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Giovanni Casadifalco

For reasons that will soon become obvious, Giovanni Casadifalco isn't his real name. He was, like many boys in my neighborhood in New York City's Little Italy, destined to become one of three things: a cop, a mafioso, or a sanitation department worker (in those days we called them, not intending any insult, "garbage men"). Mafia was the choice that snagged him.

When we were both ten years old, Giovanni got off the other end of the seesaw while I wasn't looking. I hit the ground, still sitting on the plank. A wheeze surfaced from me, and a pain new to my life transmitted itself up my spine. I was awash in a throbbing damage that thudded my senses. The impact had crushed my fourth lumbar vertebra. Although I wouldn't know that until later.

I rolled sideways off the seesaw onto the concrete of the small triangular park beneath the Manhattan Bridge and—with the smell of dirty cement in my nostrils—I entered an animal-like state, a primitive floating. A silent endurance. A dull agony. I looked up at Giovanni. He ran away.

After a while I managed—slowly—to dig myself up to my feet. Gingerly, I crossed Market Street and walked along Henry Street to my tenement building. Placing two feet on each tread, like an infant climbing steps, I made my way to my family's fifth-floor railroad apartment. My mother saw my face (it was pinched and ashen, I suppose) and knew something was terribly wrong. I fessed up.

The notion of an ambulance was not part of our world. I probably would have had to be lying in a pool of blood for it to have occurred to us to call an emergency vehicle. So down the stairs I went, accompanied by my mother. We walked about a mile to the nearest hospital where, after a lengthy emergency-room wait, I was x-rayed and pronounced hale. Then the sore mile-long walk back home and up the five flights.

Hours later the telephone rang. A physician more competent than the original one had examined the x-rays and detected the crushed vertebra. My father was home by then and drove me and my mother back to the hospital. Where I remained, instructed to stay in bed, supine. No sitting up. No turning onto my belly or either side.

What I *could* do was read. And read and read I did. My arms ached from the effort of holding books above my face, until a kind facilities man installed a supporting bar across my bed. Ultimately, reading—which I already loved before my back was broken—was the

important part. It would split me from the neighborhood and carry me to my future.

But for now, hospital life surrounded me. When the first institutional grub, Chicken Chop Suey from a can, arrived, I stared at it in disbelief. I had never eaten anything but fresh home-cooked meals. My mother rescued me by bringing real food every day.

Then there was the boy, with whom I briefly shared the room. He had gone deaf suddenly, without warning. Until he went hoarse, he screamed for hours in an effort to hear himself. And, from my bed, I could see through the glass walls of the quarantine room down the hall, where the gowned and masked parents of the baby who had contracted meningitis wavered. I witnessed the sagging sobbing of the mother on the day that infant died.

As you might expect from any girl my age, I developed a childish passion for the young blond intern assigned to my case. I asked him when I could go home and he told me, "In three days." I counted them off. They came and went. I stayed. I asked him again and received the same answer and the same outcome. A few more repetitions of his lie and I refused to speak to him.

After how long in that place (I can't rightly recollect) I was crammed into a heavy plaster body cast from my armpits to my hips—with my lower spine acutely curved rearward—and sent home to a hot and itchy summer. On the day I returned, Giovanni's mother dragged him across the sidewalk to apologize to me. He cringed and said nothing.

From the incident onward, my mother didn't speak Giovanni's name. She spat it. Sulfurous. She was convinced of his malice. I wasn't. He and I had never fought. Nor had we argued on the day I was injured. We were merely kids, both of us reaping the consequences of an offhand prank. But Giovanni steered clear of me from then on and, since he went to Catholic school and I didn't, I lost track of him.

Except for the stories. After barely graduating from high school, Giovanni joined his hairy-eared uncle, who was a "made man" in one of the local Mobs. Giovanni started as an errand boy and rose to the rank of soldier. Enforcer. He collected a nickname, Calcio (Italian for soccer), because of the kicking technique he used on the groins of men who had garnered Mafia disfavor. That might have been the least of his misdeeds.

I don't want to say any more. So, no other details about which Mafia family or its activities. I still carry enough of the neighborhood code to keep my mouth shut if I know what's good for me.

What seemed like a lifetime later, I bumped into an old pal from elementary school and heard that things had changed for Giovanni. Big time. His uncle had run afoul of a capo (money matters)

and had been executed while eating pasta in a restaurant on . . . you don't need to know the name of the street. It had been a classically efficient hit. Only the uncle was gunned down. Diners at the other tables were all in one piece and had the option of continuing their meals at leisure, assuming they had the stomach for it.

But Giovanni, who'd been seated across the table during the hit, looked at his zio's fedora in the tomato sauce and the strand of spaghetti lolling from his zio's dead mouth and lost *his* stomach for the whole business. He turned informant for the Feds, testified in court, and was plopped into the Witness Protection Program. New name. New place. New past. New future. No news. For Giovanni, no news was good news.

I'd always kept my distance from the Mafia, although my best friend in junior high school, Mary Jane, was the daughter of a mobster. As her chum I automatically had the same mantle of protection that covered her. Nobody was going to mess with me. Though I wasn't alone in that safety; anybody who came into that neighborhood with the intention of bothering *any* local kid had a life expectancy of about ten minutes. If I'd been a boy, I *sort of* could have joined the Mob. But I'm not Italian. I'm Jewish. Although ethnicity isn't a deal breaker, if you're not Italian you can't really rise above the rank of "associate"—a kind of second-class citizen within the family. Anyway, I'd found books more exciting than guns and became an endocrinologist. Which is how, thirty-five years after the seesaw episode, I inadvertently re-crossed paths with Giovanni. At a conference. In Las Vegas.

The convention center was humongous. My guess is you could fit thirty-two typical U.S. small towns inside it. I had gotten lost in the maze of passageways somewhere between a talk on androgen excess and a blah-blah session on thyroid oncology. Or maybe something about the pituitary. I forget. Wait! Don't mistake me. I take my profession seriously. But I was jetlagged.

And there he was, on the elevator. Giovanni. Older. With a paunch. Slick hair. Pale-blue three-piece suit. Big cross hanging over an aqua tie. Pinky ring with a giant gem in it. Very shiny shoes. Pointy. Good for kicking.

My spine recognized Giovanni before I did. A supercharged memory of a piece of bone being squashed went through me vertically. For him, recognition began only with his wondering why a woman on the elevator was ogling him. Once he placed me, his fear followed. Makes sense. There's no time limit on Mob revenge. Not decades. Not a lifetime. What if I blew his Witness Protection cover?

Well, I have proof that you can take the girl out of the neighborhood, but you can't take the neighborhood out of the girl. I still know the rules. I suppressed a gasp, dropped my eyes and,

appropriate to Las Vegas, put on a poker face. Giovanni and I rode in silence until the other people on the elevator departed.

Then I stuck out my hand and said, reading his name tag, “Nice to meet you, Mr. Evesmore. I’m just here for the endocrine conference. I leave tomorrow.”

“Oh,” he said. “I see.”

I pushed the button that would eject me at my floor and, when the elevator stopped, I said, “Well, this is where I get out.”

What was Giovanni doing in the convention center? I was willing to wager he hadn’t become an endocrinologist. After all, the vast building was hosting numerous meetings simultaneously. Once I got to my room, I couldn’t resist looking up his name on the Internet. Jonathan Evesmore. And what do you know? He was the pastor of a local evangelical church. Considering his early life, almost as shocking as if he *had* become an endocrinologist.

I reckoned that was the end of that and ordered what I anticipated would be a dismal meal from room service. I had my head ducked when I answered my door’s buzzer, so the first thing I saw was Giovanni’s spikey shoes. This time—caught off guard—I *did* gasp. Hadn’t I been clear about my non-threat status in the elevator encounter? Had I missed some essential Witness Protection protocol? Had I violated an element in that etiquette? Just how convinced was Giovanni of my benignity? *Could* I convince him? How frightened was he of me? Frightened enough to use his sharp shoes (which I continued to gape at)? Their tips looked so much like shark snouts. Was my goose cooked? Was I going to be whacked in Las Vegas by a born-again minister? What a way to go.

Struggling to control my emotional seasickness, I peeled my eyes away from Giovanni’s shoes and said, “Mr. Evenshore.”

“Evesmore. But you can call me Jonathan.”

He still retained the Lower East Side accent.

“Jonathan. Sure. Jonathan. You know, I don’t really need to . . . ”

“I got your room number from the front desk. I bet you figured I’d remember *your* name.”

“Uh. Uh huh, my name. Yeah.”

“I thought, being that you’re in Las Vegas, we could catch up. Should catch up.”

My brain was going a mile a minute. It was saying, “Clam up, you. Don’t be an idiot. Yes, ‘being that’ isn’t correct grammar. But don’t correct him. Should you invite him in? How would that look during the homicide investigation, after your body is found slumped on the blood-stained carpet? ‘No sign of forced entry. She must have known her assailant.’”

“Would you like to come in?” I asked.

I said that because I decided that nonchalance was the best strategy. After all, playing it cool had been a basic neighborhood tenet. A doctrine I had absorbed through cultural osmosis. Didn’t I still have all the ploys down, when necessary? The unruffled air. The little hitch to the bop-walk down the sidewalk. The “I didn’t hear that” countenance when, actually, you had heard *all* of whatever it was you weren’t supposed to have heard.

Giovanni came in. Without further invitation, he slopped himself into an armchair, and my body language clicked into street-smart-tomboy mode. I became two people. Both of them were me. Honestly me. The one of me who’d become an endocrinologist was saying to itself, “Your body is culturally multilingual. This is just an alternative community, and you’re one of its citizens.” The other me, the tomboy, wasn’t saying anything. It was too busy going back to its first home on Henry Street. My dialect went along for the ride. Still so blue-collar fluent, if called upon. So seamless. So natural.

“Hey,” I said. “I ain’t got no reason to do anything stupid. I’m just here, that’s all. It don’t mean anything.”

“Yeah,” said Giovanni. “We still got a problem, though. I can’t afford no mess up from you. You’re smart. You said endocrinologist, right? A brainy doctor, like you. You know that this here situation is . . . sensitive. Tricky.”

“Sure. I get that. But I’m not a girl who messes up. Never was.”

Something shifted in me when I said that. An iceberg cracked its mass away from a frozen shelf and drifted toward the hull of an unsuspecting boat. I knew that something in me was committing perjury. I never messed up? I pushed the lie aside. I couldn’t afford to think of it right now. Not with Calcio.

“No mess up. I hope so,” said Giovanni. “I gotta hope so. I gotta. Do me a favor and sit down.”

He gestured to the other armchair. I sat down.

“You got a husband?”

“No.”

“You got kids?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Long story.”

“I got time,” said Giovanni.

Inside my brainy doctor skull, college science told me that an iceberg, 90 percent of it below the surface, moved not of its own volition. Its bulk was at the mercy of seawater currents. Seawater, almost the same as tears.

“So,” Giovanni persisted. “No marriage. No kids. Tell me.”

“I almost got married,” I said.

“Why didn’t you?”

“The guy wanted kids.”

“And you didn’t?”

“Right,” I said. “Look. I don’t really wanna get into it. Give me a break. OK? Please.”

The tiniest flick-raise of Giovanni’s eyebrows and a change in his regard, a warmth that made me wonder whether he was looking deep into me or into himself. We were both hushed. I had nothing to say, in any language. It was Giovanni who broke the muteness.

“The power of Confession,” he said.

“What?”

“Never mind,” said Giovanni. “You ain’t Catholic. Yeah. I’ll give you a break. But that goes both ways. Me, I got a wife and kids. They don’t know nothing about before I got here. I gotta be careful. Protect them. All of that stuff. *Capeesh?*”

“Capeesh. Of course.”

Giovanni laughed. The same laugh he had as a kid.

“Ain’t that funny?” he said. “I ain’t said capeesh in years. They give an Italian type person like me this stupid Evesmore name. No way Jonathan Evesmore would say capeesh. I had to learn that. A whole other style of talking and walking. Like a movie. You know?”

“Yeah, I know exactly.”

“How about you?”

“How about me, what?” I asked.

“When’s the last time you said capeesh?”

“I dunno. Most likely last time I was down in the neighborhood. So, maybe when I went down for a funeral of one of the old-timers. Mildred? Maybe Mildred. You remember . . .”

“Stop,” said Giovanni. “I don’t reminisce about there, or anybody from there.”

“Capeesh,” I said.

Giovanni laughed when I used the word again.

“It was all so long ago. Jeez,” I said.

“Yeah, Jeez,” said Giovanni. “Jeez. You said it right. Jesus. And me, raised Catholic. But now that I’m Jonathan Evesmore, my wife, she ain’t Catholic. What does she know from Catholic? So, when I met her, I started going to her church. Her Jesus. And that worked out better than I could’ve planned. Turned out to be the same Jesus. Kinda. But not the Virgin Mary. Nothing like the way she is in the Catholic Church. I miss the Holy Mother. The same way I miss my Mom.”

“Your mom . . .” I said.

“Don’t!” said Giovanni. “Don’t!”

I put my palms up in surrender.

Giovanni looked at me for a while and then said, "I'm not gonna show you a picture of my wife."

I nodded.

"We got a deal? You and me?" Giovanni asked.

"Yeah. We're good."

"You're no snitch. I can see that," said Giovanni. "Though you gotta admit that you told your mother that I was the one on the seesaw with you."

"I was a little girl. I told grownups. Like I was supposed to. Now *I'm* the grownup. It's different."

Giovanni was thinking.

"Omerta?" I said.

"Omerta. On the dot," said Giovanni.

My dinner arrived. When the waiter left, Giovanni stood.

"I invite you to my church tomorrow," he said. "I'm scheduled to give a sermon in the morning. If you can make it. Depending on when your plane leaves."

"In the late afternoon."

"That'll work. How you getting to the airport?"

"Cab."

"You don't have to do that. I'll pick you up here at 9:30, take you to the church, and drop you at the airport after."

Could I attend the service and still make my flight? Absolutely. Should I attend? Absolutely not. Could I say no? No.

"That's not necessary, I . . ."

"See you tomorrow," interrupted Giovanni.

He was on time the next day and carried my suitcase to his brand-new candy-apple red Cadillac. You could get tooth decay just looking at the car. During the drive to his house of worship, Giovanni pointed out the Las Vegas sights.

"That's Caesars Palace. That's the Venetian Resort. That's the New York—New York Hotel and Casino. That's the Eiffel Tower restaurant."

We cruised past Egyptian pyramids, Italian fountains, volcanic eruptions, gondolas, and a replica of the Statue of Liberty. This, on top of my recent jetlag, totally discombobulated me. Where was I? New York? Rome? Cairo? This was all more of Las Vegas than I ever wanted to interact with. I nodded agreeably and grunted my sightseeing appreciation.

Did I mention that the Cadillac's seats were also red leather?

Once at the church, Giovanni set off to concentrate on his pre-sermon responsibilities, and I, desperately hoping to be inconspicuous, selected a seat in the very last row. My plan was to catch the sermon,

behave politely, and then depart as discreetly as possible. Though discretion didn't seem very possible, considering I would be driving off, with the pastor, in an expensive car whose very color represented sexual passion.

That was Giovanni in the pulpit alright. He was giving a homily on redemption and fellowship. Like I said, I'm Jewish. Secular, at that. So, I wasn't paying much attention to the sermon, although I did catch, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life." I was more enthralled by whatever strange path had brought Giovanni from the slums we both grew up in, through a criminal past, to this role, which he seemed to occupy sincerely, despite his cheesy wardrobe and jewelry choices—and the equally sleazy antiseptic modern architecture of the chamber we were in. (I wouldn't have been surprised if the twenty-foot cross up front had lit up in neon.) Giovanni seemed to believe his belief. That earnestness was what finally made me listen as he quoted scripture.

"In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace . . ."

As the service wound down, Giovanni stepped from the dais, made his way along the aisle, and paused at my row. I scrunched down. Giovanni, on the other hand, gazed skyward, in the general direction of his deity. I took notice of the last bit of what he was saying.

" . . . having compassion of one another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous. Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing."

My time at the hospital spilled into me. How long, like the deaf boy, had Giovanni screamed, trying to hear himself? In what quarantine room of her chest had Giovanni's mother sobbed when her son disappeared into a new name and place? It brought to my mind, my weak unsteady first steps as I clung to the railing on the hospital walls and re-learned how to walk. I remembered, too, that Giovanni, unlike the intern, had never lied to me.

Giovanni continued to the church door and, as his parishioners filed out, spoke a few words to each of them.

What he said to me was, "Let's get you to the airport."

As Giovanni and I drove off, I gawped at the pointy shoe on the gas pedal. (Why was I so obsessed with those shoes?)

When, about halfway through what should have been a twenty-minute drive, traffic slowed, Giovanni said, "Must be an accident up ahead. Let's do something else."

He took the next exit. We were now on a less-traveled ancillary road and, despite the conversational transaction we'd had last night, I

started on a paranoid jag. Were we really going to the airport? Nobody knew exactly where I was or whom I was with. I could vanish easily. Without a trace. Like Giovanni had. Well, to be accurate, not Giovanni but the boy with Giovanni's real name who'd been with me in the playground under the Manhattan Bridge and then had become Calcio before morphing into Jonathan Evesmore. My dread increased when Giovanni pulled to the side of the road and stopped the car. My heart thumped. Illogically, I was comforted by the fact that I wasn't eating spaghetti and that the car engine was still idling. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Giovanni grinning at me.

"Hey," he said. "What are you so jumpy for? We got an agreement. And I'm not that guy. Not nowadays."

"Glad to hear it," I said, almost giggling.

"The nervous you're trying to bury might fool an outsider," said Giovanni. "But you can't hide from me. That edginess is all over you, like a smear of butter. You don't have to do that. OK? It's not a big megillah anymore."

It was my turn to laugh.

"See," said Giovanni. "You know about capeesh and I know about big megillah."

He patted my knee and put the car back in drive. The rest of the trip, he made small talk. Nothing worth repeating.

At the airport, he held the car door open, watched me as I exited, and said, "You got yourself a limp."

"Yeah."

"Is it from . . . ?"

"Yeah. No big deal."

Sometimes it *was* a big deal and becoming more so as I aged. The unreliable lower back. The bouts of physical misery that now and again bent me double and by which I could predict— cliché though it is—dank weather coming in.

Giovanni, carrying my bag to the airport doors, took my hand and said, "Thank you for joining us in church today."

I responded, "Thank you, pastor," and, relieved at having been delivered in one piece to the airport, turned to go.

Then Giovanni said (to my back, aptly enough), "I'm sorry."

I halted. This was about more than my vertebra. Giovanni was uttering a blessing for himself, the man who had at one time been Calcio.

In the airport terminal, the public address system greeted me with an announcement that the computers were down, resulting in extensive delays and convoluted switchback lines that furled and furled and persuaded me that I had entered an Escher drawing. What was going on? What was space anyway? Was I now going down the same

stairs I had just ascended? Or was I moving upward in a Möbius strip that would twist me back to the end of a line that I had once been at the beginning of? And when? What was time anyway? Wasn't that scuzzy traveler, over there, in front of me, the same person who'd stood behind me an hour earlier? Or four minutes earlier? I was waiting my turn in a matrix that was no longer bound to itself. Nor could I prove I was bound to *it*. Was I bound to anything?

The answer to my question clobbered me. I was bound to Giovanni Casadifalco. What?! I was bound to a former lunkhead punk who was now on the official lam and had accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior? Yes! I was fastened somehow to Giovanni. How else could I explain the curve of temporality and location that had reattached the two of us in Las Vegas? In a moment of synchronous insanity, the airport speakers began to play hurdy-gurdy music. Fact is, although I was no longer gliding in a red Cadillac down The Strip in Las Vegas, I was nevertheless participating in a spectacle. A circus in which Giovanni and I both boogied.

My awareness danced itself through the circus and back to when I was a medical resident at a ghetto hospital. I was treating a diabetic child, four years old, a beautiful Latina with glorious wavy hair that flowed down to the middle of her back. And tiny gold earrings. I'd seen all of those details. What I hadn't sufficiently seen was the lesion on the underside of her foot. Sure, I'd looked at it. And had identified it as an eschar—dead tissue sloughed off of healthy skin. But I should have looked more carefully. I should have known it was a melanoma, a dangerous and rapidly spreading cancer.

I could make excuses. I'd been working twenty-eight hours straight. I was witless with fatigue. None of that counts. Granted, there were fewer treatments available then, but maybe if I'd given a timely diagnosis . . .

Six weeks after I'd examined her, I learned that the child had returned to the hospital. Room 502. I could have gone to see her. I should have gone to see her. I didn't. I did go to that ward once, on a different errand. But when I emerged from the elevator—years before the Las Vegas elevator that linked me to Giovanni—I saw the patient's mother huddled down at the end of the corridor. She was embracing her other children, in the shape of the Pietà. Near panic, I reversed direction. Receded into the elevator. The truth is, I ran. And my mother wasn't there to haul me forward with the command, "Say you're sorry."

That was right before the child died. Oh, and one more thing about that child. She'd had eyes like the moon. I couldn't stand the idea that they'd closed.

They say there are times when your whole life flashes before you. But, standing in the seemingly endless airport line, surrounded by

barrel-organ jangles, with my luggage at my feet, it wasn't *my* life that passed before me, it was Giovanni's, or parts of it. I suddenly recalled his snotty tears on an autumn day when, new to roller skates, he had skidded into the gutter and badly scraped both knees. Immediately after that image came another, this one of a scared Giovanni looking down at me at the base of the seesaw and then running away. And that same boy, cowering from his mother's demand that he apologize to the girl in the body cast.

This time, here in Las Vegas, he hadn't run away. This time, without cowering, he had atoned.

Had said, "I'm sorry."

It was an absolution a long while in the making. But redemption is like revenge, I guess. It doesn't have a time limit, even if you're in the Witness Protection Program. Whatever brutality Giovanni had committed as a young man I couldn't deny. But my mother had been wrong about him; he had never meant to harm me.

And I? I *had* done harm. I had never told anyone—no one at all, not even the man I almost married—about the lost four-year-old. My dogged silence doomed me, every time I thought of that toddler with eyes like the moon, to an ocean on which I was the only voyager. And the power of Confession that Giovanni had intuitively sussed out was the iceberg, looming. I had been worse, far worse, than the blond intern. My sloppy diagnosis had been more destructive than his cavalier lies. I was Giovanni in the playground; I had run. But, unlike him, I *still* flinched. Would the recurring attacks of conscience always haunt me? The thorn of guilt piercing me out of sleep, my pillow showing the faint track of my weeping. Would clemency ever soften the bitter self-blame that periodically sliced me bolt upright in bed at 3 a.m.? The whisper echoing through the years, reminding me that I hadn't been worthy of motherhood.

Airport loudspeakers blared my gate number. Now boarding! Too far away for me to get there in time, no matter how fast I ran. I would miss my flight home. I put down the dense weight of my suitcase and then, I, on whom religion had never placed its delicate wing, looked at the clouds that swam outside the airport windows, and muttered—toward I can't say what—"Help me."—not asking for my burden to be removed, just for help carrying it.

I don't know what lingers with Giovanni, but I know what lingers with me. The vision of a scrawny messy-haired ten-year-old boy on the other end of the seesaw. He's wearing a torn t-shirt, a pair of filthy brown shoes, and oversized hand-me-down trousers with the belt pulled up to his ribs. We look into one another's innocent eyes. We are balancing one another. Neither of us is wounded and neither of us has hurt anyone. Yet.

