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Part 1

***Murder, like talent, seems occasionally to run
in families.***

Physiology of Common Life. G H Lewis

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BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

Summer 1983

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Chapter 1

It was 8:00 a.m. and already the heat was searing. Students wiggled restlessly in their seats, sweat moistening their hairlines and streaking down their bored, young faces. As the teacher called the roll in the freshman classroom of the Bensonhurst High School, the musical names rolled off her tongue like lyrics from an Italian opera: “Arcazzi?”

“Here.”

“Benniditto?”

“Here.”

“Carmen?”

“Present.”

“Carrao?”

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“Yeah.”

At that name several students shifted in their seats to eye Vinnie Carrao who sat slouched, leg in the aisle, turning a pencil end over end on his desk. Attitude: arrogant. The Carrao name was one many of their parents spoke in hushed tones.

It was the first day of summer school and a number of the students were there because of failing grades, but not Vinnie Carrao. He was the brightest pupil in the class, in any of his classes, and he was there solely because he wanted to get through school as quickly as possible and credits accrued in summer school would make that goal come that much quicker. Vinnie didn't really care about finishing high school, he couldn't see any sense in it, but his mother, Maria, counseled him constantly on the advantages of having an education.

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“You make good of you, Vinnie. Go college. With education you be somebody. No more bad neighborhood. No more tough guys. Maybe get job in Manhattan—or Jersey. You no have stay here get mix with bad guys who run in street mugging, stealing, hurt others. God know what else. You better. You Mamma’s Vinnie.”

What she didn’t say was, “You don’t have to be like your father,” but they both knew that was what she meant.

Father? Vinnie would silently muse. What father? The only time he was around was to eat some pasta, holler at Vinnie, sometimes beat him with a belt, buckle side down, and then if he’d had enough wine, turn on his wife, too.

But outside the house Giancarlo Carrao was a man respected. People looked up to him, some even envied him. Most feared him. Giancarlo was a *capo* in the Gambino

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Family, one of the five *Cosa Nostra* Families who ran the New York City underworld.

Giancarlo had grown up in Bensonhurst, a product not only of his environment, but also of his heritage. His mother, Angelina, had brought him there when he was not yet three-years-old. Giancarlo's father, Vincenzo, had been *consigliere* (advisor) to his cousin, the regional don in the Italian region of Napoli. But when the don ordered a hit on Vincenzo's brother for some minor infraction of Mafia rules, Vincenzo, infuriated, turned traitor and attempted to testify against his former partners as they were periodically brought before the bar of so-called justice. But he was brutally murdered before being able to do so.

Angelina, fearing for her son's life, as well as her own, escaped to her sister's home in America—the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn. Angelina never looked

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back and never really learned to speak English. There was no need. The baker, sidewalk grocery vendor, candy store, cheese shop, and wine shop proprietors all spoke Italian, as did her neighbors.

Giancarlo grew up surrounded by his mother's large Italian family, many of whom were members of the well-established *Cosa Nostra* (Our Thing). He learned at an early age that this was the way to live the "Good Life," America offered—good suits, great cars, the finest restaurants in New York City, and rubbing shoulders with the rich and famous.

At sixteen Giancarlo had become an associate in the Gambino family. This was possible only because he had been a member of a street gang and had shown himself to be not only tough, but unusually ruthless. To become an associate in any Family your acceptance had to be approved by all top

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members of the other four Families. A candidate's behavior and gang history had to be well known to all.

Giancarlo had quickly moved up through the ranks from associate to member. To be a member it was customary, although not mandatory, to have made at least one "hit". Giancarlo had made two before he was seventeen, picking off his victims at random as they walked past a dark alleyway. The next step up was *capo*, and by age twenty-seven he'd become the youngest *capo* ever in the NYC underworld. He had crewmembers working under him who were twice his age, but his strong personality, and sadistic cruelty, quickly gained him their respect. Something else that contributed to the respect was his high intelligence and his off-hours study of the law. Although he never earned a law degree, he learned enough about the inner workings of the criminal justice system to recognize ways around possible

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trouble spots sometimes even better than his superiors.

Over time he came to the notice of none other than John

Gotti, the foremost don of all NYC's five Families.

Giancarlo's true nature was hidden behind exceptionally good looks. He was somewhat taller than most of his fellowmen, and powerfully built. His onyx hair was worn straight back from his wide forehead, his eyebrows thick and bushy, his nose straight and narrow, lips full and quick to smile, the jaw firm and full. At twenty he captured the heart of young, pretty, vulnerable, Maria

Martinelli.

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The drive out to Long Island took a little over an hour and a half and Vinnie dozed in the back seat while Johnny and his uncle made small talk in the front.

“Hey Vinnie! Get the lead out.” Johnny’s uncle reached over the seat and nudged him. “We gotta use some other kinda lead.”

Vinnie climbed out of the car, still groggy, but once his eyes adjusted he saw a professional shooting range up ahead, and off to the right a barn, whose doors were open revealing all kinds of gym equipment. Three men he’d seen at Frankie’s were jogging around a circular track that looked as if it was used by horses.

“Are those guys nuts? Running in the snow!”

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“Yeah, our guys gotta stay in shape.” Uncle Al gestured to the left. “Over there’s a swimmin’ pool. Covered up now. Kinda cold for swimmin’ this time a year.”

Vinnie and Johnny exchanged looks of astonishment, but offered no further questions. And Uncle Al offered no further information.

They walked straight ahead to the shooting range and once there Al asked for their weapons. Vinnie handed him his .38 and after a careful examination, the older man handed it back. “Glad to see you’ve taken good care of it.” He did the same with Johnny’s weapon, but made no comment, then turned to the range. Three of the targets were the traditional round ones with the bull’s eye. Three others had cardboard cutouts of men dressed in everyday apparel.

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“Okay fellas, let’s see what ya can do.” Al stepped back and gestured with his head toward the targets.

Vinnie was the first to step forward. He raised his weapon and fired, hitting the round target with a near bull’s eye. The second and third shots hit the target dead center.

Vinnie turned and Al nodded his head approvingly. “That’s pretty damned good! Now Johnny, let’s see what you can do.”

Johnny’s first shot went wild. He corrected his aim and hit the target on its outer fringes with the succeeding shots. His uncle stepped forward. “You’re shootin’ too high. Try holdin’ the gun with two hands. See like this. And squat a little. Like ya see on tv. Taking the gun from Johnny he demonstrated what he wanted him to do.

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Embarrassed, Johnny took his gun back, held it with both hands and aimed again. This time the shots were on the target and one very close to the bull's eye.

“That’s better. All ya need is a little practice.” Al clapped Johnny on the shoulder. “Now let’s see what you guys can do over here.” He moved several steps to the left and stood before the targets of men dressed in everyday attire. Vinnie and Johnny stood side by side as they took aim at the targets and Vinnie, using both hands this time shot the target squarely between the eyes with two shots and one in the heart area. Johnny’s shots struck the target in the legs on the first two tries and in the mid-section with the third shot.

“Okay, keep goin’. There’s a box a bullets there on the table. Use ‘em up.” Al stepped back and leaned against a tree as he lit a cigarette.

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After a half-hour the bullet box was empty and Johnny's aim had improved. He'd made head shots eight out of ten times.

“Okay,” Al stepped forward. “You’re both pretty good at hittin’ targets, but what if it’s a livin’, breathin’ man?”

Vinnie looked at Johnny's uncle and cocked his head to one side. “Well, I guess he wouldn't be living and breathing anymore when I got through with him then would he?”

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“Good. I’ve got the heater goin’.” Patting the steering wheel. “This old thing has seen better days, but she should be warmed up in a minute or two.”

“Do you know where we’re going?”

Tom removed his wool cap and scratched his head.

“Yeah. Sort of. Spring Creek Park, ain’t it?”

This guy hadn’t been prepped at all. “Here’s a map. Better study it before we get started.”

The driver took the map, switched on a flashlight and began looking it over. Meanwhile, two of Vinnie’s crew, Carlo and Guido, climbed in from the other side, sitting next to Vinnie. “What a fuckin’ night!” Guido complained. “I never seen it rain this fuckin’ hard!”

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A moment later, Ralphie, another member of Vinnie’s crew knocked on the rear passenger door. “Where the hell are we supposed to sit?” he hollered.

“Guido, you and Carlo climb over the seat and get in the back,” Vinnie directed. “Tom can we have a light back here?”

Tom turned a flashlight onto the rear and Guido and Carlo scrambled into the third row of seats, which were cramped; the seats narrow and rain was dripping in from a crack in the roof.

As Ralphie and Vinnie’s other crewmember, Paulie, climbed in Guido called from the back, “That’s what we get fer bein’ on time! You got any midgets ya wanna throw back here?”

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“Oh shut the fuck up,” Carlo snapped. “You’re always griping about somethin’.”

The front passenger door opened and Sal Correnti climbed in. Since Sal was a member of Joey Benniditto’s crew and not well known among the others, perfunctory introductions were made as the green station wagon pulled out from the curb and into the storm swept night.

Vinnie leaned his forehead against the windowpane. The rain hammered hard against the glass. The windshield wipers beat out a monotonous rhythm and the smell of wet wool filled the cramped car. He thought of Rosa all alone. Needing him—*really* needing him--and he wasn’t there for her. What was she doing now? What was she thinking about his leaving her at a time like this? He should be with her, comforting her—and here he was on his way to another hit—three this time—more like another massacre. Then. . .

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somehow through—or was it *in* the glass—The Virgin appeared again. Vinnie jolted upright and shook his head. It sure as hell wasn't a dream because he was wide-awake this time. His forehead broke out with sweat. The contents of his stomach rose to his esophagus. He could feel his whole body tremble. Slowly, without turning his head, he shifted his eyes to the window. She was gone. All he could see was rain. *Good God!* It *had* to be his imagination. Maybe he needed to see a shrink!

The car slowed, drove past the entrance to the park, continued on, passing Howard Beach, and did a U-turn at the intersection of Cross Bay Road. This time as they reached the park entrance the car made a last minute turn into the park.

“The gate’s closed.” Tom pointed to a green wooden gate blocking the drive.

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“Okay, Paulie, get out and open it,” Vinnie directed.

“Never mind, I’ll do it,” Sal replied and before Paulie could open the rear door Sal was out of the car. He pushed the wooden gate aside then climbed back into the car.

“Cut your lights,” Vinnie advised.

“If I do I won’t be able to see a damned thing.”

“Hand me the map.” Vinnie reached forward and Tom handed it to him

“Stop for a minute. Cut the motor.” Vinnie pulled out his Zippo and studied the roughly drawn map. After a minute he snapped the lighter shut. “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do. The road bears to the right for a little ways then makes an abrupt turn to the left. Like a Z turn. Real sharp. We’ll go that far for the present. Looks like there’s a small clearing there. Probably a parking lot. Paulie

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you get out and walk the road. Stay right in front of the car.”

He tapped Tom on the shoulder. “Give him your flashlight.”

“How come I’m the one to get out in this fuckin’ rain?

What’s the matter with one a the other guys doin’ it?”

“Okay, okay,” Sal snapped, “Stop yer moanin’. I’m soaked anyway. I’ll do it.”

“All right then. Sal you take the flashlight and hold in down at your side. Your right side as long as the road bears right. And keep it pointing at the ground. When it makes the sharp Z turn you switch it to your left side. Got that?”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it.”

“Are you carrying?”

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“Is the pope catholic?” As he opened the door and climbed out the sky came alive with lightning. The following crackle of thunder seemed to be directly overhead.

“Okay now Tom follow the flashlight. Stay as close to him as you can, but don’t turn on your lights.”

Tom again started the car.

“The rest of you guys roll down your windows a little to let some of this steam out and keep an eye on the woods.”

Tom inched the car forward, following the dim light that Sal carried. “All I can see is a mud path and Sal’s pant legs.”

“Do the best you can,” Vinnie reached forward and patted his shoulder encouragingly. “We don’t have much farther to go. There’s a cabin about 200 yards from the clearing. That’s where they’re hold up. It’s not possible for

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them to hear the car's motor because of this downpour, so the rain's working in our favor."

Abruptly, Sal switched the flashlight to his left hand.

"Here's the turn." Vinnie looked over his shoulder.

"You guys see anything?"

"Are you kiddin'?" Carlo answered. "I don't think we're gonna need to do a hit. Those guys have already drowned by now."

Suddenly the light from the flashlight disappeared.

"What the hell?" Tom muttered. "Did he drop it or wh--?"

"*Watch it!*" Vinnie cried as gunfire erupted on all sides.

Midnight turned to noon as the automatic weapons began firing sending streaks of red and orange across the

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clearing. Bullets crashed through the rear windows taking out Carlo and Guido. Vinnie ducked to the floor as the rear passenger seat windows erupted in a shower of broken glass. He felt a sharp pain as a ragged piece of glass tore into his leg. Ralphie's body was thrown to the floor from the impact and landed on top of Vinnie. Paulie fell on top of both of them. Tom was shot between the eyes as he tried to put the car into reverse and the windshield exploded creating a shower of glass shards throughout the interior of the car.

As quickly as it had begun the gunfire ceased. Vinnie lay stone still, covered by the lifeless bodies of his crewmen, their blood and brains pouring over him mingling with the rain streaming in through the broken windows. He heard voices that seemed to be surrounding the car.

“Check it out. Make sure you got ‘em all.”

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“Right.”

Car doors opened on all sides. “Jessez what a mess!”

The rear door on the driver’s side swung open and then fell to the ground, its hinges broken. Someone poked the muzzle of a rifle at the bodies covering Vinnie. He held his breath not daring to exhale for fear of being heard.