

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



# The Godfather: The Lost Years

Mark Winegardner

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Acknowledgments

*alla mia famiglia*

# THE GODFATHER: THE LOST YEARS

'Covers the years between all the Godfather films in suitably stylish fashion. And compared to the Corleones' deadly power struggle, your own family's squabbles over the festive season are guaranteed to pale into insignificance.'

*Daily Mail*

'*The Godfather Returns* is not only a real book by a real writer. It's also a real pleasure, a fine, swirling epic - bitter, touching, funny and true ... Winegardner has not squandered his inheritance.' *New York Times Book Review*

'Writing in a dry, deadpan style that permits itself few literary flourishes yet powerfully evokes the five decades it spans ... Winegardner infuses *The Godfather: The Lost Years* with his exquisite perception of the most mundane details and with his laconically graceful language.'

*Irish Times*

'Impressive ... Neither mimics Puzo's [novel] nor jars with it, Winegardner's achievement is no mean feat.' *Mirror*

'Winegardner ... has done an excellent job and, though he is standing on the shoulders of a giant, *The Lost Years* is in some respects an improvement on its model ... The politicking, the election, the roles of showbiz and the unions are all skilfully and convincingly handled ... The plotting is subtler and defter than Puzo's, with more

surprises - even jokes. The writing, too, is much silkier.'

*Daily Telegraph*

*Also by Mark Winegardner*

FICTION

That's True of Everybody  
Crooked River Burning  
The Veracruz Blues

NON-FICTION

Prophet of Sandlots  
Elvis Presley Boulevard

AS EDITOR

Three by Thirty-three  
We Are What We Ate  
The 26th Man

*Whoever forsakes the old way for the new knows what he is losing, but not what he will find.*

—Sicilian proverb

*They were killing my friends.*

—AUDIE MURPHY,  
most decorated U.S. soldier of World War II, when asked  
how he had found the courage to fight an entire German  
infantry company

# Timeline

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	<b>The Godfather: The Lost Years</b> (1955–1958)		<b>The Godfather: The Lost Years</b> (1959–1962)**	
<b>The Godfather</b> (1945–1954)		<b>The Godfather II</b> (1958–1959)*		<b>The Godfather III</b> (1979–1980)

\* *The Godfather II* also covers the early life of Vito Corleone (1910–1939) in flashback scenes.

\*\* The second half of *The Godfather: The Lost Years* also covers the early life of Michael Corleone (1920–1945) in flashback scenes.

# Cast of Characters

## THE CORLEONE FAMILY

Vito Corleone, the first godfather of New York's most powerful crime family

Carmela Corleone, Vito Corleone's wife and mother of their four children

Sonny Corleone, Vito and Carmela Corleone's oldest son

Sandra Corleone, Sonny's wife, now living in Florida

Francesca, Kathy, Frankie, and Chip Corleone, Sonny and Sandra Corleone's children

Tom Hagen, *consigliere* and unofficially adopted son

Theresa Hagen, Tom's wife and mother of their three children Andrew, Frank, and Gianna

Frederico "Fredo" Corleone, Vito and Carmela's second-born son (underboss 1955-1959)

Deanna Dunn, Oscar-winning actress and Fredo's wife

Michael Corleone, Vito's youngest son and the reigning Don of the Corleone Family

Kay Adams Corleone, Michael's second wife

Anthony and Mary Corleone, children of Michael and Kay Corleone

Connie Corleone, Vito and Carmela's daughter

Carlo Rizzi, Connie Corleone's deceased husband

Ed Federici, Connie Corleone's second husband

## THE CORLEONE FAMILY ORGANIZATION

Cosimo "Momo the Roach" Barone, *soldato* under Geraci and nephew of Sally Tessio

Pete Clemenza, *caporegime*

Fausto Dominick "Nick" Geraci, Jr. (aka Ace Geraci),  
soldato under Tessio, later *caporegime*, later boss

Charlotte Geraci, Nick's wife

Barb and Bev Geraci, Nick and Charlotte's daughters

Rocco Lampone, *caporegime*

Carmine Marino, *soldato* under Geraci and third cousin to  
the Boccicchio Family

Al Neri, head of security for Family hotels, other security  
details as needed

Tommy Neri, *soldato* under Lampone and nephew of Al  
Neri

Richie "Two Guns" Nobile, *soldato* under Clemenza, later  
*caporegime*

Eddie Paradise, *soldato* under Geraci

Salvatore Tessio, *caporegime*

#### RIVAL CRIME FAMILIES

Gussie Cicero, *soldato* under Falcone and Ping-Pong;  
owner of L.A. supper club

Otilio "Leo the Milkman" Cuneo, boss, New York

Frank Falcone, boss, Los Angeles

Vincent "the Jew" Forlenza, boss, Cleveland

Fat Paulie Fortunato, boss of Barzini Family, New York

Cesare Indelicato, *capo di tutti capi*, Sicily

Tony Molinari, boss, San Francisco

Laughing Sal Narducci, *consigliere*, Cleveland

Ignazio "Jackie Ping-Pong" Pignatelli, underboss and later  
boss, Los Angeles

Louie "the Face" Russo, boss, Chicago

Anthony "Black Tony" Stracci, boss, New Jersey

Rico Tattaglia, boss, New York (succeeded by Osvaldo  
"Ozzie" Altobello)

Joe Zaluchi, boss, Detroit

FRIENDS OF THE FAMILY CORLEONE

Marguerite Duvall, dancer and actress

Johnny Fontane, Oscar-winning actor and probably the greatest saloon singer who ever lived

Buzz Fratello, nightclub entertainer (usually with his wife, Dotty Ames)

Fausto "the Driver" Geraci, a trucker in the Forlenza organization and father of Nick Geraci

Joe Lucadello, friend of Michael Corleone's youth

Annie McGowan, singer, actress, and former hostess of puppet show *Jojo, Mrs. Cheese & Annie*

Hal Mitchell, retired Marine and front for Corleone-owned casinos in Las Vegas and Lake Tahoe

Jules Segal, head surgeon at Corleone-owned hospital in Las Vegas

M. Corbett "Mickey" Shea, former bootlegging partner of Vito Corleone's; ex-Ambassador to Canada

James Kavanaugh Shea, governor of New Jersey and son of the Ambassador

Daniel Brendan Shea, assistant attorney general of New York and son of the Ambassador

Albert Soffet, director of the Central Intelligence Agency

William Brewster "Billy" Van Arsdale III, heir to the Van Arsdale Citrus fortune

BOOK I

Spring 1955

## CHAPTER 1

**O**N a cold spring Monday afternoon in 1955, Michael Corleone summoned Nick Geraci to meet him in Brooklyn. As the new Don entered his late father's house on Long Island to make the call, two men dressed like grease monkeys watched a television puppet show, waiting for Michael's betrayer to deliver him and marveling at the tits of the corn-fed blond puppeteer.

Michael, alone, walked into the raised corner room his late father had used as an office. He sat behind the little rolltop desk that had been Tom Hagen's. The *consigliere's* desk. Michael would have called from home—Kay and the kids had left this morning to visit her folks in New Hampshire—except that his phone was tapped. So was the other line in this house. He kept them that way to mislead listeners. But the inventive wiring that led to the phone in this office—and the chain of bribes that protected it—could have thwarted an army of cops. Michael dialed. He had no address book, just a knack for remembering numbers. The house was quiet. His mother was in Las Vegas with his sister, Connie, and her kids. On the second ring Geraci's wife answered. He barely knew her but greeted her by name (Charlotte) and asked about her daughters. Michael avoided the phone in general and had never before called Geraci at home. Ordinarily, orders were buffered, three men deep, to ensure that nothing could be traced to the

Don. Charlotte gave quavering answers to Michael's polite questions and went to get her husband.

Nick Geraci had already put in a long day. Two heroin-bearing ships, neither of which was supposed to arrive from Sicily until next week, had shown up late last night, one in New Jersey, the other in Jacksonville. A lesser man would be in prison now, but Geraci had smoothed things over by hand-delivering a cash donation to the pension fund of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, whose men in Florida had performed like champs, and by paying a visit (and a sizable tribute) to the Stracci Family *capo* who controlled the docks in north Jersey. By five, Geraci was exhausted but home in his backyard in East Islip, playing horseshoes with his two girls. A two-volume history of Roman warfare he'd just started reading sat next to the armchair in his den, in position for later that night. When the phone rang, Geraci was a few sips into his second Chivas and water. He had T-bones sizzling on his barbecue pit and a Dodgers/Phillies doubleheader on the radio. Charlotte, who'd been in the kitchen assembling the rest of the meal, came out on the patio, carrying the phone with the long cord, her face drained of color.

"Hello, Fausto." The only other person who called Nick Geraci by his given name was Vincent Forlenza, who'd stood as Geraci's godfather in Cleveland. "I'd like you to be a part of this thing Tessio arranged. Seven o'clock at this place called Two Toms, do you know it?"

The sky was blue and cloudless, but anyone watching Charlotte rush to herd the girls inside might have thought she'd learned that a hurricane was bearing down on Long Island.

"Sure," Geraci said. "I eat there all the time." It was a test. He was either supposed to ask about *this thing Tessio arranged* or he wasn't. Geraci had always been good at

tests. His gut feeling was to be honest. "But I have no idea what you're talking about. What thing?"

"Some important people are coming from Staten Island to sort things out."

*Staten Island* meant the Barzini, who had that place sewn up. But if Tessio had set up peace talks with Michael and Don Barzini, why was Geraci hearing it from Michael and not Tessio? Geraci stared at the flames in his barbecue pit. Then it came to him what must have happened. He jerked his head and silently cursed.

Tessio was dead. Probably among many others.

The meeting place was the tip-off. Tessio loved that place. Which meant that most likely he'd contacted Barzini himself and that either he or Barzini had set up a hit on Michael, which Michael had somehow anticipated.

Geraci poked the T-bones with a long steel spatula. "You want me there for protection," he said, "or at the table or what?"

"That was a hell of a long pause."

"Sorry. Had to get some steaks off the grill here."

"I know what you're worried about, Fausto, but not why."

Did he mean Geraci had nothing to worry about? Or that he was trying to figure out what if any role Geraci had played in Tessio's betrayal? "Well, pilgrim," Geraci answered, in his best John Wayne, "I ain't so much worried as I am saddle sore and plum tuckered out."

"Excuse me?"

Geraci sighed. "Even in the best of times I'm a worrier." He felt a tide of gallows humor rise in him, though he spoke flatly: "So shoot me."

"That's why you're so good," Michael said. "The worrying. It's why I like you."

“Then you’ll forgive me if I point out the obvious,” Geraci said, “and tell you to take a route there you’d never ordinarily take. And also to avoid Flatbush.”

Now it was Michael’s turn for a long pause. “Flatbush, huh? How do you figure that?”

“Bums’re home.”

“Of course,” Michael said.

“The Dodgers. Second game of a twin bill with Philadelphia.”

“Right,” Michael said.

Geraci lit a cigarette. “Not a baseball fan, eh?”

“Used to be.”

Geraci wasn’t surprised. Seeing the business side of gambling ruined sports for a lot of the smarter guys. “This could be the Bums’ year,” Geraci said.

“That’s what I keep hearing,” Michael said. “And of course you’re forgiven.”

“For what?”

“For pointing out the obvious.”

Geraci lifted the steaks off the grill and onto a platter. “It’s a gift I have,” he said.

An hour later, Geraci arrived at Two Toms with four of his men and positioned them outside. He took a seat alone and sipped an espresso. He wasn’t afraid. Michael Corleone, unlike his brothers—the brutish Sonny and the pathetic Fredo—had inherited the old man’s deliberate nature. He wouldn’t order a hit on a hunch. He’d make sure, no matter how long it took. Whatever test was coming, however galling it was to be tested by the likes of Michael Corleone, Nick Geraci would respond with honor. He was confident he’d emerge unscathed.

Though he’d never heard Salvatore Tessio say a bad word about Michael, Geraci didn’t doubt that Sally had

thrown in with Barzini. He *had* to be angry about the nepotism that made a Don out of a greenhorn like Michael. He *had* to see the folly of cutting the organization off from its neighborhood roots to move west and become—what? Geraci had taken over countless once-thriving neighborhood businesses built by industrious, illiterate immigrant fathers and ruined by American-born sons with business degrees and dreams of expansion.

Geraci checked his watch, a college graduation gift from Tessio. Michael certainly hadn't inherited the late Don's legendary punctuality. Geraci ordered a second espresso.

Time and time again, Geraci had proven himself a loyal member of the Corleone organization and, still shy of his fortieth birthday, maybe its best earner. Once he'd been a boxer, a heavyweight, both as Ace Geraci (a boyhood nickname that he let stick, even though it mocked him for acceding to the American pronunciation of his name: *Juh-RAY-see* instead of *Jair-AH-chee*) and under numerous aliases (he was Sicilian but fair-haired, able to pass as Irish or German). He'd kept his feet for six rounds against a man who, a few years later, knocked the heavyweight champion of the world on his ass. But Geraci had hung around gyms since he was a little kid. He'd vowed never to become one of those punch-drunk geezers shuffling around smelling of camphor and clutching a little bag of yesterday's doughnuts. He fought for money, not glory. His godfather in Cleveland (who was also, Geraci gradually learned, *the* Godfather of Cleveland) had connected him with Tessio, who ran the biggest sports gambling operation in New York. Fixed fights meant fewer blows to the head. Soon Geraci was called on to give out back-alley beatings (beginning with two kids who'd assaulted the daughter of Amerigo Bonasera, an undertaker friendly with Vito Corleone). The beatings punished deadbeats and loudmouths who had it coming, and earned Geraci enough

money to go to college. Before he was twenty-five, he'd finished his degree, left the enforcer racket, and was a rising man of promise in Tessio's *regime*. He'd started out with some dubious qualities—he was the only guy hanging out at the Patrick Henry Social Club who hadn't been born in Brooklyn or Sicily; the only one with a college degree; one of the few who didn't want to carry guns or visit whores—but the best way to get ahead was to make money for the people above him, and Geraci was such a gifted earner that soon his exotic flaws were forgotten. His most brilliant tactic was to exaggerate his take on every job. He handed over sixty or seventy percent of everything instead of the required fifty. Even if he *had* been caught, what were they going to do, whack him? It was foolproof. His overpayments were an investment with jackpot-level payouts. The more he made for the men above him, the safer he was and the faster he rose. The higher he rose, the more men there were underneath him paying *him* fifty percent. And if the greedy morons held out on him, he was smart enough to catch it. It became clear all over New York that there was a difference between getting hit by the toughest guy you ever fought and having your eye socket flattened into a bloody paste by a blow from a former heavyweight prizefighter. The threat of what Geraci *could* do became a part of the mythology of the street. Soon he rarely needed to do anything to get his money but ask for it. If that. Intimidation is a better weapon than a fist or a gun.

During the war, Geraci mastered the ration-stamp black market and held a draft-exempt civilian position as a loading-dock inspector. Tessio proposed him for membership in the Corleone Family, and at the ceremony his finger was cut by Vito himself. After the war, Geraci started his own shylock operation. He specialized in contractors, who at first never realized how front-loaded

their expenses were and underestimated how tough it was, at the end of jobs, to get everyone who owes you money to pay (here, too, Geraci could be of service). He also targeted business owners who were degenerate gamblers or had any other weakness that made them seek quick cash. Before long, Geraci was able to use those businesses to launder money and give wiseguys something to put on their tax returns—at least until the time came to bust the place out. For thirty days, deliveries would stream through the front door and go straight out the back: presents for wives and girlfriends, gestures of friendship to cops, but otherwise sold to bargain hunters from the neighborhood. Once the bills came, so, too, would a mysterious fire—*dago lightning*. Geraci hated both the term and the crude endgame strategy, and he put it to rest by working on a night school law degree and supplanting the fires with perfectly legal bankruptcy proceedings. He incorporated every business in question (Geraci had a guy in Delaware), sheltering the owner's personal assets. If the owner was a good sport, Geraci tossed in a thousand bucks and some land in Florida or Nevada. When Michael Corleone took advantage of his father's semiretirement and covertly got involved with prostitution and narcotics, the businesses Vito had refused to enter, he'd put Geraci in charge of narcotics and let him hand-pick several men from Tessio's *regime* and what was left of Sonny's. Within months, Geraci worked some things—with the great Sicilian Don Cesare Indelicato, with the powers-that-be on the docks in New Jersey and Jacksonville, and with airports in New York and the Midwest, where he operated several small planes owned by companies the Corleones controlled but did not on paper own. The Corleones, unbeknown to most of the men in their organization, were making as much from narcotics as anybody in America. Without that money, they could never have amassed a war chest big enough to go after the Barzinis and the Tattaglias.

Finally, just after nine o'clock, Peter Clemenza and three bodyguards walked into Two Toms and sat down at Geraci's table. Geraci took it as a bad sign that Michael hadn't come, that he'd sent his *caporegime* instead, the one who'd over the years supervised the family's most important hits. Which sealed it: Tessio was dead.

"You eat?" Clemenza asked, wheezing from the effort of the walk from his car to the table.

Geraci shook his head.

But Clemenza waved a meaty paw to indicate the restaurant's aroma. "How can you resist? We'll get a little something. Just a snack." Clemenza ordered and devoured an *antipasto crudo*, a plate of caponata, two baskets of bread, and linguine with clam sauce. Last of a breed, Clemenza, almost literally so—the last *capo* Michael had inherited from his father, now that Tessio was dead.

"Tessio's not dead," Clemenza whispered to Geraci on the way out.

Geraci's stomach lurched. They were going to make him pull the trigger himself, a test of loyalty. Geraci's certainty that he would pass was no solace at all.

Darkness had fallen. He rode in the backseat with Clemenza. On the way, Clemenza lit a cigar and asked Geraci what he knew and what he could guess. Geraci told the truth. He did not know, yet, that earlier that day the heads of the Barzini and the Tattaglia families had both been killed. He couldn't have known that the reason Clemenza was late was because he'd first had to garrote Carlo Rizzi, Michael Corleone's own brother-in-law. These and several other strategic murders had all been made to look like the work of either the Barzinis or the Tattaglias. Geraci didn't know that, either. But the things Geraci *had* been able to surmise were in fact correct. He took the cigar

Clemenza had offered him but didn't light it. He said he'd smoke it later.

The car pulled into a closed Sinclair station just off Flatbush Avenue. Geraci got out, and so did everyone in the two cars that had pulled in beside them, one bearing Clemenza's men, the other Geraci's. Clemenza and his driver stayed in the car. When Geraci turned and saw them there, an electric ribbon of panic shot through him. He looked for the men who would kill him. Trying to guess how it would happen. Trying to figure out why his own men were standing by passively watching. Why they'd betrayed him.

Clemenza rolled down his window. "It ain't like that, kiddo," he said. "This situation here is just too—" He put both palms to his jowly face and rubbed it fast, the way you'd scrub a stain. He let out a long breath. "Me and Sally, we go back I don't want to think about how long. Some things a man just don't want to see. You know?"

Geraci knew.

The fat man wept. Clemenza made very little noise doing it and seemed unembarrassed. He left without saying anything more, waving to his driver and rolling up his window and looking straight ahead.

Geraci watched the taillights of Clemenza's car disappear.

Inside, toward the back of the first filthy service bay, two corpses in jumpsuits lay in a heap, their blackening blood oozing together on the floor. In the next bay, flanked only by Al Neri, Michael's new pet killer and an ex-cop Geraci had some history with, was Salvatore Tessio. The old man sat on a case of oil cans, hunched over, staring at his shoes like an athlete removed from a game that was hopelessly lost. His lips moved, but it was nothing Geraci could understand. He trembled, but he had some kind of

condition and had been trembling for a year now. There was only the sound of Geraci's own footsteps and, wafting in from another room, thin, distorted laughter that could only have come from a television set.

Neri nodded hello. Tessio did not look up. Neri put a hand on the old warrior's shoulder and squeezed, a gesture of grotesque reassurance. Tessio fell to his knees, still not looking up, lips still moving.

Neri handed Geraci a pistol, butt first. Geraci wasn't good with guns and didn't know much about them. This one was heavy as a cashbox and long as a tent spike—a lot more gun than seemed necessary. He'd been around long enough to know that the weapon of choice in matters like this was a .22 with a silencer—three quick shots to the head (the second to make sure, the third to make extra sure, and no fourth because silencers jam when you fire too many shots too fast). Whatever this was, it was bigger than a .22. No silencer. He stood in that dark garage with Tessio, a man he loved, and Neri, who'd once cuffed him, chained him to a radiator, punched him in the balls, and gotten away with it. Nick Geraci took a deep breath. He'd always been a man who followed his head and not his heart. The heart was just a bloody motor. The head was meant to drive. He'd always thought there'd come a time, when he was old and set, when he would move down to Key West with Charlotte and play the affluent fool.

Now, looking at Tessio, he realized that would never happen. Tessio was twenty-some years older than Nick Geraci, which until that moment had seemed like a long time. Tessio had been born in the last century. He would die in the next minute. He'd lived his life governed by his head and not his heart, and where had it gotten him? Here. A man who loved him was about to reduce that same head to blood and pulp.

"I'm sorry," Tessio muttered, still looking down.

This might have been directed at the Corleones or Geraci or at God. Geraci certainly didn't want to know which. He took the gun and walked around behind Tessio, whose bald spot, lit only by streetlights, gleamed in the darkness.

"No," Neri said. "Not like that. In front. Look him in the eyes."

"You're fucking kidding me."

He cleared his throat. "I don't suppose I look like I'm kidding you."

"Whose idea is that?" Geraci said. Neri didn't have a gun in his hand, but Geraci could not leave this scummy garage alive if he shot anyone but Tessio. From that back office, the television set erupted in a gale of tinny applause.

"Don't know, don't care," Neri said. "I'm just the messenger, sir."

Geraci cocked his head. This dumbass didn't seem witty enough to make a joke about shooting the messenger. But he did seem sadistic enough to take it on himself to make the killing as cruel as possible. And *sir*? How did he mean that? "Salvatore Tessio," Geraci said, "no matter what he's done, deserves more respect than that."

"Fuck youse!" Tessio said, loud now, but eyes still on the slimy floor.

"Look up," Neri ordered Tessio. "Traitor."

Trembling no worse, the old man did as he was told, eyes dry, staring into Geraci's but already far away. He muttered a rapid string of names that meant nothing to Nick Geraci.

Geraci raised the gun, both sickened by and grateful for the sight of his own steady hand. He pressed the barrel gently against the old man's soft forehead. Tessio did not move, did not blink, did not even shake anymore. His saggy