

The Godfather

by Mario Puzo

After five months of exile in Sicily, Michael Corleone came finally to understand his father's character and his destiny. He came to understand men like Luca Brasi, the ruthless caporegime Clemenza, his mother's resignation and acceptance of her role. For in Sicily he saw what they would have been if they had chosen not to struggle against their fate. He understood why the Don always said, "A man has only one destiny." He came to understand the contempt for authority and legal government, the hatred for any man who broke omerta, the law of silence.

Dressed in old clothes and a billed cap, Michael had been transported from the ship docked at Palermo to the interior of the Sicilian island, to the very heart of a province controlled by the Mafia, where the local capo-mafioso was greatly indebted to his father for some past service. The province held the town of Corleone, whose name the Don had taken when he emigrated to America so long ago. But there were no longer any of the Don's relatives alive. The women had died of old age. All the men had been killed in vendettas or had also emigrated, either to America, Brazil or to some other province on the Italian mainland. He was to learn later that this small poverty-stricken town had the highest murder rate of any place in the world.

Michael was installed as a guest in the home of a bachelor uncle of the capo-mafioso. The uncle, in his seventies, was also the doctor for the district. The capo-mafioso was a man in his late fifties named Don Tommasino and he operated as the gabbellotto for a huge estate belonging to one of Sicily's most noble families. The gabbellotto, a sort of overseer to the estates of the rich, also guaranteed that the poor would not try to claim land not being cultivated, would not try to encroach in any way on the estate, by poaching or trying to farm it as squatters. In short, the gabbellotto was a mafioso who for a certain sum of money protected the real estate of the rich from all claims made on it by the poor, legal or illegal. When any poor peasant tried to implement the law which permitted him to buy uncultivated land, the gabbellotto frightened him off with threats of bodily harm or death. It was that simple.

Don Tommasino also controlled the water rights in the area and vetoed the local building of any new dams by the Roman government. Such dams would ruin the lucrative business of selling water from the artesian wells he controlled, make water too cheap, ruin the whole important water economy so laboriously built up over hundreds of years. However, Don Tommasino was an old-fashioned Mafia chief and would have nothing to do with dope traffic or prostitution. In this Don Tommasino was at odds with the new breed of Mafia leaders springing up in big cities like Palermo, new men who, influenced by American gangsters deported to Italy, had no such scruples.

The Mafia chief was an extremely portly man, a "man with a belly," literally as well as in the figurative sense that meant a man able to inspire fear in his fellow men. Under his protection, Michael had nothing to fear, yet it was considered necessary to keep the fugitive's identity a secret. And so Michael was restricted to the walled estate of Dr. Taza, the Don's uncle.