

## The God Father (U1020)

The little shopkeeper wiped the sweat from his brow as he sat alone in his corner store. Though the summer heat abated slightly in the late evening, the humidity pressed down on the man, adding weight to his hair, his clothes, his shoes. It was an almost humiliating humidity, one that thwarted anyone's plans for comfort. Even after a cold morning shower and toweling off, you would immediately begin sweating. The stink of your own sweat hovers around you like a swarm of gnats.

Staring through the front window, duct-taped together after hoodlums assaulted his store on two separate occasions the previous week, he waited for customers who had stopped coming, who avoided his once bustling corner store. No customers, no money and, for the time being anyway, no hoodlums. He sat alone with his merchandise, his sweat and his thoughts.

He grabbed for a glass of water with his right hand, his left being in a cast up to his elbow, but as he brought it to his lips, some of the water spilled out. His hand shook with some vigor and his right foot tapped rapidly. Setting the glass down, a crack of thunder promised to resolve the situation and a cool breeze whipped through the store.

Just then the door alarm beeped and in walked a man in a tailored gray suit. The man made no eye contact with the shopkeeper. Walking to the far corner of the store, the gray-suited man looked all around the store. Picking up a jar of maraschino cherries, "How much for these?"

The store owner would not look directly at the man, but askance or by way of the convex mirror on the wall. He soon exhaled and fumbled, “They’re, ummm, well... they’re \$3.89.”

The gray-suited man stood silently, still holding the cherries in his hand. Then, CRASH, he let the jar drop to the floor.

The owner said nothing, though he jumped when the jar hit. Advancing through the store, closer to the register behind which the shopkeeper sat, the gray man examined the shelves. As he neared the counter he stuck out his right arm and ran it along those shelves, pushing to the floor jars of pickles, jam, catsup, mustard. In walked another man, this time in a charcoal suit, and he went straight to the far corner of the store where the gray-suited man had dropped the cherries.

“Clean up in aisle Dumb Ass!” The charcoal man laughed loudly, with a jerky sort of rhythm, but stopped abruptly when a third man entered the store. This was a mountain of a man who moved with according gravitas. In his black suit he walked directly to the register and addressed the shopkeeper.

“Mister Hommière, I regret that I have to come here this evening. And I do not like to regret things, Mister Hommière.”

“I...” the shopkeeper interrupted, “forgive me but...you...you know my name.” He took a short breath, “Please call me Adam.”

The giant man leaned over and gently placed his hands on the counter. “Mister. Hommière. I believe you have given up the right to be called by your first name, the same as I would call a brother or a son. When I look at you I do not see a man of my own family. In fact, when I look at you,” the man lifted his index finger in the air, then extended his arm, pushing his finger to within a hair’s breadth of the shopkeeper’s nose, “I do not see a man at all.”

He held his finger in the keeper’s face for a few seconds, then relaxed his arm and brought it back to the counter. He stood for a few seconds without saying a word. Then he pointed to the gray-suited man, who was standing about five feet to his left. “Now, last month, my friend Gabby here came to you with a choice. He came to you with an offer of protection. But, I do not understand you, Mister Hommière. I gave you the choice to live peaceably and comfortably under my protection—as you have for the past few years now—or to try to face this horrible, evil—brutal world alone. And that...that stupid, selfish, childish second option is the one you chose.

“I understand you have been visited by the worst kinds of hardships over the past month. That is too bad. It hurts me. You know why? Because it did not have to be like that. And you know what hurts me most of all? That you would put your family in harm’s way just so you could be the big man. You, the BIG MAN. It is a shame.

“It did not have to be like that. Now I could have stopped the violence done to you.” He grabbed Adam’s good wrist, increasingly applying pressure with his massive hands until the shopkeeper cried out in pain. “It was your own choice, Mister Hommière. Your choice to do the

right thing: pay for the services I have provided over the years or defy me. I will always give you that option. And I could have looked the other way from your defiance, but you needed to learn your lesson.” With that he released Adam’s wrist and the shop owner recoiled behind the counter.

Over Adam’s groans, the man continued, unconcerned for the keeper’s pained state. “But you know what? I really do feel for your family. I mean, why should they pay for your...debts? Now you, on the other hand, I watched you grow up here in the neighborhood. I thought you were a smart boy. I even treated you like a son.”

“A son?!?” Adam blurted. He couldn’t take it anymore. The fear inside manifested itself in anger. He needed King Coeli (King being his first name, not so much his title) to know that King’s treatment of his own son was well-known. “As in, *your* son? Oh boy!” He forced a laugh. “Tell me King, how did you treat him? And what about Councilman Pharam? What choice did you give him?”

Though many mountains grow a few centimeters in just a year, we do not perceive that growth. By means of erosion, some may imperceptibly recede. In the latter manner, King Coeli, the giant man in the black suit, lost a millimeter or so.

Adam knew of an event that ended an embarrassing chapter in the great man’s life. Another man, present at said event, told Adam about it. The next week that other man was found in a garbage bag floating down river on a barge.

The man, known as “Ghost” for his white hair and quiet demeanor, recounted the story of how King’s son died. It involved a local councilman named Pharam. He was chairman of the council that headed the city’s government. This did not endear him to the city’s de facto ruler, King Coeli.

So one night, while Pharam worked late at his office, as was his wont, in walked King Coeli, Gabby, Ghost and King’s son Salvatore. When they entered, Pharam was on the phone. He looked up and saw the three men enter.

“Listen, someone’s here. I gotta go. Good night, hon. I love you. And, hey, honey, kiss the kids for me, will ya? Tell ‘em I love ‘em. Yeah, me too. Yeah. Bye.” Hanging up the phone, Pharam sat back in his chair. “I guess this explains the smell coming from the hall. I was afraid the sewer backed up. But it’s only you. Tell me, what the hell do you want?”

King walked up to the councilman’s desk with his right hand extended, showing a large, bejeweled ring. The councilman smiled, “You’re joking, right? I’ll kiss your ring when you kiss my ass.”

At that King stepped back and Gabby approached, pulling back the hammer of his revolver. The councilman sneered, “You gangster stereotype, you know they made pistols in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, too, right?” Looking back to King, “And you. You can’t shoot me. This town will finally stand up to you and shut you down. So, you got another play?”

Gabby continued to the desk and set the pistol down in front of Pharam and backed away.

Pharam sat up in his chair, looking from the revolver to Coeli, the revolver and Coeli again.

“Kill myself? You want me to shoot *myself*? Fuuuuck yooou.” Pharam sat back, shaking his head.

King finally spoke. “Now, I tried to make you understand me. Nothing....*heavy-handed*. I tried to be subtle because I thought, if I just show up in your office, it would be as if I forced you to do what I wished. You would not freely choose to go into business with me. I needed you to trust me first, by my deeds.

“So I sent my emissaries with projects, ideas, and donations. But each time, you showed no gratitude. You sent them away empty-handed. Then you attacked me in the press and at the polls.

“I even sent my good-for-nothing son, my own flesh and blood to you and you rejected him. I am disappointed in both of you. That shopping complex would have made this city millions, maybe billions. How you two could not make that work, I do not understand.

“So I had to spend millions to defeat your re-election campaign last fall. But the people, the masses who are asses, beat me. Now you *are* a popular man. This is true. They would revolt and I would be in trouble. So I stand here, and you sit there, barking at me like some little, foul-mouthed Chihuahua. And I see I will never get you to follow me.

“What am I to do? You are correct. I do not expect you to shoot yourself. I will always give you that option. But you do not have to. It *would* make all of this easier for me, but I cannot take any chances in case you thumb your nose at me again. You do not have to shoot yourself. Does not matter. Tomorrow the papers will run headlines about your secret affairs, your secret bank accounts. Drugs. Sex. I have already seen the front pages they will run. The Internet will post the pictures of your lover, their stories of abuse filling the pages of tabloids and the New York Times.

“Here is the last choice I will give you: shoot yourself or...you shoot my son.”

Pharam’s mouth fell. “Whaaa...?” His cockiness fell from his face to the floor, shattered. In the silence that ensued, Pharam, holding his breath, blinked. Brow furrowed, he shook his head slowly, no. Gabby walked slowly to the window behind the councilman and closed the blinds. Then he stood directly behind Pharam.

King shook his head. “That is too bad. What choice do *I* have? Now I hate to do this but...” King walked to the desk, took the revolver, turned and shot his own son in the head. Pharam remained unmoved as Coeli’s son crumpled in a heap.

“See what you made me do? It would have been so much easier if you had done it yourself.”

Pharam summoned the ability to stand in protest. Then Gabby shot him in the back of the head.

In a city where the Mafia runs the police force, this is the textbook definition of a murder-suicide. The Internet blew up with the story just as Coeli said, plus blaming him for the murder of Salvatore. The city was in shock at their beloved leader's "secret life". There was no outrage at Coeli. Instead the citizens felt betrayed by the councilman. And if King could do that to the most powerful man, Adam's death was a question of "How soon?"

A fog began to shroud the whole of the store. While Coeli had been speaking to Adam, the man in the back of the store had opened all of the freezer and cooler doors, and even lit a cigar to add to the effect. Standing in front of the shopkeeper, King Coeli straightened himself and regained his elevation. "I do not understand you. I am giving you the chance to save your own life. And still you make the same decision. Why?"

Adam took a deep breath and long exhale. His hand no longer shook, his foot stopped tapping. His anger subsided and became...resolve. "Why." Adam repeated Coeli's question as a statement. He started slowly, "You know, some people, they're content to let other people tell them what to do, how to live their lives. Take Gabby here or that fella in the back or, maybe, Ghost.

"I'm not sure you ever gave them the chance to do your dirty work or not but they know damn well that, if they cross you, they're dead. Just—bang. They'll spend their days bouncing around singing songs of your greatness. To your face anyway. Not out of love or loyalty but fear. It's a living death. Or a dead life, I don't know, something like that. I doubt you ever gave them the chance though. Too messy. What if they refused?"



“If only we could ask Ghost. After all, if you’re just giving us all opportunities to learn, tell me, what did he learn? You taught him what would happen if he called you out for being the monster you are. I got an idea. Instead of two options, shut up or die, what if you gave him a third or fourth option? Bet you didn’t think of that. Coulda let him leave town. Alive. You coulda asked him to *politely* stop talking about that night. No, if we choose you once, we give up on having choices. I should say that we can choose anything we want, as long as you’ve already decided for us.

“Why not use all that power and money you’ve got to feed the hungry around here? Why not help the police clean up the streets instead of filling the streets with your garbage?

“You paint yourself as this benevolent head of the family. Yet who are you serving but yourself? You could still be rich and powerful—large and in charge, the most loved man in the city. Why pick favorites? Why create enemies?

“So, for me, why be protected by the only man I need protection from? Doesn’t do me any good to lick your boots. Maybe tomorrow you’ll decide you want my store and when I don’t sell, I’ll end up in a ditch somewheres. It’s not like your protection is good for business. Instead of creating opportunities around here, you restrict our options.” The shopkeeper took another sip of his water, the shakes having returned. Putting the glass down, “And you owe me for a jar of cherries.”

Adam Hommière looked around his store, tears in his eyes. Then he forced a smile and turned to Coeli. “So what do I choose to be? A kiss-up to a tyrant? Or toes up and free? No, King Coeli, I do not accept your offer of protection.”

A gunshot, then the sound of the shopkeeper falling to the ground. King Coeli called to the man in back. “Take care of the cameras and call the police. Gabby, go to his house. Be quick. Down to the seventh generation. No one escapes.”

Coeli looked around and shook his head. Before Gabby walked out the door, Coeli stopped him, “Gabby, tell me. What is wrong with these people?”

Gabby looked at him and said, “Well, you did create them out of dirt,” as he walked out.