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# Omerta



# Omertà

# Mario

# Puzo

BY THE AUTHOR  
OF THE CLASSIC  
BESTSELLER  
*THE GODFATHER*

*Par Mario Puzo*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurOmert, the Sicilian code of silence, has been the cornerstone of the Mafia's sense of honour for centuries. Born in the Sicilian hills, omert carried the Mafia through a hundred years of change, but now at the century's end it is becoming a relic from a bygone age. Honour may be silent - but money talks. New York - a mob boss is assassinated. His nephew Astorre Viola and the head of the city's FBI both launch investigations into the murder. But this time silence spreads like a contagion: the silence of rival gangs, the silence of crooked bankers, even the silence of the courts. The world of the Mafia is riven with greed, and Viola knows that now is the time to claim his destiny....frDon Raymondo Aprile, important mafioso new-yorkais, a recueilli Astorre, le fils en bas ge d'un parrain sicilien dcd. Ses trois enfants ont fait

de brillantes tudes mais ont toujours t tenus loigns de ses activits. l'inverse, Aprile a initi leur "cousin" Astorre ses affaires et il l'a mme envoy faire un stage la source, en Sicile. Retir du circuit aprs s'tre reconverti dans le secteur bancaire, Aprile est assassin par des concurrents qui veulent utiliser ses tablissements pour blanchir l'argent de la drogue. Le FBI et la police, compromis dans ce crime, ne bougent pas. Astorre, actionnaire majoritaire des banques de son pre adoptif, doit tenir ses promesses et protger la famille Aprile et ses biens contre des ennemis qu'il faut identifier. Et sa vengeance sera terrible! Ceux qui ont aim Le Parrain apprécieront Omerta, ultime ouvrage de Puzo, paru peu aprs sa mort. On y retrouve ses thmes familiaux: meurtres, trahisons, amour de la famille et la loi du silence qui n'en finit pas d'tre transgressée. --Claude MespldeExtraitPROLOGUE1967N THE STONE-FILLED VILLAGE of Castellarmare del Golfo facing the dark Sicilian Mediterranean, a great Mafia Don lay dying. Vincenzo Zeno was a man of honor, who all his life had been loved for his fair and impartial judgment, his help to those in need, and his implacable punishment of those who dared to oppose his will. Around him were three of his former followers, each of whom had gone on to achieve his own power and position: Raymonde Aprile from Sicily and New York, Octavius Bianco from Palermo, and Benito Craxxi from Chicago. Each owed him one last favor. Don Zeno was the last of the true Mafia chiefs, having all his life observed the old traditions. He extracted a tariff on all business, but never on drugs, prostitution, or other crime of any kind. And never did a poor man come to his house for money and go away empty-handed. He corrected the injustices of the law-the highest judge in Sicily could make his ruling, but if you had right on your side, Don Zeno would veto that judgment with his own force of will, and arms. No philandering youth could leave the daughter of a poor peasant without Don Zeno persuading him into holy matrimony. No bank could foreclose on a helpless farmer without Don Zeno interfering to put things right. No young lad who hungered for a university education could be denied it for lack of money or qualification. If they were related to his cosca, his clan, their dreams were fulfilled. The laws from Rome could never justify the traditions of Sicily and had no authority; Don Zeno would overrule them, no matter what the cost. But the Don was now in his eighties, and over the last few years his power had begun to wane. He'd had the weakness to marry a very beautiful young girl, who had produced a fine male child. She had died in childbirth, and the boy was now two years old. The old man, knowing that the end was near and that without him his cosca would be pulverized by the more powerful coscas of Corleone and Clericuzio, pondered the future of his son. Now he thanked his three friends for the courtesy and respect they had shown in traveling so many miles to hear his request. Then he told them that he wanted his young son, Astorre, to be taken to a place of safety and brought up under different circumstances but in the tradition of a man of honor, like himself. "I can die with a clear conscience," he said, though his friends knew that in his lifetime he had decided the deaths of hundreds of men, "if I can see my son to safety. For in this two-year-old I see the heart and soul of a true Mafioso, a rare and almost extinct quality." He told them he would choose one of these men would to act as guardian to this unusual child, and with this responsibility would come great rewards. "It is strange," Don Zeno said, staring through clouded eyes. "According to tradition, it is the first son who is the true Mafioso. But in my case it took until I reached my eightieth year before I could make my dream come true. I'm not a man of superstition, but if I were, I could believe this child grew from the soil of Sicily itself. His eyes are as green as olives that spring from my best trees. And he has the Sicilian sensibilityromantic, musical, happy. Yet if someone offends him, he doesn't forget, as young as he is. But he must be guided." "And so what do you wish from us, Don Zeno?" Craxxi asked. "For I will gladly take this child of yours and raise him as my own." Bianco stared at Craxxi almost resentfully. "I know the boy from when he was first born. He is familiar to me. I will take him as my own." Raymonde Aprile looked at Don Zeno but said nothing. "And you, Raymonde?" Don Zeno asked. Aprile said, "If it is me that you choose, your son will be my son." The Don considered the three of them, all worthy men. He regarded Craxxi the most intelligent. Bianco was surely the most ambitious and forceful. Aprile was a more restrained man of virtue, a man closer to himself. But he was merciless. Don Zeno, even while dying, understood that it was Raymonde Aprile who most needed the child. He would benefit most from the child's love, and he would make certain his son learned how to survive in their world of treachery. Don Zeno was silent for a long moment. Finally he said, "Raymonde, you will be his father. And I can rest in peace." The Don's funeral was worthy of an emperor. All the cosca chiefs in Sicily came to pay their respects, along with cabinet ministers from Rome, the owners of the great latifundia, and hundreds of subjects of his widespread cosca. Atop the black horse-drawn hearse, two-year-old Astorre Zeno, a fiery-eyed baby attired in a black frock and black pillbox hat, rode as majestically as a Roman emperor. The cardinal of Palermo conducted the service and proclaimed memorably, "In sickness and in health, in unhappiness and despair, Don Zeno

remained a true friend to all." He then intoned Don Zeno's last words: "I commend myself to God. He will forgive my sins, for I have tried every day to be just." And so it was that Astorre Zeno was taken to America by Raymonde Aprile and made a part of his own household. CHAPTER 1 WHEN THE STURZO TWINS, Franky and Stace, pulled into Heskow's driveway, they saw four very tall teenagers playing basketball on the small house court. Franky and Stace got out of their big Buick, and John Heskow came out to meet them. He

was a tall, pear-shaped man; his thin hair neatly ringed the bare top of his skull, and his small blue eyes twinkled. "Great timing," he said. "There's someone I want you to meet." The basketball game halted.

Heskow said proudly, "This is my son, Jocko." The tallest of the teenagers stuck out his huge hand to Franky. "Hey," Franky said. "How about giving us a little game?" Jocko looked at the two visitors. They were about six feet tall and seemed in good shape. They both wore Ralph Lauren polo shirts, one red and the other green, with khaki trousers and rubber-soled shoes. They were amiable-looking, handsome men, their craggy features set with a graceful confidence. They were obviously brothers, but Jocko could not know they were twins. He figured them to be in their early forties. "Sure," Jocko said, with boyish good nature. Stace grinned. "Great! We just drove three thousand miles and have to loosen up." Jocko motioned to his companions, all well over six feet, and said, "I'll take them on my side against you three." Since he was the much better player, he thought this would give his father's friends a chance. "Take it easy on them," John Heskow said to the kids. "They're just old guys futzing around." It was midafternoon in December, and the air was chilly enough to spur the blood. The cold Long Island sunlight, pale yellow, glinted off the glass roofs and walls of Heskow's flower sheds, his front business. "A million bucks," Stace said. "That's a lot of money." "My client knows it's a big step to hit Don Aprile," Heskow said. "He wants the best help. Cool shooters and silent partners with mature heads. And you guys are simply the best." Franky said, "And there are not many guys who would take the risk." "Yeah," Stace said. "You have to live with it the rest of your life. Somebody coming after you, plus the cops, and the feds." "I swear to you," Heskow said, "the NYPD won't go all out. The FBI will not take a hand." "And the Don's old friends?" Stace asked. "The dead have no friends." Heskow paused for a moment. "When the Don retired, he cut all ties. There's nothing to worry about." Franky said to Stace, "Isn't it funny, in all our deals, they always tell us there's nothing to worry about?" Stace laughed. "That's because they're not the shooters. John, you're an old friend. We trust you. But what if you're wrong? Anybody can be wrong. What if the Don still has old friends? You know how he operates. No mercy. We get nailed, we don't just get killed. We'll spend a couple of hours in hell first. Plus our families are at stake under the Don's rule. That means your son. Can't play for the NBA in his grave. Maybe we should know who's paying for this." Heskow leaned toward them, his light skin a scarlet red as if he were blushing. "I can't tell you that. You know that. I'm just the broker. And I've thought of all that other shit. You think I'm fucking stupid? Who doesn't know who the Don is? But he's defenseless. I have assurances of that from the top levels. The police will just go through the motions. The FBI can't afford to investigate. And the top Mafia heads won't interfere. It's foolproof." "I never dreamed that Don Aprile would be one of my marks," Franky said. The deed appealed to his ego. To kill a man so dreaded and respected in his world. "Franky, this is not a basketball game," Stace warned. "If we lose, we don't shake hands and walk off the court." "Stace, it's a million bucks," Franky said. "And John never steered us wrong. Let's go with it." Stace felt their excitement building. What the hell. He and Franky could take care of themselves. After all, there was the million bucks. If the truth were told, Stace was more mercenary than Franky, more business-oriented, and the million swung him. "OK," Stace said, "we're in. But God have mercy on our souls if you're wrong." He had once been an altar boy. "What about the Don being watched by the FBI?" Franky asked. "Do we have to worry about that?" "No," Heskow said. "When all his old friends went to jail, the Don retired like a gentleman. The FBI appreciated that. They leave him alone. I guarantee it. Now let me lay it out." It took him a half hour to explain the plan in detail. Finally Stace said, "When?" "Sunday morning," Heskow said. "You stay here for the first two days. Afterward the private jet flies you out of Newark." "We have to have a very good driver," Stace said. "Exceptional." "I'm driving," Heskow said, then added, almost apologetically, "It's a very big payday." For the rest of the weekend, Heskow baby-sat for the Sturzo brothers, cooking their meals, running their errands. He was not a man easily impressed, but the Sturzos sometimes sent a chill to his heart. They were like adders, their heads constantly alert, yet they were congenial and even helped him tend to the flowers in his sheds. The brothers played basketball one-on-one just before supper, and Heskow watched fascinated by how their bodies slithered around each other like snakes. Franky was faster and a deadly shooter. Stace was not as good but more clever. Franky could have made it to the NBA, Heskow thought. But this was not a basketball game. In a real crisis, it would have to be Stace. Stace would be the

primary shooter. CHAPTER 2 THE GREAT 19gos FBI blitz of the Mafia families in New York left only two survivors. Don Raymonde Aprile, the greatest and most feared, remained untouched. The other, Don Timmona Portella, who was nearly his equal in power but a far inferior man, escaped by what seemed to be pure luck. But the future was clear. With the 1970 RICO laws so undemocratically framed, the zeal of special FBI prosecuting teams, and the death of the belief in omerta among the soldiers of the American Mafia, Don Raymonde Aprile knew it was time for him to retire gracefully from the stage. The Don had ruled his Family for thirty years and was now a legend. Brought up in Sicily, he had none of the false ideas or strutting arrogance of the American-born Mafia chiefs. He was, in fact, a throwback to the old Sicilians of the nineteenth century who ruled towns and villages with their personal charisma, their sense of honor, and their deadly and final judgment of any suspected enemy. He also proved to have the strategic genius of those old heroes. Now, at sixty-two, he had his life in order. He had disposed of his enemies and accomplished his duties as a friend and a father. He could enjoy old age with a clear conscience, retire from the disharmonies of his world, and move into the more fitting role of gentleman banker and pillar of society. His three children were safely ensconced in successful and honorable careers. His oldest son, Valerius, was now thirtyseven, married with children, and a colonel in the United States Army and lecturer at West Point. His career had been determined by his timidity as a child; the Don had secured a cadet appointment at West Point to rectify this defect in his character. His second son, Marcantonio, at the early age of thirty-five, was, out of some mystery in the variation of his genes, a top executive at a national TV network. As a boy he had been moody and lived in a make-believe world and the Don thought he would be a failure in any serious enterprise. But now his name was often in the papers as some sort of creative visionary, which pleased the Don but did not convince him. After all, he was the boy's father. Who knew him better? His daughter, Nicole, had been affectionately called Nikki as a young child but at the age of six demanded imperiously that she be called by her proper name. She was his favorite sparring partner. At the age of twenty-nine, she was a corporate lawyer, a feminist, and a pro bono advocate of those poor and desperate criminals who otherwise could not afford an adequate legal defense. She was especially good at saving murderers from the electric chair, husband killers from prison confinement, and repeat rapists from being given life terms. She was absolutely opposed to the death penalty, believed in the rehabilitation of any criminal, and was a severe critic of the economic structure of the United States. She believed a country as rich as America should not be so indifferent to the poor, no matter what their faults. Despite all this she was a very skilled and tough negotiator in corporate law, a striking and forceful woman. The Don agreed with her on nothing. As for Astorre, he was part of the family, and closest to the Don as a titular nephew. But he seemed like a brother to the others because of his intense vitality and charm. From the age of three to sixteen he had been their intimate, the beloved youngest sibling-until his exile to Sicily eleven years before. The Don had summoned him back when he retired. The Don planned his retirement carefully. He distributed his empire to placate potential enemies but also rendered tribute to loyal friends, knowing that gratitude is the least lasting of virtues and that gifts must always be replenished. He was especially careful to pacify Timmona Portella. Portella was dangerous because of his eccentricity and a passionate murderousness that sometimes had no relationship to necessity. How Portella escaped the FBI blitz of the 19gos was a mystery to everyone. For he was an American-born don without subtlety, a man incautious and intemperate, with an explosive temper. He had a huge body with an enormous paunch and dressed like a Palermo picciotto, a young apprentice killer, all colors and silk. His power was based in the distribution of illegal drugs. He had never married and still at age fifty was a careless womanizer. He only showed true affection for his younger brother, Bruno, who seemed slightly retarded but shared his older brother's brutality. Don Aprile had never trusted Portella and rarely did business with him. The man was dangerous through his weakness, a man to be neutralized. So now he summoned Timmona Portella for a meeting. Portella arrived with his brother, Bruno. Aprile met them with his usual quiet courtesy but came to the point quickly. "My dear Timmona," he said. "I am retiring from all business affairs except my banks. Now you will be very much in the public eye and you must be careful. If you should ever need any advice, call on me. For I will not be completely without resources in my retirement." Bruno, a small replica of his brother who was awed by the Don's reputation, smiled with pleasure at this respect for his older brother. But Timmona understood the Don far better. He knew that he was being warned. He nodded respectfully to the Don. "You have always showed the best judgment of us all," he said. "And I respect what you are doing. Count on me as your friend." "Very good, very good," the Don said. "Now, as a gift to you, I ask you to heed this warning. This FBI man, Cilke, is very devious. Do not trust him in any way. He is drunk with his success, and you will be his next target." "But you and I have

already escaped him," Timmona said. "Though he brought all our friends down. I don't fear him but I thank you." They had a celebratory drink, and the Portella brothers left. In the car Bruno said, "What a great man." "Yes," Timmona said. "He was a great man." As for the Don, he was well satisfied. He had seen the alarm in Timmona's eyes and was assured there would no longer be any danger from him. Don Aprile requested a private meeting with Kurt Cilke, the head of the FBI in New York City. Cilke, to the Don's own surprise, was a man he admired. He had sent most of the East Coast Mafia chiefs to jail and almost broken their power. Don Raymonde Aprile had eluded him, for the Don knew the identity of Cilke's secret informer, the one who made his success possible. But the Don admired Cilke even more because the man always played fair, had never tried frame-ups or powerplay harassments, had never given publicity pin marks on the Don's children. So the Don felt it was only fair to warn him. The meeting was at the Don's country estate in Montauk. Cilke would have to come alone, a violation of the Bureau rules. The FBI director himself had given approval but insisted Cilke use a special recording device. This was an implant in his body, below his rib cage, which would not show on the outer walls of his torso; the device was not known to the public, and its manufacture was strictly controlled. Cilke realized that the real purpose of the wire was to record what he said to the Don. They met on a golden October afternoon on the Don's verandah. Cilke had never been able to penetrate this house with a listening device, and a judge had barred constant physical surveillance. This day he was not searched in any way by the Don's men, which surprised him. Obviously Don Raymond Aprile was not going to make him an illicit proposal. As always, Cilke was amazed and even a little disturbed by the impression that the Don made on him. Despite knowing that the man had ordered a hundred murders, broken countless laws of society, Cilke could not hate him. And yet he believed such men evil, hated them for how they destroyed the fabric of civilization. Don Aprile was clad in a dark suit, dark tie, and white shirt. His expression was grave and yet understanding, the lines in his face the gentle ones of a virtue-loving man. How could a such a humane face belong to someone so merciless, Cilke wondered. The Don did not offer to shake hands out of a sensibility not to embarrass Cilke. He gestured for his guest to be seated and bowed his head in greeting. "I have decided to place myself and my family under your protection-that is, the protection of society," he said. Cilke was astonished. What the hell did the old man mean? "For the last twenty years you have made yourself my enemy. You have pursued me. But I was always grateful for your sense of fair play. You never tried to plant evidence or encourage perjury against me. You have put most of my friends in prison, and you tried very hard to do the same to me." Cilke smiled. "I'm still trying," he said. The Don nodded in appreciation. "I have rid myself of everything doubtful except a few banks, surely a respectable business. I have placed myself under the protection of your society. In return I will do my duty to that society. You can make it much easier if you do not pursue me. For there is no longer any need." Cilke shrugged. "The Bureau decides. I've been after you for so long, why stop now? I might get lucky." The Don's face became graver and even more tired. "I have something to exchange with you. Your enormous success of the past few years influenced my decision. But the thing is, I know your prize informant, I know who he is. And I have told no one." Cilke hesitated for only seconds before he said impassively, "I have no such informant. And again, the Bureau decides, not me. So you've wasted my time." "No, no," the Don said. "I'm not seeking an advantage, just an accommodation. Allow me, because of my age, to tell you what I have learned. Do not exercise power because it is easy to your hand. And do not get carried away with a certainty of victory when your intellect tells you there is even a hint of tragedy. Let me say I regard you now as a friend, not an enemy, and think to yourself what you have to gain or lose by refusing this offer." "And if you are truly retired, then of what use is your friendship?" Cilke said, smiling. "You will have my goodwill," the Don said. "That is worth something even from the smallest of men." Later Cilke played the tape for Bill Boxtton, his deputy, who asked, "What the hell was that all about?" "That's the stuff you have to learn," Cilke told him. "He was telling me that he's not completely defenseless, that he was keeping an eye on me." "What bullshit," Boxtton said. "They can't touch a federal agent." "That's true," Cilke said. "That's why I kept after him, retired or not. Still, I'm wary. We can't be absolutely sure. . . ." Having studied the history of the most prestigious families in America, those robber barons who had ruthlessly built their fortunes while breaking the laws and ethics of human society, Don Aprile became, like them, a benefactor to all. Like them, he had his empire-he owned ten private banks in the world's largest cities. So he gave generously to build a hospital for the poor. And he contributed to the arts. He established a chair at Columbia University for the study of the Renaissance. It was true that Yale and Harvard refused his twenty million dollars for a dormitory to be named for Christopher Columbus, who was at the time in disrepute in intellectual circles. Yale did offer to take the money and name the dorm after Sacco and Vanzetti, but the Don was not interested in Sacco and

Vanzetti. He despised martyrs. A lesser man would have felt insulted and nursed a grievance, but not Raymonde Aprile. Instead, he simply gave the money to the Catholic Church for daily masses to be sung for his wife, now twenty-five years in Heaven. He donated a million dollars to the New York Police Benevolent Association and another million to a society for the protection of illegal immigrants. For the three years after his retirement, he showered his blessings on the world. His purse was open to any request except for one. He refused Nicole's pleas to contribute to the Campaign Against the Death Penalty-her crusade to stop capital punishment. It is astonishing how three years of good deeds and generosity can almost wipe out a thirty-year reputation of merciless acts. But great men also buy their own goodwill, forgiveness of betraying friends and exercising lethal judgment. And the Don too had this universal weakness. For Don Raymonde Aprile was a man who had lived by the strict rules of his own particular morality. His protocol had made him respected for over thirty years and generated the extraordinary fear that had been the base of his power. A chief tenet of that protocol was a complete lack of mercy. This sprang not from innate cruelty, some psychopathic desire to inflict pain, but from an absolute conviction: that men always refused to obey. Even Lucifer, the angel, had defied God and had been flung from the heavens. So an ambitious man struggling for power had no other recourse. Of course there were some persuasions, some concessions to another man's self-interest. That was only reasonable. But if all that failed, there was only the punishment of death. Never threats of other forms of punishment that might inspire retaliation. Simply a banishment from this earthly sphere, no more to be reckoned with. Treachery was the greatest injury. The traitor's family would suffer, as would his circle of friends; his whole world would be destroyed. For there are many brave, proud men willing to gamble their lives for their own gain, but they would think twice about risking their loved ones. And so in this way Don Aprile generated a vast amount of terror. He relied on his generosity in worldly goods to win their less necessary love. But it must be said, he was as merciless to himself. Possessed of enormous power, he could not prevent the death of his young wife after she had given him three children. She died a slow and horrible death from cancer as he watched over her for six months. During that time he came to believe that she was being punished for all the mortal sins he had committed, and so it was that he decreed his own penance: He would never remarry. He would send his children away to be educated in the ways of lawful society, so they would not grow up in his world so full of hate and danger. He would help them find their way, but they would never be involved in his activities. With great sadness he resolved that he would never know the true essence of fatherhood. So the Don arranged to have Nicole, Valerius, and Marcantonio sent to private boarding schools. He never let them into his personal life. They came home for the holidays, when he played the role of a caring but distant father, but they never became part of his world. And yet despite everything and though they were aware of his reputation, his children loved him. They never talked about it among themselves. It was one of those family secrets that was not a secret. No one could call the Don sentimental. He had very few personal friends, no pets, and he avoided holiday and social gatherings as much as possible. Only once, many years before, he had committed an act of compassion that astounded his colleagues in America. Don Aprile, when he returned from Sicily with the infant, Astorre, found his beloved wife dying of cancer and his own three children desolate. Not wanting to keep the impressionable infant in such a circumstance for fear it would harm him in some way, the Don decided to place him in the care of one of his closest advisors, a man named Frank Viola, and his wife. This proved to be an unwise choice. At the time, Frank Viola had ambitions to succeed the Don. But shortly after the Don's wife died, Astorre Viola, at the age of three, became a member of the Don's personal family when his "father" committed suicide in the trunk of his car, a curious circumstance, and his mother died of a brain hemorrhage. It was then that the Don had taken Astorre into his household and assumed the title of uncle. When Astorre was old enough to begin asking about his parents, Don Raymonde told him that he had been orphaned. But Astorre was a curious and tenacious young boy, so the Don, to put an end to all his questions, told him that his parents had been peasants, unable to feed him, and had died, unknown, in a small Sicilian village. The Don knew this explanation didn't completely satisfy the boy, and he felt a twinge of guilt over deceiving him, but he knew it was important while the child was still young to keep his Mafia roots a secret-for Astorre's own safety and for the safety of the Aprile children. Don Raymonde was a farseeing man and knew that his success could not last forever-it was too treacherous a world. From the beginning he planned to switch sides, to join the safety of organized society. Not that he was truly conscious of his purpose, but great men have an instinct for what the future will demand. And in this case, truly, he acted out of compassion. For Astorre Viola, at the age of three, could have made no impression, could have given no hint of what he would later become as a man. Or how important a part he would play in the Family. The Don understood that the glory of America

was the emergence of great families, and that the best social class sprang from men who had at first committed great crimes against that society. It was such men who in the search for fortune had also built America and left evil deeds to crumble into forgotten dust. How else could it be done? Leave the Great Plains of America to those Indians who could not conceive of a three-story dwelling? Leave California to Mexicans who had no technical ability, no vision of great aqueducts to feed water to lands that would allow millions to enjoy a prosperous life? America had the genius to attract millions of laboring poor from all over the world, to entice them to the necessary hard work of building the railroads, the dams, and the sky-scratching buildings. Ah, the Statue of Liberty had been a stroke of promotional genius. And had it not turned out for the best? Certainly there had been tragedies, but that was part of life. Was not America the greatest cornucopia the world had ever known? Was not a measure of injustice a small price to pay? It has always been the case that individuals must sacrifice to further the advance of civilization and his particular society. But there is another definition of a great man. Primarily that he does not accept that burden. In some way, criminal, immoral, or by sheer cunning, he will ride the crest of that wave of human progress without sacrifice. Don Raymonde Aprile was such a man. He generated his own individual power by his intelligence and by his complete lack of mercy. He generated fear, he became a legend. But his children, when they were grown, never believed in the most atrocious stories. There was the legend of the beginning of his rule as Family chief. The Don controlled a construction company run by a subordinate, Tommy Liotti, whom the Don had made rich at an early age with city building contracts. The man was handsome, witty, a thorough charmer, and the Don always enjoyed his company. He had only one fault: He drank to excess. Tommy married the Don's wife's best friend, Liza, an old-fashioned handsome woman with a sharp tongue, who felt it her duty to curb her husband's, obvious pleasure with himself. This led to some unfortunate incidents. He accepted her barbs well enough when he was sober, but when drunk he would slap her face hard enough to make her bite her tongue. It was also unfortunate that the husband had a massive strength due to working hard and long on construction sites during his youth. Indeed, he always wore short-sleeved shirts to display his magnificent forearms and his great biceps. Sadly, the incidents escalated over a period of two years. One night Tommy broke Liza's nose and knocked out a few teeth, which required expensive surgical repair. The woman did not dare ask Don Aprile's wife for protection, since such a request would probably make her a widow, and she still loved her husband. It was not Don Aprile's desire to interfere in the domestic squabbles of his underlings. Such things could never be solved. If the husband had killed the wife, he would not have been concerned. But the beatings posed a danger to his business relationship. An enraged wife could make certain testimonies, give damaging information. For the husband kept large quantities of cash in his house for those incidental bribes so necessary to the fulfillment of city contracts. So Don Aprile summoned the husband. With the utmost courtesy, he made it plain he interfered in the man's personal life only because it affected business. He advised the man to kill his wife outright or divorce her or never to ill-treat her further. The husband assured him it would never happen again. But the Don was mistrustful. He had noticed that certain gleam in the man's eyes, the gleam of free will. He considered this one of the great mysteries of life, that a man will do what he feels like doing with no regard to the cost. Great men have allied themselves with the angels at a terrible price to themselves. Evil men indulge their slightest whim for small satisfactions while accepting the fate of burning in hell. And so it turned out with Tommy Liotti. It took nearly a year, and Liza's tongue grew sharper with her husband's indulgence. Despite the warning from the Don, despite his love for his children and his wife, Tommy beat her in the most violent fashion. She ended up in the hospital with broken ribs and a punctured lung. With his wealth and political connections, Tommy bought one of the Don's corrupt judges with an enormous bribe. Then he talked his wife into coming back to him. Don Aprile observed this with some anger and regretfully took charge of the affair. First, he attended to the practical aspects of the matter. He obtained a copy of the husband's will and learned that like a good family man, he had left all his worldly goods to his wife and children. She would be a rich widow. Then he sent out a special team with specific instructions. Within the week the judge received a long box wrapped in ribbons, and in it, like a pair of expensive long silk gloves, were the two massive forearms of the husband, one wearing on its wrist the expensive Rolex watch the Don had given him years before as a token of his esteem. The next day the rest of the body was found floating in the water around the Verrazano Bridge. Another legend was chilling because of its ambiguity, like some childish ghost story. While the Don's three children were attending boarding school, an enterprising and talented journalist noted for his witty exposure of the frailties of famous people tracked them down and enticed them into what seemed like harmless verbal exchange. The writer had great fun with their innocence, their preppy clothes, their juvenile idealism about how to make a

better world. The journalist contrasted it with their father's reputation while admitting that Don Aprile had never actually been convicted of a crime. The piece became famous, circulated in newsrooms throughout the country even before publication. It was the kind of success a writer dreams about. Everybody loved it. The journalist was a nature lover, and every year he took his wife and two children to a cabin in upstate New

York for hunting and fishing and living simply. They were there one long Thanksgiving weekend. On Saturday the cabin, ten miles from the nearest town, caught fire. There was no rescue for about two hours.

By then the house had burned to smoking logs and the journalist and his family were merely charred and brittle sticks. There was an enormous outcry and a massive investigation, but no evidence of foul play could be found. The conclusion was that the family had been overcome by smoke before they could escape. Then a curious thing happened. A few months after the tragedy, whispers and rumors began to circulate.

Anonymous tips came in to the FBI, the police, the press. They all suggested that the fire was an act of vengeance by the infamous Don Aprile. The press, hot for a story, clamored for the case to be reopened. It was, but again there was no indictment. Yet, despite any proof, this became another legend of the Don's ferocity. But that was the general public; the authorities were satisfied, in this instance, that the Don was beyond reproach. Everybody knew journalists were exempt from any retaliation. You would have to kill thousands, so what was the point? The Don was too intelligent to take such a risk. Still, the legend never died. Some FBI teams even thought the Don himself had inspired the rumors to fulfill his legend. And so it grew. But there was another side to the Don: his generosity. If you served him loyally, you became rich and

had a formidable protector in times of travail. The rewards given by the Don were enormous but the punishments final. That was his legend. After his meetings with Portella and Cilke, Don Aprile had details to tidy up. He set in motion the machinery to bring Astorre Viola back home after his eleven-year exile. He needed Astorre, indeed had prepared him for this moment. Astorre was the Don's favorite, even above his own children. As a child Astorre was always a leader, precocious in his sociability. He loved the Don, and he did not fear him as his own children sometimes did. And though Valerius and Marcantonio were twenty and eighteen years old, when Astorre was ten, he established his independence from them. Indeed when

Valerius, somewhat of a military martinet, tried to chastise him, he fought back. Marcantonio was much more affectionate to him and bought him his first banjo to encourage his singing. Astorre accepted this as the courtesy of one adult to another. The only one Astorre took orders from was Nicole. And though she was two years older, she treated him as a suitor, as he demanded even as a small boy. She made him run her errands and listened soulfully to the Italian ballads he sang her. And she slapped his face when he tried to kiss her. For even as a small boy, Astorre was enraptured by feminine beauty. And Nicole was beautiful. She had large dark eyes and a sensual smile; her face revealed every emotion she felt. She challenged anyone who tried to insinuate that as a female she was not as important as any man in her world. She hated the fact that she was not as physically strong as her brothers and Astorre, that she could not assert her will by force

but only by her beauty. All this made her absolutely fearless, and she taunted them all, even her father, despite his dread reputation. After his wife's death, when the children were still young, Don Aprile made it a practice to spend one summer month in Sicily. He loved the life in his native village, near the town of

Montelepre, and he still owned property there, a house that had been the country retreat of a count, called Villa Grazia. After a few years he hired a housekeeper, a Sicilian widow named Caterina. She was a very

handsome woman, strong with a rich peasant beauty and a keen sense of how to run a property and command respect from the villagers. She became his mistress. All of this he kept secret from his family and friends, though now he was a man of forty and a king in his world. Astorre Viola was only ten years old the first time he accompanied Don Raymonde Aprile to Sicily. The Don had been requested to mediate a great conflict between the Corleonisi cosca and the Clericuzio cosca. And it was also his pleasure to spend a quiet month of tranquillity at Villa Grazia. Astorre, at ten, was affable—there was no other word. He was always cheerful, and his handsome round face with its olive skin radiated love. He continually sang in a sweet tenor voice. And when he was not singing, he offered lively conversation. Yet he had the fiery qualities of a born rebel, and he terrorized the other boys his age. The Don brought him to Sicily because he was the best of company for a middle-aged man, which was a curious commentary on both, as well as a reflection on how the Don had brought up his own three children. Once the Don settled his business affairs, he mediated the dispute and brought about temporary peace. Now he enjoyed his days reliving his childhood in his native village. He ate lemons, oranges, and olives from their briny barrels, and he took long walks with Astorre under the sullen deadly light of the Sicilian sun that reflected all the stone houses and countless rocks with a stunning heat. He told the small boy long-ago stories of the Robin Hoods of Sicily, their fights against the

Moors, the French, the Spaniards, the pope himself. And tales of a local hero, the Great Don Zeno. At night, together on the terrace of the Villa Grazia, they watched the azure sky of Sicily lit with a thousand shooting stars and the flashes of lightning hurling through the mountains just a short distance away. Astorre picked up the Sicilian dialect immediately and ate the black olives from the barrel as if they were bits of candy. In just a few days Astorre established his leadership in a gang of young village boys. It was a wonder to the Don that he could do so, for Sicilian children were full of pride and feared no one. Many of these ten-year-old cherubs were already familiar with the lupara, the ever-present Sicilian shotgun. Don Aprile, Astorre, and Caterina spent long summer nights eating and drinking al fresco in the luxuriant garden, the orange and lemon trees saturating the air with their citrus perfume. Sometimes old boyhood friends of the Don were invited to dinner and a game of cards. Astorre helped Caterina serve them drinks. Caterina and the Don never showed public signs of affection, but all was understood in the village, so no man dared to present any gallantries to Caterina and all showed her all the respect the female head of the house was due. No time in his life was more pleasant to the Don. It was just three days before the end of the visit that the unimaginable happened: The Don was kidnapped while walking the streets of the village. In the neighboring province of Cinesi, one of the most remote and undeveloped in Sicily, the head of the village cosca, the local Mafioso, was a ferocious, fearless bandit by the name of Fissolini. Absolute in his local power, he really had no communication with the rest of the Mafia coscas on the island. He knew nothing of the Don Aprile's enormous power, nor did he think it could penetrate his own remote and secure world. He decided to kidnap the Don and hold him for ransom. The only rule he knew he was breaking was that he was encroaching onto the territory of the neighboring cosca, but the American seemed a rich enough prize to warrant the risk. The cosca is the basic unit of what is called the Mafia and is usually composed of blood relatives. Law-abiding citizens such as lawyers or doctors attach themselves to a cosca for protection of their interests. Each cosca is an organization in and of itself but may ally itself to a stronger and more powerful one. It is this interlinking that is commonly called the Mafia. But there is no overall chief or commander. A cosca usually majors in a particular racket in its particular territory. There is the cosca that controls the price of water and prevents the central government from building dams to lower the price. In that way it destroys the government's monopoly. Another cosca will control the food and produce markets. The most powerful ones in Sicily at this time were the Clericuzio cosca of Palermo, which controlled the new construction in all of Sicily, and the Corleonisi cosca of Corleone, which controlled the politicians in Rome and engineered the transportation of drugs all over the world. Then there were the piddling coscas who demanded tribute from romantic youths to sing to the balconies of their beloveds. All coscas regulated crime. They would not tolerate lazy good-for-nothings burglarizing innocent citizens who paid their cosca dues. Those who stabbed for wallets or raped women were summarily punished by death. Also, there was no tolerance of adultery within the coscas. Both men and women were executed. That was understood. Fissolini's cosca made a poor living. It controlled the sale of holy icons, was paid to protect a farmer's livestock, and organized the kidnapping of careless wealthy men. And so it was that Don Aprile and little Astorre, strolling along the streets of their village, were picked up in two vintage American army trucks by the ignorant Fissolini and his band of men. The ten men in peasant clothes were armed with rifles. They plucked Don Aprile off the ground and threw him into the first truck. Astorre, without hesitation, jumped into the open bed of the truck to stay with the Don. The bandits tried to throw him out, but he clung to the wooden posts. The trucks traveled an hour to the base of the mountains around Montelepre. Then everyone switched to horseback and donkey and climbed the rocky terraces toward the horizon. Throughout the trip, the boy observed everything with large green eyes but never spoke a word. Near sunset, they reached a cave set deep in the mountains. There they were fed a supper of grilled lamb and homemade bread and wine. On the campsite was a huge statue of the Virgin Mary enclosed in a hand-carved dark wooden shrine. Fissolini was devout in spite of his ferocity. He also had a natural peasant courtesy and presented himself to the Don and the boy. There was no doubt he was chief of the band. He was short and built powerfully as a gorilla, and he carried a rifle and two guns on his body belt. His face was as stony as Sicily, but there was a merry twinkle in his eyes. He enjoyed life and its little jokes, especially that he held in his power a rich American worth his weight in gold. And yet there was no malice in him. "Excellency," he said to the Don, "I don't want you to worry about this young lad. He will carry the ransom note to town tomorrow morning." Astorre was eating lustily. He had never tasted anything so delicious as this grilled lamb. But he finally spoke up with cheerful bravery. "I'm staying with my Uncle Raymonde," he said. Fissolini laughed. "Good food gives courage. To show my respect for His Excellency I prepared this meal myself. I used my mother's special spices." "I'm staying with

my uncle," Astorre said, and his voice rang out clear, defiant. Don Aprile said to Fissolini sternly yet kindly, "It's been a wonderful night-the food, the mountain air, your company. I look forward to the fresh dew in the country. But then I advise you to bring me back to my village." Fissolini bowed to him respectfully. "I know that you are rich. But are you that powerful? I am only going to ask for one hundred thousand dollars in American money." "That insults me," the Don said. "You will injure my reputation. Double it. And another fifty for the boy. It will be paid. But then your life will be an eternal misery." He paused for a moment. "I'm astonished you could be so rash." Fissolini sighed. "You must understand, Excellency, I am a poor man. Certainly I can take what I want in my province, but Sicily is such a cursed country that the rich are too poor to support men like myself. You must understand that you are the chance to make my fortune." "Then you should have come to me to offer your services," the Don said. "I always have use for a talented man." "You say that now because you are weak and helpless," Fissolini said. "The weak are always so generous. But I will follow your advice and ask double. Though I feel a little guilty about that. No human is worth so much. And I will let the boy go free. I have a weakness for children-I have four of my own whose mouths I must feed." Don Aprile looked at Astorre. "Will you go?" "No," Astorre said, lowering his head. "I want to be with you." He raised his eyes and looked at his uncle. "Then let him stay," the Don said to the bandit. Fissolini shook his head. "He goes back. I have a reputation to keep. I will not be known as a kidnapper of children. Because after all, Your Excellency, though I have the utmost respect, I will have to send you back piece by piece if they do not pay. But if they do, I give you the word of honor of Pietro Fissolini, not a hair of your mustache will be touched." "The money will be paid," the Don said calmly. "And now let us make the best of things. Nephew, sing one of your songs for these gentlemen." Astorre sang to the bandits, who were enchanted and complimented him, ruffling his hair affectionately. Indeed it was a magical moment for all of them, the child's sweet voice filling the mountains with songs of love. Blankets and sleeping bags were brought out of a nearby cave. Fissolini said, "Your Excellency, what would you like for breakfast tomorrow? Some fish, fresh from the water perhaps? Then some spaghetti and veal for lunch? We are at your service." "I thank you," the Don said. "A bit of cheese and fruit will be enough." "Sleep well," Fissolini said. He was softened by the boy's look of unhappiness, and he patted Astorre on the head. "Tomorrow you will rest in your own bed." Astorre closed his eyes to fall asleep immediately on the ground next to the Don. "Stay beside me," the Don said, as he reached his arms around the boy. Astorre slept so soundly that the rising cinder-red sun was over his head when a clatter awoke him. He rose and saw that the hollow was filled with fifty armed men. Don Aprile, gentle, calm and dignified, was sitting on a great ledge of stone, sipping from a mug of coffee. Don Aprile saw Astorre and beckoned to him. "Astorre, do you want some coffee?" He pointed a finger at the man before him. "This is my good friend, Bianco. He has rescued us." Astorre saw a huge man who, though he was well encased in fat, wore a suit and tie, and seemed to be unarmed, was far more frightening than Fissolini. He had a curly head of white hair and large pink eyes, and he radiated power. But he seemed to blanket that power when he spoke with a soft, gravelly voice. Octavius Bianco said, "Don Aprile, I must apologize for being so late and that you had to sleep like a peasant on the ground. But I came as soon as I got the news. I always knew Fissolini was a dunce, but I never expected him to do this." There began the sound of hammering, and some men moved out of Astorre's vision. He saw two young boys, nailing together a cross. Then, lying on the far side of the hollow, he saw Fissolini and his ten bandits trussed on the ground and tethered to trees. They were encased by a web of wire and rope, their limbs entwined. They looked like a mound of flies on a lump of meat. Bianco asked, "Don Aprile, which of these scum do you wish to judge first?" "Fissolini," the Don said. "He is the leader." Bianco dragged Fissolini before the Don; he was still tightly bound, like a mummy. Bianco and one of his soldiers lifted him and forced him to stand. Then Bianco said, "Fissolini, how could you be so stupid? Didn't you know the Don was under my protection or I would have kidnapped him myself? Did you think you were just borrowing a flask of oil? Some vinegar? Have I ever entered your province? But you were always headstrong, and I knew you would come to grief. Well, since like Jesus you must hang from the cross, make your apologies to Don Aprile and his little boy. And I will give you mercy and shoot you before we hammer in the nails." "So," the Don said to Fissolini. "Explain your disrespect." Fissolini stood upright and proud. "But the disrespect was not for your person, Excellency. I did not know how important and dear you were to my friends. That fool, Bianco, might have kept me fully informed. Excellency, I have made a mistake and I must pay." He stopped for a moment and then shouted angrily and scornfully at Bianco, "Stop those men from hammering those nails. I'm going deaf. And you can't scare me to death before you kill me!" Fissolini paused again and said to the Don, "Punish me, but spare my men. They followed my orders. They have families. You will destroy an

entire village if you kill them." "They are responsible men," Don Aprile said sarcastically. "I would insult them if they did not share your fate." At this moment Astorre, even in his child's mind, realized that they were talking life and death. He whispered, "Uncle, don't hurt him." The Don made no sign of having heard. "Go on," he said to Fissolini. Fissolini gave him a questioning look, at once proud and wary. "I will not beg for my life. But those ten men lying there are all in my blood family. If you kill them, you destroy their wives and their children. Three of them are my sons-in-law. They had absolute faith in me. They trusted my judgment. If you let them go, I would make them swear their undying loyalty to you before I die. And they will obey me. That is something, to have ten loyal friends. That is not nothing. I am told you are a great man, but you cannot be truly great if you do not show mercy. You shouldn't make a habit of it, of course, but just this once." He smiled at Astorre. For Don Raymonde Aprile this was a familiar moment, and he was in no doubt as to his decision. He had always distrusted the power of gratitude, and he believed that no one could direct the influence of free will in any man, except by death. He regarded Fissolini impassively and shook his head. Bianco moved forward. Astorre strode to his uncle and looked him square in the eyes. He had understood everything. He put out his hand to protect Fissolini. "He didn't hurt us," Astorre said. "He just wanted our money." The Don smiled and said, "And that's nothing?" Astorre said, "But it was a good reason. He wanted the money to feed his family And I like him. Please, Uncle." The Don smiled at him and said, "Bravo." Then he remained silent for a long time, ignoring Astorre tugging at his hand. And for the first time in many years the Don felt the urge to show mercy. Bianco's men had lit up small cigars, very strong, and the smoke wafted through the dawn air carried on the mountain breezes. One of the men came forward and from his hunting jacket took out a fresh cigar and offered it to the Don. With a child's clarity, Astorre understood this was not only a courtesy but a demonstration of respect. The Don took the cigar, and the man lit it for him within cupped hands. The Don puffed his cigar slowly and deliberately, then said, "I will not insult you by showing you mercy. But I will offer you a business arrangement. I recognize you had no malice and you showed the utmost regard for my person and the boy. So this is the arrangement. You live. Your comrades live. But for the rest of your lives, you will be at my command." Astorre felt an enormous relief, and he smiled at Fissolini. He watched Fissolini kneel to the ground and kiss the Don's hand. Astorre noticed that the surrounding armed men puffed furiously on their cigars, and even Bianco, grand as a mountain, trembled with pleasure. Fissolini murmured, "Bless you, Your Excellency." The Don put his cigar down on a nearby rock. "I accept your blessing, but you must understand. Bianco came to save me, and you are expected to do the same duty. I pay him a sum of money, and I will do the same for you every year. But one act of disloyalty and you and your world will be destroyed. You, your wife, your children, your nephews, your sons-in-law will cease to exist." Fissolini rose from his knees. He embraced the Don and burst into tears.

And so it was that the Don and his nephew became most formally united. The Don loved the boy for persuading him to show mercy, and Astorre loved his uncle for giving him the lives of Fissolini and his ten men. It was a bond that lasted the rest of their lives. The last night in Villa Grazia, Don Aprile had espresso in the garden and Astorre ate olives from their barrel. Astorre was very pensive, not his usual sociable self. "Are you sorry to leave Sicily?" the Don asked. "I wish I could live here," Astorre said. He put the pits of his olives in his pocket. "Well, we will come every summer together," the Don said. Astorre looked at him like a wise old friend, his youthful face troubled. "Is Caterina your girlftiend?" he asked. The Don laughed. "She is my good friend," he said. Astorre thought about this. "Do my cousins know about her?" "No, my children do not know." Again the Don was amused by the boy and wondered what would come next. Astorre was very grave now. "Do my cousins know you have such powerful friends like Bianco who will do anything you tell them they must do?" "No," the Don said. "I won't tell them about anything," Astorre said. "Not even about the kidnapping." The Don felt a surge of pride. Omerta had been bred into his genes. From the Hardcover edition.