



A Faun at Large: A Garden State Saga

M.R. Blackmoor

Ces nymphes, je les veux perpétuer.
—Stéphane Mallarmé, L'Après-Midi d'un Faune

I have lived with this horrendous virus for 47 years. After treatments with high strength CDS covering a period not exceeding 3 months overall, my genital herpes (HSV2) seemed to be completely cured. However, it is now over 18 months since my treatment, and the sores have returned. The boils are so painful.

—Herpes-survivor Facebook posting

I

It was a mid-August Friday afternoon in Elizabeth and hotter than tickets to a Boss concert. The upright segment of the city's population had run for the shore, some going as far as Delaware to escape the heat and the local stench. Not that any of those fine folks would have been found in Dick's Filling Station, whose raunchiness was legendary even among Northern Jersey bars. Giovanni Caprese was a regular at Dick's and did not mind the hot weather, for he was always boiling inside with unspent energy and semi-processed jalapeño meat tacos, the house's specialty.

Very few people, except some family members, knew him as Giovanni. He was universally called Johnny *il Mela*, maybe because he drank mostly applejack; a half-drunk bottle of Laird's could often be seen on the table in front of him at Dick's. He explained his affinity for the liqueur (a blend of 35% apple brandy and 65% neutral spirits with a hint of apple flavor and aroma) by saying that as a teenager he worked one summer at a farm in Scobeyville in Monmouth County, where the drink was mainly produced, and became addicted to it. It didn't hurt that Applejack was relatively inexpensive. Moreover, Applejack was used to make a potent cocktail, a Jack Rose, which Johnny proffered to ladies whose already dubious virtue he sought to peg down another notch. In most cases, he got them under the table after the second cocktail, which they had carelessly ingested, misled by the drink's pretty pink color and innocent looking apple and cherry garnishes.

Johnny was a notorious lady's man, and his multiple conquests may have accounted also for his sobriquet—stories of his dalliances, usually initiated by him, often made the rounds at Dick's Filling Station and were repeated sardonically by the regulars.

There was still a third possible reason for Johnny Appleseed's nickname. A persistent story had it that he had contracted an incurable venereal disease from one of his early encounters with cheap Manhattan floozies, and now his penis uncontrollably dripped at most inopportune times. Had anyone dared question him directly on the matter, there would have been a volcanic eruption that put Mt. St. Helens to shame. But nobody did, aware as everyone was of his exceedingly bad temper. Johnny learned of the allegations only when a buxom waitress from Perth Amboy declined to bed with him for health reasons, which she proceeded to enumerate.

The rumor was, alas, true. Johnny had been suffering for a long time from abnormal discharges outside intercourse. These were thick and had a yellowish white tinge, with a ghastly odor that was hard to ignore. He had visited doctors who had ambiguously pointed to a variety of sexually transmitted diseases including chlamydia, gonorrhea, and mycoplasma as the potential culprits, but had been unable to specifically pinpoint the cause, let alone come up with a cure. A wide range of antibiotics had been prescribed and had proved ineffective.

What the doctors failed to recognize, but Johnny empirically observed, was that the only way to temporarily quell his symptoms was to pass on his affliction to another. He still remembered the incredulous expression on his urologist's face when

he declared, "Doc, when I pop, it goes away, at least for a while." "No, Mr. Caprese," the physician had responded, "I'm afraid that's just a coincidence." But it was a coincidence that had played out quite a few times.

Therein lay the problem. Whatever the Molotov cocktail of sexually transmitted diseases that afflicted Johnny, he had developed some tolerance to the symptoms: constitutive soupy discharges, burning urine, painful sores, and constant itching. These were all annoyances with which Johnny could deal. On the other hand, his hapless paramours typically found Johnny's ministrations too much to bear. Rumor had it that some of the girls had even passed away within days of their trysts with Johnny. Even if these rumors were just that—tall tales recounted at seedy tanning parlors and hair salons—the word was out about Johnny: mess with the Caprese, and you'll get the horns. The local talent had heard enough to steer clear, and Johnny was in the midst of a grueling dry spell.

It was not in Johnny's nature to become despondent. A junior but promising member of an entrenched Jersey family, he faced challenges swiftly and often brutally, not letting conscience get in the way of results. But this dripping problem had him down, for he had been deprived of sex for almost four weeks. During this time, he had become one with his right hand. But solitary pleasures had become less fulfilling with each passing day. He needed human contact, soon.

With this thought burning on his mind like an open sore, Johnny sat at the bar at Dick's. The bartender, Tony, was tall and handsome and relatively salubrious for this part of Jersey. His main claim to fame was that he had bartended for six months at STK, in New York City's Meatpacking District. During his time there, he had roasted several desperate, yet well-to-do cougars, who lavished him with designer clothing and jewelry, and used him as an arm-piece while attending cheesy parties at hotels like the Tribeca Grand. So Tony was a bit more polished than the average Jersey boy.

As the old adage goes, however, you can take the kid out of Jersey, but you cannot take the Jersey out of the kid. Tony's stint at STK had come to a sudden end when his manager caught him raiding the cash register. Tony had stayed in Manhattan a bit longer, working as a waiter or bartender at various NYU college bars on Bleecker Street, but college students are stingier than wealthy society women, and before he knew it, Tony had found himself back in Jersey, working at Dick's Filling Station.

"Johnny, what's up, brother?" Tony said as he approached one of his most notorious customers. "What can I get you?" As he said this, he exchanged a firm high five with Johnny, clasping Caprese's hand.

"Hey chief," Johnny replied, "I'll have the usual."

"Coming right up. By the way, the rest of the gang is here, too."

While heading off to fix Johnny's Jack Rose, Tony gestured to four muscle-bound steak-jobs standing at the far end of the bar, wearing Ed Hardy shirts, tight jeans, and chains. They all had the same short, half-spikey haircut. One of them had frosted tips.

"Aw shit, is that Richie Catalano?" asked Johnny to himself, "I definitely need to have a drink first."

Tony returned with two drinks. "Who's the second drink for, man?" inquired Johnny.

"I thought I'd help you out, bro," replied Tony. "Three o'clock."

Johnny looked to his right, at a well-endowed, attractive yet trashy-looking hairdresser-type girl, bursting out of a Guns N' Roses tank top with a pair of daisy dukes and hooker heels. As she leaned over the bar to get Tony's attention, the back of her t-shirt rode up her back, revealing a faded tramp stamp. She was a true Jersey goddess.

"Who is that piece of ass?" asked Johnny.

"That, my friend, is for you to find out," said Tony, with a wink. "She started coming in here a few days ago. I'd be all over that myself, but she's friends with this girl I'm hooking up with, so I don't want to rock the boat. Knock yourself out."

"Thanks, bro," Johnny replied. "Real quick: which one of the two drinks is the PD?" ("PD" was their short for "pant dropper.") A little-known fact to which Johnny and few others were privy was that Tony once had been among Manhattan's most-heralded roofter-artists. He was a true MacGyver when it came to slipping a girl a mickey. With a couple Tylenol, some cough syrup, and few cubes of ice, Tony could concoct a potion that was equal parts aphrodisiac and sedative. The Bronx zoo was said to have called on Tony to help when Quang-Xi, a female panda, had repeatedly rebuffed the advances of her presumptive mate, a feisty male panda called General Tso. It had worked, and the new panda cub was already being scheduled for return to the mother country.

Despite enjoying the mild suspense of watching Johnny down a girl with a series of Jack Roses, Tony occasionally felt charitable enough to eliminate chance altogether and assist Johnny with a PD.

Tony looked tellingly at one of the drinks. Johnny nodded in acknowledgement, licked the index and pinky fingers of his right hand, ran them through his eyebrows, and was off to the races.

With all the charm he could muster, Johnny leaned over. "Hey, gorgeous. What's your name?"

“Are you talking to me?” replied the Jersey princess frostily.

“Yeah. What’s your name?”

“Angela.”

“Angela... are you an angel?”

“Yeah, I guess,” responded Angela. If one looked closely, one might have seen at that moment an incipient blush fighting its way to the surface of her tan.

“Well, Angela. Let me tell you a secret,” Johnny said as he leaned in. “I’ve never seen an angel with a pair of knockers like yours before.”

Angela laughed, “Oh my Gawd, you’re gonna get us hit by lightning! I bet you’ve never seen an angel before.”

“No, trust me. I’d know. I’ve been to all the churches. Even St. Anthony’s over in Paramus, overlooking the Turnpike.”

“Oh stop! And what’s *your* name?”

“I’m Johnny.”

“Nice to meet you, Johnny.”

“Pleasure is all mine, Angela darling. Here, I got this drink for you. Take a sip.” Johnny offered her the PD.

“Oh thanks! What is it?”

“Why don’t you take a sip and guess?”

Angela sipped the glass and began pondering. One could practically hear the hamster wheel in her head begin to turn.

“How do you like your drink?” As Angela took another sip, Johnny gently pushed the bottom of her glass, indicating that she should drink more. The two began making chit-chat for a few minutes. They talked about what it was like to grow up in Jersey, the rest stops, Bon Jovi, and Bill Parcells.

“So, Angela,” he finally said, “do you wanna get out of here?”

Angela wanted to tell him, “no.” But she couldn’t. The PD was already starting to take effect. Without knowing what she was doing, she said “yes.” The following day, she wouldn’t really know where they went after Dick’s Filling Station. Visually it was all a blur, and all she could hear was a cacophony of Def Leppard and Johnny rambling about the one time he had run into Bill Belichick at a gas station on the Garden State parkway and how much she’d love the autographed Chris Candido poster on his bedroom wall. Angela was powerless to comment on any of this. She did, however, note that her clothes reeked of a lingering feral odor.

Angela was pronounced dead a week later in the Emergency Room of the Jersey Shore Medical Center in Hackensack. The cause of death was unknown. But one internist likened the scar tissue built up around her private parts to a case of leprosy he had once witnessed while volunteering for the Peace Corps in Papua, New Guinea. Her parents were despondent. Not only was their daughter dead, but news of the tragedy had reached them just hours before they were supposed to attend a Springsteen concert. They ended up selling their lawn seats on Craigslist for \$17.99 each, almost half their face value. It was a terrible afternoon for them, perhaps the most trying one of their lives.

II

The news of Angela’s demise eventually reached Johnny’s ears. As he sat another steamy afternoon at his usual table at the Filling Station, Johnny pondered what to do. He suspected that his venereal diseases proved fatal to the women with whom he had commerce. This was not a problem he could discuss with his buddies at Dick’s or with other family members. After a while, he concluded that there was only one person in whom Johnny could confide: his grandfather Vito Caprese, the head of the Caprese clan, still alive and spending his final days in a retirement home in Edison.

To anyone else in Johnny’s immediate family, the notion of a counseling session with grandpa Vito would have been ludicrous. Vito had convinced them years before that he had lost the faculty of speech and that fate had relegated him to a quasi-vegetative existence. For years, Johnny, too, had lived under this impression.

It all changed for Johnny around the time he had reached puberty. On one summer day in 1990, Johnny was alone in the living room with Vito and his high school yearbook, while the second half of a Yankees doubleheader played on the television. With Vito sitting listlessly in his wheelchair and no one else in the house, Johnny thought the moment opportune to squeeze out some “gentleman’s relish” while admiring a photograph of ninth grade heartthrob Tina Cuccinello. Just as things were getting good, Johnny leapt from his seat at the sound of words—actual words—emanating from Vito’s mouth, “Don’t fuck around, kid. Give it to her... goooooood!” Johnny proceeded to cringe, both at his own shame and at the sight of his grandfather following

up his utterance, perhaps his first in years, with an attempt to lick his own cheeks lustily. To this day, Johnny had etched in his mind's eye the image of his grandfather's corroded, sore-riddled tongue, which very much resembled the outer skin of a beaded lizard. Frighteningly, Vito had almost succeeded in licking his cheeks.

From then on, Vito took Johnny under his wing and, during their private moments, instructed him in the arts of seduction, Jersey-style. Vito also warned Johnny many times that, if he did not have sex early and often, fate would punish him with unspeakable maladies that would burn him down low, where it counted. Johnny often thought of Vito's admonishments whenever his symptoms flared up.

Johnny decided he needed counsel from his *nonno*. He hopped into his favorite girl, Brenda, a restored 1966 flaming red 289 V8 Mustang convertible, and got onto Route 9, speakers blasting Human Remains' *Rote*—one of the defunct band's most enduring tunes. He had plunked his entire share of the first job he ran for the family to buy Brenda, but it was worth all the money he had to be able to zoom down the Turnpike at way above the speed limit, wind mussing his hair, inflicting heavy metal blasts on the cars he passed.

It was only a half an hour drive down to Edison, but Johnny fretted all the way there. After all, Johnny hated guilt trips, and he had the undeniable feeling that he was in for one, given that his constant hunt for fresh tail, not to mention his overall indolence, had prevented him from visiting his *nonno* in several years. Making matters worse, the onset of dementia had exacerbated Vito's cantankerous traits, which was not difficult to do, given that Vito was, at core, a grouchy curmudgeon, a characteristic brought about by years of hard living. The older Caprese was fond of recounting reminiscences of his early years in the *Sassi di Matera*, which according to his tales was one of the worst dumps on Earth. He always made it clear that Matera was in Basilicata, at the heel of the Italian peninsula, and was nowhere near the cesspool that was Sicily (as with their cousins in the states, Italians living in the old country can be a territorial lot).

Johnny always thought that the disclaimer was funny, for upon arrival in America in 1949 Vito Caprese had settled in Elizabeth and gone to work as a janitor and sanitation worker at a landfill owned by the Badami crime family. A Sicilian family, the Badamis had purchased the landfill so they could more easily dispose of unwanted contraband and the remains of their victims. For the most part, they and their henchmen looked down on Vito, mainly because of his Materan ancestry. If they ever visited the men's room in the landfill operator's office while he was mopping, they would make a point to piss on the floor, so they could watch him clean it up, which he would have no choice but to do, often while cursing under his breath. One time, one of the mobsters had even masturbated to completion in front of Vito, as well as some of his buddies, whom he had tried to impress by claiming that he could shoot across a room (as it turned out, he could make it to Vito's shoes). But it was precisely because of Vito's unassuming nature and appearance that various Badami capo regimes occasionally used Vito to mule for them. Indeed, Vito had made a decent supplemental income running low-grade narcotics, like Quaaludes and molly, for the Sicilians. In this way, he had managed to provide a reasonable middle-class life for his children and grandchildren.

After revealing his still functional powers of speech to Johnny, Vito had made sure that his favorite grandson realized the importance of supplemental income and linked up with connected Sicilianos of his own generation who occasionally need Materan help in moving a few grams here and there. Selling cheap club drugs was how Johnny managed to pay for his membership at Gold's Gym and numerous tanning bills.

Indeed, Johnny was full of memories as he sought to shave a few minutes off his commute by winding through Edison's suburban backstreets in route to the Evergreen Gardens nursing home, to which Vito Caprese had been moved by his sons, including Johnny's father, when he began giving incipient signs of psychotic behavior. They had essentially left him there to die, and besides paying the nursing home bills, paid no attention to him or to the medical staff, which occasionally tried to contact them regarding his health.

Evergreen Gardens was a small facility on a quiet street not far from the Garden State Parkway. From the outside, it looked just like many other low-rise nursing homes dotted across America. Evergreen's common areas sported Early American furniture and overstuffed sofas and armchairs covered with washable fabrics in large prints. The resident rooms had single beds, minimal accessories, and Kinkadee prints on the walls. The place was clean but devoid of character, and was reminiscent of a discount motel.

Johnny found Vito in his room arguing with an attendant. "Mr. Caprese, you *must* take your medication. You know you get restless if you miss even one dose." The beefy nurse sounded weary but resigned.

"Bullshit, you stinking whore!" was the shouted response of the scrawny man on the wheelchair. "I don't need no pills. You are just trying to poison me."

"Mr. Caprese, I am not a 'stinking whore,' and this is antipsychotic medication, it is very important you take it."

“No way. Shove it up your loose cunt.”

“Mr. Caprese! Watch your mouth!”

“Why don’t you watch it, instead!” Vito squinted his eyes and began rapidly flicking his tongue up and down, in mock cunnilingus.

At this point, Johnny interjected himself into the conversation. “*Ciao, nono. Come sta?*”

The old man turned away from the nurse and faced Johnny with an expression of disbelief. “Giovanni, *sei tu?*”

“*Si, papo. Son ’io.*”

As the senior Caprese stared at his grandson, the nurse turned toward Johnny with a sense of relief. “Are you his grandson?” she asked.

Johnny replied that he was. She responded, “Well, I’ll leave the two of you alone. He’s in quite a mood today. Maybe you can convince him to take these.”

The nurse handed the pills to Johnny as she walked out the room. On her way out, Vito tried unsuccessfully to grope her breasts. Johnny stared briefly at the pills and then tossed them into the waste basket in the corner of the room.

Vito’s face turned to suspicion. “What do you want? You have not come visit me in almost five years. Are you in trouble? Are you having money problems?”

“No, papo. I have enough.”

“Then, what is it?”

“You see...” Johnny hesitated, gulped, and went on to describe his difficulty as briefly as he could, turning crimson in the process.

“Ah, that,” was Vito’s laconic response.

“You don’t seem surprised. You always said it would happen if I didn’t fuck enough.”

Vito shrugged. “I believe it runs in the family, but sometimes it skips a generation or two.”

“What do you mean?” asked Johnny, astonished.

Vito closed his eyes for a moment and his face drained of expression, as if he was drifting away. Finally, he came to and replied in a voice that had a different intonation and sounded much younger than his eighty seven years: “Did I ever tell you how we came to change our family name?”

“What change? Weren’t we always the Caprese clan?”

“No, no, no. When I was born, our family in the Sassi was known as the Agnelli. But as I got into my teens, this need to screw we have been talking about started cropping up. At the age of thirteen, I was already getting *la mia minchia* in every hole I could find, which at the time meant farm animals. Finally, as grew older, I switched my attention to the young girls in the village... and the family.”

“But how did your parents put up with your behavior?”

“My father was somewhat tolerant of my indiscretions because he felt, with pride, that they were the result of my being very male, *di avere i grandi coglioni.*” But, when I was seventeen, I was caught by Aunt Lola violating her nine-year old daughter, something that the family could not forgive. I was kicked out of our hovel in Sassi and after tumbling all over Basilicata made the jump to Sicilia. It was in Sicilia that I first felt the scourge on my sausage after a dalliance with this village girl named Apollonia. I went to the village doctor, who told me that, from his experience with other patients, the disease was like a hot potato and that the only way to get rid of it was to pass it on to a hooker or barnyard animal. So that’s what I tried to do, for years, and with anything I could get my hands on. After a while, the villagers got used to the sight of me helping myself to their livestock, particularly goats, which were everywhere back then. So, they began calling me Caprese, and since the Agnellis had disowned me, ‘Caprese’ was the name I gave the immigration officers at Ellis Island when I made the jump to this country as a stowaway on a ship full of immigrants.”

“And you never tried to find a permanent cure when you were in America?”

“Not really. I was quite satisfied with the folk remedy that the Siciliano doctor had prescribed. Chasing tail was not anything that bothered me, *ma* it drove your *nonna* insane. She made me go to a shrink, who said I suffered from satyriasis and prescribed tranquilizers and herbal teas to calm me down. They never did anything.” Vito’s voice trailed off as he momentarily lost himself in thought before resuming, “The strange thing is that your grandmother was somehow immune to the symptoms of the affliction, although other girls and animals were not.”

“So, *caro papo, che devo fare?* What should I do about my problem?”

“*Figlio mio*, you have two problems. You have to find a cure for your *male di cazzo*, those diseases that keep you dripping

like a leaky faucet. But the other thing, the need to always be in the hunt for pussy, has no cure and will be with you until you cannot get it up, and even after then.”

“Managgia, nonno. I’m screwed.”

“Ma perchè?”

“Because the doctors don’t know how to get rid of whatever is making me leaky.”

“Well, in that case....” Vito seemed to ponder for a moment. “You will need to keep trying to find fresh pussy.”

As he drove back from Edison, Johnny could not shake the haunting image of his grandfather perfecting his power stroke by making his way through herds of sheep and she-goats in the old country. In any event, it amazed Johnny how vastly different his grandfather turned out to be from the man he had seen at family-get togethers during much of his childhood: mute, frozen, and half-comatose, but somewhat dignified while parked in a rusty wheelchair at the head of the dinner table. Would that be Johnny one day?

III

WWNJ was the most popular TV station in Northern Jersey. While affiliated with Fox, the station carried independent programming, largely to the taste of its target audience. A trademark of WWNJ was its inclination to deploy buxom girls as part of its local news team. The sight of scantily clad reporters prancing about the studio or on location at the site of the latest bank robbery or drug bust brought some of the most excitable male viewers over the edge with messy consequences.

Perhaps the most famous mare in the WWNJ stable was Blanca O’Reilly, a stunning half-caste with green eyes, caramel skin and boobs that triggered burglar alarms when they bumped into doors. Blanca was actually an accomplished reporter, who could conduct a mean interview by shaking her maracas to loosen the lips of otherwise circumspect witnesses. Her specialty, developed over several years with the network, was to track the coming and goings of the leading families in the Garden State. It was the admissions during her interview of a minor *capo* that led to the third conviction of Angelo Prisco, one of the most notorious members of the Genovese family. Blanca was appreciated and lusted after by most of her viewers.

It was that reporting zeal that drew Blanca to Dick’s Filling Station one unseasonably hot Wednesday afternoon in mid-September. She was trying to track down a lead on a crime ring responsible for distributing petty club drugs, as well as laced scratch-and-sniff stickers, in the Greater New York area. Johnny’s name had come up in conversation with one of her contacts. After a lot of digging, she located his hangout in an Elizabeth bar and decided to pay him a visit.

Tony was standing behind the bar, pretending to be busy cleaning beer glasses even though the joint was almost deserted. As Blanca strutted in and stood in front of the bar, Tony—who had failed to recognize her at first—did a double take and greeted her effusively: “Why, Miss O’Reilly! Honored to meet you in person! I am a great fan, you know! Can I offer you anything?”

Blanca, who was used to the adoration of her fans, gave a tiny smile and replied almost curtly: “Diet Coke, please.”

Tony busied himself filling a glass with ice and pouring a soft drink. As he handed it to Blanca he asked: “What brings you to our modest establishment?”

“I’m looking for someone called Johnny Caprese. Do you know him?”

“No shit. Oh, pardon my French! Yes, I know him well. He comes here often.”

“Do you expect him any time soon?”

“He usually does not come on Thursdays, but I expect he’ll be here tomorrow afternoon about this time.”

“I will return then. Thanks for the information.” She slurped the rest of the Coke and got up to leave. “How much do I owe you?”

“Nothing, Miss O’Reilly. It’s on the house. See you tomorrow?”

“I think so. Thank you for the drink and the information.”

“My pleasure.”

As Blanca exited the bar, Tony picked up his cell phone. “Yo, Johnny, this is Tony. How’s it hanging?” ... “Yeah, fine. Same shit. Listen, you had a visitor today.” ... “A very nice visitor.” ... “Yeah, do you know Blanca O’Reilly of WWNJ?” ... “She came looking for you.” ... “No, I’m not shitting you. I told her you would be here tomorrow afternoon and she is coming back to meet you.” ... “No, I don’t know what she wants, but she’s a real piece, so you better put on your best duds.” ... “Same to you, motherfucker. Bye.”

Johnny’s vanity was stroked by the news. He immediately made an appointment to have his eyebrows tweezed. However, on his way back from the salon he became apprehensive because everyone in Jersey knew the Prisco story. He decided to be very

careful when he met the journalist.

Friday afternoon the Filling Station was even more deserted than the day before. Indeed, when Blanca arrived—dressed to the nines—only Tony was at the place. “Has Mr. Caprese shown up yet?” she immediately asked.

“No, but he called earlier, and I expect him momentarily. Can I get you another Diet Coke, or maybe something else?”

“No, thanks. I had a late lunch.”

“Why don’t you sit down and wait for him? It won’t be long.”

“Thanks.” She had barely sat down when the door swung open and Johnny, wearing his newest pair of Diesel jeans and a shiny gray short-sleeved muscle shirt, ambled in as if he owned the whole wide world, subtly flexing to impress her with his muscle tone. Tony rushed to make the introductions. “Hello, Johnny. Please meet Miss Blanca O’Reilly, who is here to see you.”

Johnny put on his most charming smile and proffered his hand in welcome. “*Enchanté*” he crooned (actually pronouncing the word “An-Chan-tea”). “De-elighted to meet you. I gotta say you are even more beautiful in person than on TV.”

Blanca responded with a wry smile that failed to warm her face. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Is this a social call, darling? If it is, I would invite you to join me in a more private place so we can get better acquainted.”

“Unfortunately, I’m here on business. I understand you worked for Mr. Francesco Guarraci and we are researching to do a piece on him as a leading citizen of the North Jersey community. Perhaps you could help me with some questions about him and his business activities, on which I’m sure you can shed some light.”

Johnny frowned, but quickly smoothed his features into a look of polite interest. “Sure, just let me know what you want to know. But, will you join me for a little drink?”

“Sorry, I don’t drink while I’m on the job.”

“That’s honorable and all, but this is a special cocktail that Tony here invented. Can we ask him to fix us a couple?”

“Again, I don’t drink while I’m on business.”

“Listen, doll, I tell you what: I’ll ask Tony to bring us a glass so you can see what we’re talking about.” Before she could protest again, Johnny turned to Tony, who had pretended to be oblivious to the conversation but had not missed a word. “Tony, could you hook us up with a couple of Jack Roses, and please use the fancy glasses that you keep hidden under the counter?”

“Sure, boss” was Tony’s unctuous reply.

Blanca wasted no time getting on with the interview. “How long have you worked for Mr. Guarraci?”

“Oh, let me think... It’s a little over six years.”

“And what do you do for his company?”

“I do a number of things, but I am mainly responsible for accounts receivable, you know invoicing, collections, things like that.” The conversation stopped when Tony approached with two liqueur glasses filled to the rim with a lovely pink liquid. He placed one in front of Blanca and the other before Johnny.

“Hey, wouldn’t it be cool if we sipped them at the same time?” implored Johnny.

Blanca relented. “Well, just a sip. I’m not much of a drinker.” She brought the small glass to her lips and inhaled the aroma. “Smells like apple blossoms, but somehow sweeter,” she declared.

“Damn right, give it a taste.” Blanca swirled a small amount inside her mouth, admiring the complex flavor and the rich bouquet of the concoction. “It’s delicious,” she reluctantly admitted.

“Have some more” urged Johnny. “The taste grows on you.”

She swallowed one small gulp, then took a larger one. Johnny leaned in closely, studying her features intently and starting to get hard. Blanca noticed, for the first time, a musky odor emanating from Johnny, which was probably his having doused himself with Aqua Velva. “I like it,” she said. “But let’s continue. What kinds of receivables are those that you collect for Mr. Guarraci?”

“Well, as you know, his main line of business is in farm equipment. I deal with small farmers in Southern Jersey and collect on their purchases of tractors, combines, and other such devices.”

“And... what...” Blanca paused as if losing her train of thought. “I mean, what...?”

She never finished the sentence. The empty glass fell from her hand and Johnny had to move quickly to catch her before she fell out of her chair.

Tuesday afternoon, Chet Jobs, Blanca’s news anchor at WWNJ, had a solemn message for the viewership to start off the 6 O’Clock News: “We begin tonight’s show with a sad story. We regret to inform you that Blanca O’Reilly passed away earlier today after checking herself in at the Jersey Shore Medical Center. Medical staff and authorities are still investigating the

precise cause of death, and WWNJ will keep you posted.”

IV

At age forty-three, Giovanna Balducci was the epitome of unfulfilled potential. Born to a wealthy socialite couple in Milan Italy, Giovanna combined natural beauty with an alert mind that had gained her a first-rate education. After obtaining a law degree from the *Universita degli Studi di Roma La Sapienza* and an L.L.M. from Columbia University, she had joined a major Milanese firm and settled into a comfortable legal practice as a litigator. She generally enjoyed the work environment, which she spiced up every now and then with a work-place affair.

Despite her professional triumphs, Giovanna suffered from a mounting sense of ennui. She was an outlier in Italian society, not only because of her family's wealth and her superlative education, but also due to her anomalous romantic life. Giovanna had never married, and either sought out married men, whom she knew to be unavailable from the outset, or, if she found herself in a reasonably healthy relationship, she would cheat on her boyfriend; by playing the betrayer, she protected herself from making any commitments. This sort of free-booting lifestyle had served her well through her twenties and early thirties, but, with age, Giovanna's looks had begun to fade, and between her deteriorating physique, hostility toward men, and the long hours she usually logged at the office, she saw her prospects of settling down dwindle.

Suddenly, her career also took a hit. In 2012, her firm landed one of the highest profile court cases in Italy. It involved a raunchy Pringles potato chips commercial, in which acclaimed Italian adult film actor Rocco Siffredi boasted about how he preferred Pringles to all the other “potato chips” that he'd ever tasted. The claim involved a risqué play on words, as *patata* is both the Italian conventional word for “potato” and a slang name for “pussy.” Although the Pringles ad was a hit with the younger generation, many citizens found it appalling and prevailed upon the Ministry of Communication to ban it. This led to widespread protests, and Rocco Siffredi became an icon and rallying figure for freedom-loving Italians wary of government censorship. Giovanna's assignment to Siffredi's freedom of speech suit by the head of her firm's litigation department was to boost her resume in the push to make her a partner.

Unfortunately for Pringles, Siffredi, and Giovanna, the assignment came at a time when Giovanna's negative feelings towards men were at their nadir. Unable to stomach serving as the zealous advocate for Siffredi, whose misogynistic, street style of porn was as sinister to girls as it was popular among adolescent males around the world, Giovanna tanked the case. Giovanna botched routine depositions, wrote incoherent motions, and missed filing deadlines, leading to the case's dismissal.

In a normal work environment, Giovanna would have lost her job. However, she had bedded several members of the firm's board, and fearing that she might spill the beans to their spouses, they kept her around, although they slowly weaned her off meaningful matters, effectively hamstringing her career.

Somehow, her story was luridly captured by a tabloid that paraded her incompetence and referred to her as the “*sterile principessa*” and depicted her life as that of a shameless and convention-defying bachelorette.

Despite her swelling antipathy toward men, Giovanna did, in fact, yearn for a child. Throughout her travails, she visited her gynecologist frequently and was always popping hormone pills and other supplements to ensure maximum fertility. The problem was that she had now become a notorious man-eater and no males in her social and professional circles would chance getting involve with her.

So, Giovanna decided to take a vacation in the States and search among her former Columbia classmates for a willing sperm supplier. After arriving in New York, Giovanna spent a week serially dating her former classmates. It was all very much disheartening, because not one of them sought to invite her for a nightcap. Some simply were not interested in anything more than a drink; others just could not read between the lines and comprehend the obvious signs of interest that she tried to give off. And her faded beauty provided no incentives for the guys to walk into the trap.

Having given up her attempts to lure nerdy intellectuals into her bed, Giovanna decided to spend the last two days of her trip visiting with an old female friend from her LLM days. Her friend had a lucrative immigration practice in Elizabeth, New Jersey, and Giovanna looked forward to spending some time away from men. It all went well, but on the last night of her stay she found herself alone in town, since her friend had another engagement. Giovanna had a simple but satisfying meal at a local Italian diner and consumed a whole bottle of Chianti by herself. Feeling a bit woozy, Giovanna went for a stroll along the sidewalks of the downtown area to clear her mind. She eventually felt the need to respond to a call of nature and went into a dive called “Dick's Filling Station.” Giovanna entered the establishment, waited in the line to the lady's room for what seemed like an eternity, and finally relieved herself.

While exiting the bar, she chanced upon a scuffle between two testosterone-laden men. The dispute apparently arose when the more aggressive of the men had stormed out of the establishment with his head down and accidentally bumped into the other guy. There ensued the standard exchange of pleasantries regarding one another's mothers, followed by some pushing, and then the grabbing and yanking of necklaces. A bouncer moved in before things could really heat up. Giovanna noticed that the more aggressive of the two meatheads, who apparently knew and was friendly with the bouncer, kept baring his teeth and pulling up his muscle shirt to show off his abs once it became obvious that no fight would ensue.

Satisfied that he had given off the impression of having cowed his opponent into docility, the brute turned to leave, when out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of Giovanna. He nonchalantly moseyed over toward her. "I'm sorry you had to see that, darling," he apologized. Giovanna responded that it was no big deal and that every man must stand up for himself. She was strangely turned on by his bellicosity, which was a welcome change from the craven and unmanly lawyers she encountered on both sides of the pond. Observing her pure, if alcohol-slurred Northern Italian accent, the almost-street fighter remarked, "So, you're from the old country? What's your name?"

"Giovanna... and yes, I am from *Italia*. What is your name and where are you from?"

"*Che coincidenza! Inoltre mi chiamo Giovanni, come lei!*," he said with a toothy smile. "*Sono di cui, di Jersey.*" Can I buy you a wonderful cocktail that is the *specialità di queste bar*?"

A bit later, Giovanna found herself waking up lying naked on her back in Johnny's bed. Johnny, also naked, stood over her. As Johnny ejaculated inside her, she was convinced that her egg had been fertilized. She crooned, "I feel the life, it grows inside of me."

Giovanna did not bother spending the night. Johnny had fallen asleep within minutes of finishing, and Giovanna quickly dressed and left. On her way out, she noticed that the room smelled something like a barn.

It took only three hours for Giovanna to realize that something was wrong. She felt a sharp pang in the inside of her womb. At first, she thought it was from her fertilized egg implanting, so she smiled to herself and went to sleep. A few hours later, the pain became unbearable. She awoke in her plush hotel room in Manhattan in a cold sweat, her private parts figuratively on fire with a searing, burning itch. She resisted scratching for a while, but before long found herself clawing frenziedly at the inside of her vagina with both hands. From the blood on her fingers she knew that she had ruptured a blood vessel. She began bleeding profusely, so she ran to the bathroom of the hotel looking for her toiletry bag to see if she might stop the bleeding with a tampon. When she found that she had run out of supplies, she rushed back into the main room to call the front desk. The half-asleep clerk could barely understand her, but promised to call 9-1-1. Meanwhile, the pain intensified. Giovanna screamed in agony and rushed back into the bathroom, planning to sit on the toilet and bleed into toilet. She was concerned that she might lose her child. Her mind was so pre-occupied with this thought, as well as her pain, that she forgot to side step the large puddle of blood beside the sink. She slipped on the wet surface and smashed the back of her head against the sink, splitting her skull wide open. When the paramedics arrived, Giovanna was delusional due to the loss of blood. She thought that she was in the delivery room. One young female paramedic caught a glimpse of Giovanna's exposed crotch and screamed in terror. Summoning every last ounce of strength left in her, Giovanna asked, "Nurse, is it a boy or a girl?"

Giovanna died without hearing the answer.

V

Unlike his other victims, Giovanna came from an affluent and well-connected family. Her father, a famous art dealer, made a big fuss over her death with the Italian politicians who in turn began pestering the State Department so that, at the end, both the FBI and the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta were brought in to investigate Giovanna's mysterious death, which the coroner had attributed to a previously unclassified strain or combination of strains of deadly venereal diseases. The CDC dispatched Clarisse Schmidt, an ambitious young epidemiologist and health specialist, to Northern New Jersey to look into Giovanna's death and those of several other women who had died under similar circumstances.

Clarisse, a born detective, found in Giovanna's purse the receipt from the diner where she had her last meal on earth, and armed with a picture of Giovanna, started walking the streets of Elizabeth looking for someone who could identify her. As luck would have it, Clarisse ran into the bouncer at Dick's Filling Station who recalled having seen her having a couple of drinks and leaving the bar in the company of Johnny Caprese.

When the Feds (accompanied by NJ State Troopers and Clarisse) invaded The Filling Station and roughed up Tony a bit they learned additional details on the story of Giovanna's meeting with the young Mr. Caprese, her sudden indisposition, and

Johnny's gallant endeavor to drive her to her home.

A few days later, law enforcement agents showed up at Antonio Guarraci's headquarters and proceeded to arrest Johnny, charging him with the suspected murder of Giovanna.

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Johnny's apprehension by the FBI and the New Jersey authorities was not the end of the story, but a mere beginning to the sensational events that followed. The case against Johnny was built by the discovery of faint vomit stains on Brenda's passenger seat, which the lab reported matched Giovanna's DNA. Small samples of her DNA were also found at various points of Johnny's apartment, including notably the top of a dinette table.

A critical discovery was that of a crumpled facial tissue between the cushions of the living room of Johnny's apartment. The tissue contained a bit of dried blood and a substance that was identified as semen. The provenance of the semen became a crucial clue in the investigation, and the Union County Prosecutor in charge of the case got the County's Superior Court to order that a sample of Johnny's DNA be obtained and matched against that of the semen found in the tissue.

When Johnny's DNA was analyzed, a startling discovery was made. In addition to the twenty-three pairs of chromosomes found in every human's cell, Johnny had two extra pairs of strange chromosomes whose structure was unlike anything specialists had ever seen. After a lot of referrals to other specialists, an animal geneticist working for a livestock company in Australia reported that the strange chromosomes were analogous to those found in goats, but appeared more primitive, as if it belonged to some ancestor of today's goat (*Capra aegagrus hircus*), and the wild goats of Eastern Europe.

Based on Giovanna's peculiar symptoms, investigators were able to link Johnny to several gruesome deaths of women in the Greater New York area, including Blanca. Given the scope of the case and the various jurisdictions involved, Johnny's prosecution was transferred to the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York, sitting in Manhattan.

It did not take long for the story to leak out and receive attention both by legitimate publications like *Nature*, and earthier ones. A spread in the *New York Post* dubbed Johnny "a satyr" and described him as a serial rapist, "in keeping with his mythological roots as an insatiable pursuer of female flesh."

The lawyer representing Johnny, Carlo Ragano, was personally selected by the Guarraci family's underboss Joe Miranda because he excelled in the ability to confuse juries into acquitting even hardened criminals. At Johnny's arraignment, Ragano instructed him to plead "not guilty" to the murder of Giovanna and seven other women, and requested a bench conference in which he advised the trial judge and the District Attorney that he intended to argue at trial, if there was one, that any deaths that Johnny may have caused were the result of his peculiar genetic makeup, citing the controversial *Durham v. United States* case in which a New Hampshire court had ruled that a defendant is entitled to acquittal if his crime was the product of his illness. Ragano argued that "as the papers eloquently describe it, Mister Caprese is a latter-day faun, and a faun cannot be blamed or punished for behaving like one—assiduously pursuing nymphs or, in this modern age, young women. In addition, these women were not murdered. They somehow died as a result of having intercourse with my client." The judge was skeptical and the District Attorney's lawyer apoplectic, but the judge allowed the not guilty plea to be entered on Johnny's behalf.

The period leading to the trial was rife with colorful media stories and raunchy "exposés." Late night TV comedians made "the New Jersey faun" the subject of one-liners, off-color skits, and fake interviews. Johnny Caprese became a household word and a synonym for lechery but, on the advice of Ragano, stayed silent through all of this. And, in an Edison nursing home, Vito Caprese now spent his days hunting down articles about his *caro nipote* Giovanni and pasting them in a new scrapbook. He was bursting with pride.

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The trial was a legal landmark and a media circus. Many articles in learned psychology and ethics journals were written exploring the issues of freedom of will and personal responsibility. Can a man be held accountable for acts over which he has little or no control? Should a man be convicted if he has awareness of his acts and their likely consequences and undertakes them nonetheless? Is the existence of an overwhelming animal imperative enough to override one's duty to abstain? Many argued that these were bogus issues, and Johnny should be found guilty and given a long prison sentence. Others argued for confinement to a mental health institution, or even acquittal.

The trial developed across predictable lines. The prosecution brought up Johnny's mafia ties, his nefarious activities as a

capo of the Guarraci family, and his deliberate efforts to cover his tracks after each life ending liaison. It argued that, in the case of Blanca, Johnny's failed attempts to remove all traces of her presence in his apartment were conclusive proof that the defendant had tried to remove any evidence that she had been on the premises with him. "Those are not the acts of an insane man, but the tactics of a methodical assassin." As for fatally infecting the other women, the prosecution quoted the long-standing "depraved heart" rule whereby a person is guilty of second-degree murder if he deliberately perpetrates a knowingly dangerous act with reckless and wanton unconcern as to whether another person is harmed. "There is no doubt that Mr. Caprese's heart is as depraved and malignant as one can find."

Most of the witnesses called by Ragano were experts. One, a famous pathologist who had performed post-mortem examination of the bodies of the women linked to Johnny, and indicated that their deaths were probably caused by the same potent mix of pathogens that were present in Johnny's body and that caused his symptoms, and which were "at best as it could be determined" due to his animal condition. "Perhaps the fauns of legend sought intercourse as the palliative for their own physical woes. Indeed, that was the situation with Mr. Caprese."

Another expert witness called by Ragano was a noted psychologist. He declared under oath that Johnny was the victim of irresistible impulses from his animal brain and he no more could have exercised control over his behavior than an owl could have ceased pursuing mice. "Mr. Caprese is what he is—a living anachronism, a man with the urges of an ancient, non-human creature. He should be acquitted, as he is not responsible for his actions."

The trial lasted almost two weeks and, at the end of it, the jury deliberated for another one. When they emerged, they declared themselves to be hung. They could not agree on any verdict, whether it resulted in Johnny's exoneration, commitment to a mental institution, or imprisonment.

When the non-verdict was announced, the presiding judge thanked and dismissed the jury and summoned counsel to his chambers. He minced no words in expressing his dismay at the situation. "In my estimation, another trial might well be futile. I invite both sides to come up with a compromise that satisfies the needs of justice and the interests of the public."

Ragano had been thinking about this for some time, and responded: "Your Honor, I recognize that we all see the need to get my client out of circulation. Neither he nor I would agree to a solution that involves confinement in a prison or a mental institution. But perhaps it would be possible to have him sent to some sort of place of retirement."

"Do you have anything specific in mind?" retorted the judge.

"Yes, your Honor, I have been making discrete inquiries and there is a Meditation Center in a remote location in Idaho that would agree to host him if a suitable donation is made on his behalf. I have spoken to Mr. Guarraci and he is willing, even eager, to defray the costs involved in Mr. Caprese's relocation away from New Jersey so that his company's reputation is no longer tainted by this scandal."

"Is Mr. Caprese willing to go?"

"I expect he can be persuaded."

"What is the position of the Government?"

"We feel that another trial could result in justice being meted out, but might again lead to further public dissension and discontent. I will of course need to consult my superiors but I expect we would all be happy to see this one go away."

"Well, I will draft an order dismissing the case with prejudice, but will not release it until you have submitted an acceptable settlement agreement between all parties. Please prepare one at your earliest convenience." In the meantime, Mr. Caprese is to remain under house arrest.

"Thank you, your Honor."

"And, Mr. Ragano, make sure that the agreement stipulates that in selecting a center in which to place Mr. Caprese, provisions are made to keep him away from boys and females of all ages. That will be all."

Sadly, the Meditation Center was not able to host its notorious guest for very long. Johnny Caprese disappeared, leaving behind a score of dead nuns whose cadavers exhibited gruesome symptoms. Johnny became an urban legend all over the Pacific Northwest.

At about the same time, Vito Caprese ran away from his retirement home. Reports of his having been spotted in farms as far as Connecticut were never confirmed.

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Washington DC attorney. Mr. Travieso-Diaz is a Cuban-American engineer and attorney, retired after half a century of professional practice. Following retirement, he has taken up creative writing and authored many short stories of various genres. His stories have appeared or are scheduled to appear in over two dozen paying publications in the United States, the U.K., Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Mr. Travieso-Diaz's co-author is a prominent attorney still in private practice, who has publications in the fields of law and history.