

The Gift of Power



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God gives the gift of life. Satan gives the gift of power.

Today

Dr. Randy Denson spent weeks anticipating this moment. He is not ready.

He nervously peers through the crack of the door and silently watches the old man and his younger male companion begin to stand, ready to leave the hotel's small ballroom.

Denson is affixed, his mind torn. Here they are right in front of him. The old man must be the puppeteer, the kind of evil he promised his dying wife he would root out and put to an end. The other, the assassin sent by the old codger to kill him and Steng only days ago.

"What on earth...?" He's stunned as the companion pulls his gun out and points it directly at his presumed boss.

Denson's instincts overrule all logic. He draws his pistol from his denim shorts and throws himself into the room, assumes his best Jack Bauer stance and stammers out his command, "S-s-top. Police. Lower your weapon. I'll sh-shoot!"

"What the hell are you doing here?" Rasoone is clearly bewildered. And annoyed.

Avery ignores Denson and interjects calmly, "Ah, Ras, excuse me, but I've got a few questions. Like, who is this clown, why is he here, why did you pull a gun on me? Questions of that nature."

"It's Denson, the CSI guy. I don't know how or why he's here." Ras keeps his gun pointed at the ancient's forehead.

"And why is your gun aimed at me?"

"Oh...that...I'm going to kill you."

Denson thrusts his gun forward, astonished he isn't being taken seriously. His pleas to God for more confidence are ignored,

"N-no you're not. If you shoot him, I'll sh'shoot you. I'm not good enough to maim you. I'll have to g-go for your upper body." Denson has never stuttered in his life.

“You’re going to take me down? Are you crazy?” Ras intended to speak unemotionally, as always, but can’t help himself, “If you shoot me and arrest him, your family, your friends, will die. This is fuckin’ Avery Perelle!”

Denson never heard the name before, but his suspicions are confirmed. The hairs on the back of his hands start to rise, signaling his body is about to panic, or go into cardiac arrest.

He knows the man is correct. It will be pointless to arrest Perelle. He has no evidence. Avery Perelle will walk and all he will have, if he has the guts to use the weapon chattering in his hands, is a wounded or dead assassin.

“You’re the one,” Denson speaks to Avery while keeping his eyes on Ras, “I know it in my soul.” Salty drops are dripping from brow to lashes as he cranks his torso and pistol toward Avery.

Ras is amused by Denson’s dilemma. As if he just noticed him, Avery finally speaks to him from a lifetime of cynicism, “Go ahead, shoot me. I’m seventy-five years old. I don’t care any more.” Avery means it. Yet he doesn’t.

Denson hesitates, questioning himself, “What the hell am I suppose to do now?”

Ras’s gun has never wavered, steadily aimed at Avery. He’s getting frustrated, knowing it’s time to take both of the old farts down and get out of here. His pause matters. All hell breaks loose.

Avery

Trevella appears a kind, elderly man who would not be considered a threat except for the frequent jerking of his head, most noticeably when holding his Model 31 Remington pump shotgun across his lap. Intentional or not, the tic is an effective dissuasion to approaching him while at his post, which is essentially all of the time.

He lives in a small one-room shack directly outside the wet rotted gate blocking the one-hundred meter path to the main villa of Giorgio and Angelina Perillo. His chair creaks in the key of B-flat as he rocks on his porch, until he turns it away from the setting sun, then it transposes to A-flat, an important transition since the trumpet in his head cannot reach the apogee of Vivaldi's concerto in its original key, thus saving it for twilight.

He committed his life to protecting Giorgio after *Caporetto* in Slovenia in '17, eighteen years ago. Travella wasn't the 'last man standing' among his eleven thousand dead Italian comrades, in fact, he wasn't standing at all. He was laying in the dirt, his legs and arms disenfranchised from weeks of running, squatting, treading across the *Tagliamento*, firing, ducking, hiding. The battle had ended, his face pressed against the sunken ground, using cupped handfuls of loose earth to filter the remnants of German mustard gas suspended, hovering above him. He was awaiting his fate, destined to be one of two-hundred and fifty thousand prisoners captured, abused, tortured, shamed.

Someone dragged the carcass of an infantryman and placed it atop him, then another and another. He dared glance and saw Giorgio for the first time, stooping to gasp for air before continuing. Three more bodies were crudely strewn, covering Travella entirely. Giorgio crawled under this blanket of lost hope and pulled over a final corpse. He snuggled against Travella's backside, sharing brief pockets of oxygen, each choosing to alternate their breathing through their mouths or nostrils, opting the taste of emptied bowels and bloody decay over the smell, then vice-versa. They laid together for three hours while gas-masked German soldiers poked and

prodded, collecting the less hopelessly wounded, gathering them in circles hundreds deep. The very corpses that sheltered the two Italian strangers were stuck with a bayonet each time an enemy soldier passed, each time discovery a prayer away.

A fresh hard rain was a blessing, cleaning the air, making slippery the earth, forcing the Germans to stop their hunt and collection efforts and abandon the field. Giorgio pushed on the body directly on top of him, raising it up like a coffin-lid, freeing him to start inching away in the slimy mud. Travella was close behind imitating Giorgio's marine crawl. They reached the end of the red-stained pasture, rose to their feet among the trees and brush and searched for a path in direction of an Italian camp.

"Why did you cover me? Why not only yourself?" Travella asked the young corporal as they stumbled onto a clay-packed trail heading north, hopefully on the right course.

"I didn't do it for you. It was for me. I needed to connect with a life so I could lay there among the dead without panic."

Travella didn't believe him.

The Sabato River Valley is lined with citrus fruit trees and grape plantations, providing a transcendental atmosphere that must be inhaled to appreciate. Surrounded by the Apennines and blessed with abundant rainfall, the Campania Region, including the town of Avellino is a pristine section of southwestern Italy. In 1935, Giorgio owns several of the lush valley's vineyards, distributing Taurasi, Greco, and Fiano di Avellino, some of Italy's more distinguished whites. He is the wealthiest man in Avellino, unashamed of the years he spent ruthlessly breaking the smaller growers and consolidating his holdings.

Travella protects the front. An obscure path serpentine through the dense thorny brush at the rear making this approach to the villa clumsy, painful. Giorgio is always armed, cockily

confident he can stop anyone who might trespass. Besides, everyone knows better than to threaten Giorgio Perillo.

He is the local villain who broadcasts his Sicilian heritage at every opportunity. At age forty-four, with Shinola-tinted temples and a protruding gut crammed into a laced-up girdle, he struts through town weekly, amused by the women and girls who stare at him as he marches past. He assumes they are gazes of desire. Dread would be more accurate.

“*Ti voglio bene, Greco*, you have missed me, I know. My cousins in Palermo send their wishes.” says Giorgio as he marches past the village butcher.

Greco stops grinding bones of lamb and grins and nods to excess, picturing Perillo’s scooped out skull upside down next to his bench, a prized, wobbly spittoon he fills with delight, aided by family and fellows, “Ah, Giorgio, we have all counted the days you were gone.”

“Days? It’s been weeks. I am a king in Palermo, you know. It is always difficult to leave my Sicilian family, gathering, crying---”

“I can imagine, Giorgio. Stop by on your walk home, I will have fresh brains wrapped for you, for your wife to enjoy. *Ciao*.” Greco is careful not to mention the new birth in the Perillo household. He values unbroken limbs.

Thirty-four year old Angelina ‘pops’ the head off a rooster with a single, firm yank and drains the blood of the bird into the earth before bringing it inside and dropping it into bubbling water. The feathers pull off easily, except the stubborn pin-feathers underneath. It takes her practiced fingers twenty minutes to pry them out, one by one.

In her bath, she stands and washes her body using a fresh sponge and a bowl of yesterdays grey, soapy water, blessedly not yet used by her husband, her infant sleeping an extended-arm’s distance away. Her stretch marks are worse this time, expanding their geography, mapping uncharted trails from her legs and belly and onto her milk-bottle breasts. She rubs them with imported coconut oil, a family solution that has never helped.

Her fresh, bleach-white underwear is covered by a front-laced, embroidered dress with a black-worked scarf around her shoulders. She inspects herself, tightening her breast bindings

with a groan to uplift her sagging shape. She twirls her large red-beaded necklace for the mirror's pleasure and feels for a moment more attractive than she has in months. "No," she scolds her 'inner-Angie', "the puffiness under your eyes is ..." Exhaustion has overcome her since giving birth to their son five days ago. Averado was an unexpected child, arriving ten years after his sister, Cantalisa.

The Perillo's massive dining room, filled with *Lacca Povera* cabinetry is little more than a showplace, a loose term since the prospect of friends enabling her to 'show' the 'place' is impossible to imagine. Giorgio insists on eating at an inherited, cracked zebra wood kitchen table each night precisely at 7:00, one of many traditions imposed by him on his small family.

Young Cantalisa wriggles in her seat waiting for her time to speak as Mama serves Papa the *tortelloni ricotta and spinaci* handmade hours earlier. Giorgio pours himself a third glass of wine while Angelina butters his thin, snowy-white crusted bread, serves Cantalisa and herself, checks on Averado in his crib alongside her chair, and settles down to eat.

It is always quiet during these first several minutes, the sound of chewing and the clanking of knives and forks against stoneware is rhythmic, tense, accompanied now by an occasional purr from the nest of the new arrival.

The almost-silence is sustained until Giorgio sets down his shovel-fork long enough to nod his completion of the first course, which is the cue for Cantalisa to stop squirming and tell them about her day. Both parents listen with orchestrated smiles.

"I have the most exciting news!" Cantalisa beams, "Miss Scalia selected me to be in this year's play that will be performed in front of the villagers. I will be a butterfly," she tilts her head back and looks down on them as if floating from above and expounds, "bringing the beauty of the wild to the princess locked away in her castle."

"That is magnificent, my sweet flower," Giorgio gushes, "You were born to be a butterfly. You must tell me when the play is performed." He glances Angelina, knowing she feels unsafe in the public eye, then continues, "Mama and I will be seated in the front, cheering your performance."

Cantalisa bounces in her chair with excitement. She stuffs poultry into her cheeks and demonstrates her speed-chewing method to Papa, lobbying to return to practicing her part. She swallows and presents a tiny-toothed open cavity and pleads, “May I be excused, Papa?” Giorgio smiles and waves his hand for her to depart. She kisses him on the cheek and dashes out the door to the front yard.

It is now Angelina’s turn. This is her only chance in any day to speak directly to her husband without distraction. She has rehearsed her lines throughout the preparation of supper and begins with practiced casualness, “How do you like the chicken, *bubi*?”

“It tastes like chicken. Why do you ask?”

“It was our plumpest bird, a second rooster in the hen house. I prepared it your favorite way.”

“You have something more important to say to me. Spit it out.” He spears his meat and examines it from all angles before chomping it.

“Well, I am ashamed to say the birth of our son exhausted me. I am too old to be a new mother, *bubi*. I beg you allow me to hire a nurse maid, if only for a few weeks.”

The quick reddening of the top of his ears signal Giorgio is not himself tonight, but it is too late for her to retract her words, besides---

“What...you have so much to do here? You clean a few rooms, cook a few meals, write to your mother. Now, because you feed and bathe a baby, you need a servant?”

“Not a servant. It’s just...I am so tired each day and still in pain. I fear falling asleep, leaving him unattended, unprotected---

Giorgio holds up his left hand, “Enough.” He pushes his seat back. Cantalisa is heard laughing in the yard, her innocent joy untouched by the gale forming in the kitchen.

“I have many questions for you, but only one of importance.” Giorgio’s lips locate and assume their snarliest shape.

“*Bubi*, please. You must stop with this---

The palm again, slapping the air this time, demanding her to cease. He dumps the water from his glass onto the floor and fills it with wine. He gulps it down with power, slamming and cracking the heavy crystal on the table, glaring at Angelina, speaking to her in a raspy whisper, “Why now? Ten years of love making several times a week and produce nothing. Why now?”

“We can’t keep going over this. You said you understood, that the baby was a gift, a gift from God.” Averado begins to stir, disturbed by the raised voices. Angelina fumbles to fit a pacifier into his mouth.

“That was before he was born,” Giorgio spats, his voice rising with each word, “Now that he is here, I look at him. I see nothing of me.”

“How can you say such a thing. He is but an infant, fresh out of the womb. His skull is still misshaped, his eyes are changing color as we speak.”

“No! I felt different when Cantalisa was born. I knew she was mine from her first breath. I do not feel it this time. I think you know why.”

Angelina’s eyes water as she stretches to look through the foyer out the screen door. In contrast to his toughness in public and the shadow of fear that dominates their household, he is rarely this harsh with her.

He points at the cradle, his voice now inflected with vibrato, “He must be proven to be my son. I will accept it is too soon to be certain, but as he grows, I will know. If he is not mine, you will suffer. Of this I swear.”

Angelina loses control and lunges forward in her chair, “God shame you, Giorgio! You accuse me? I have done nothing but care for you. I watch over your health, keep you from drinking yourself to death. I pray each morning and evening for God to save your soul. You have taken the wives and daughters of many men and used them for your filthy lust. You accuse me? Damn you, Giorgio. Damn you!”

He leaps to his feet, his palm now clenched, weaving in his stance as Angelina fumes. He looks down at her and barks, “Are you my wife?”

Angelina's anger is trumped by unexpected fear. She glances at the cradle as Averado begins a faint whine, fully wakened by his father's blaring. She sits back, lowers her head, looks down at the table and whimpers, "Of course. Of course I am your wife."

"Then stand up!" he shouts.

An overwhelming angst keeps her from rising. Giorgio grabs her by the back of her hair and yanks her to her feet. She yelps. Her baby's whines swell to cries. Holding her by the hair and nape of her neck, Giorgio declares with obsession, "Yes. Yes. You are my wife, my servant, and my whore. No one else's." His spittle sprays across her face.

He throws her torso onto the table, shifting his powerful hand to the center of her back. She is nearly in shock as she is held by his force, her body and face smashed against platters of bread and pesto, her baby now screaming out the very terror she herself feels inside.

She pushes upward, struggling for release, but he does not allow her to move as he pulls her dress up and over her waist. He fumbles with himself, grabs the crotch of her underpants, pulls them aside, and thrusts himself fully inside her, stabbing her still-healing flesh with his delusional rage. The table creaks in rhythm. She can't breathe. She pounds her fists on the table, a dish falls and shatters, then another. In seconds, he howls like a vicious beast and pulls away as suddenly as he had begun, stumbling backward and falling into his chair. He opens the third bottle, seemingly blind to the nightmare he just created, oblivious to its aftermath, muttering to himself.

Angelina remains deadly still, lying across the table, sucking in needed air, coming slowly to her senses as a bloody mess seeps out of her. She would choose to lay there and die. Let the world find her and hang her husband for her death. Only Averado's continued screams force her to her feet. She rises with difficulty, wipes her face with each forearm, lifts Averado and staggers to the porch.

Her baby suckles her breast. She commands her tears stop flowing and gropes for a smile as she waves to Cantalisa down by the gate entertaining Trevella, the child's mindless play surreal. Angelina is only beginning to collect herself, knowing she is bleeding and choosing to

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