



This Family of Mine: What It Was Like Growing Up Gotti

By Victoria Gotti

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THE ASTONISHING NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

The No-Holds-Barred Truth About Life Inside the Gotti Dynasty—Told by Their Most Famous Daughter

Victoria Gotti never intended to reveal the inside story of the Gotti household—the day-to-day life of a family that has sparked scandalous rumors and sensational headlines for decades. But with the pressing need to finally set the record straight came the realization that only she can do so, once and for all. Daughter to the late John Gotti, sister to John A. “Junior” Gotti and three other siblings, single mother to three sons with whom she shared reality television stardom on *Growing Up Gotti*, an outspoken columnist and bestselling author, Victoria Gotti delivers a candid, colorful, and brutally honest family portrait that reads like a confidential file, filled with deeply personal reflections, bombshell revelations, and stunning insider secrets.

The explosive memoir that captures the Gottis as they are—unvarnished, raw, and real—*This Family of Mine* is the essential chronicle in the ultimate American family saga.

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Editorial Review

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This Family of Mine

CHAPTER ONE

“Papa Was a Rolling Stone”

Winter 1952

The door blew open with driving force; shards of wood like shrapnel sprayed the cold, cramped Brooklyn railroad flat. To a twelve-year-old, the U.S. Marshal's arrival came in the form of an unfathomable explosion that would haunt his dreams into adulthood. Two local police officers and one marshal from the housing department had been dispatched to evict a poor and hungry family of thirteen—despite the fact that Christmas was less than one week away.

My father lay huddled with his six brothers, all forced to survive in one room, on two mattresses, in the musty three-room apartment. It was in the dead of winter and none of the Gotti children—seven boys and four girls, ages five to sixteen—had clothing suitable for protection against the elements. Dad would later recall that evening as being not only unbearably cold but accompanied by a dark, empty sky.

The Gotti children were accustomed to sharing tight quarters. If it seemed unnatural, even cruel, it was nonetheless preferable to sleeping on a cold bare floor “or being homeless,” as my father used to say. The family bounced around in those years, from a poverty-stricken section of the South Bronx to a modest apartment in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn. My grandfather, John Senior, made some money in an all-night card game and moved the family into a middle-class neighborhood; however, it wasn't long before his luck (and money) ran out. Within a few months the Gotti clan ended up in more humble surroundings, a shabby apartment in Downtown Brooklyn. “Times were hard,” my father said. “And they were about to get a lot harder.”

The eviction in 1952 was swift and heartless. Dressed only in worn flimsy garments, the Gotti children and their mother, Fannie, stood shivering in front of the dilapidated apartment complex that only a few minutes earlier had been their home. John Senior was out that night, off on one of his business trips. Monthly rent on the apartment was a paltry sum, but even that proved more than my grandfather could manage.

Philomena “Fannie” DeCarlo Gotti was a hardworking housewife who often took on odd jobs outside the home—doing the neighbors' laundry, cleaning apartments, bagging groceries at a local market to help make ends meet. But lately there never seemed to be enough money. The family was barely able to keep food on the table and heat in the apartment. Conversely, my grandfather, John Joseph Gotti, was a perpetual adolescent, forever in search of excitement and fun. An avid gambler, drinker, and womanizer, he rarely held a steady job; whenever he got the “itch,” as Grandma called it, he would take off for parts unknown, typically accompanied by some barmaid he'd only recently met.

There were times when Grandpa hit the road on one of his so-called “business trips” and didn’t return for months. For a while he had a job as a camera grip for a major film studio and even traveled to Hollywood on one occasion. This failed to result in any sort of legitimate career, but it did produce a handful of entertaining tales. My grandfather was fond of embellishment, and so he would tell anyone within earshot of his work-related war stories, like the time he met Jane Russell.

During the filming of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Grandpa swore the gorgeous actress was attracted to him (forget for a moment the professional chasm that separated the lowly tech and the leading lady), and that she looked for excuses to talk to him. According to his story, she even winked at him on occasion.

Then there was the time he met Tony Curtis at the studio commissary. Grandpa insisted the two had become fast friends.

“That guy is a class act,” Grandpa had often said. Then he would smile and laugh. “Very personable, too.”

So instantaneous was their bond that Grandpa and Tony Curtis went out together that very night and took the town by storm. They drank themselves blind, eventually winding up in a seedy motel with a “couple of real lookers.” Or so Grandpa claimed, anyway.

The odd brush with greatness apparently was far more important to my grandfather than the mundane responsibilities of family life. It seemed not to matter that he had a large family to feed, or that there was never enough money to pay the rent or heating bill. And every so often, the Gotti family was kicked to the curb.

This naturally produced a degree of cynicism in my father, who years later would erupt any time he read a cliché-ridden newspaper article or book that described Grandpa as a hardworking Italian immigrant.

“These fuckin’ bums that write books—they’re worse than us,” he would rail. “Lies. All lies! My father was born in New Jersey. He’s never been to Italy in his whole fuckin’ life. He never worked a day in his life. He was a rolling stone. He never provided for his family. He never did nothin’. He never earned nothin’. And we never had nothin’.”

DAD RECALLED HIS mother’s reaction while standing at the curb on the night of the eviction, in the freezing cold, wearing a tattered sweater over a worn and faded house-dress. She was only in her mid-thirties, but looked closer to fifty. The years, overloading her with work and anxiety and neglect, had not been kind to her. Grandma was a “cold woman,” Dad often said, hardened by years of sacrifice and disappointment. Mostly, Dad blamed his father for this. A man was supposed to take care of his family: put a roof over their heads, food in their bellies, and keep them warm in proper winter clothing. But, rather than struggle to fulfill his responsibilities and obligations, Grandpa chose instead to run—usually to the nearest bar to drown himself in his failure as a husband and father.

On this evening my father saw that she was understandably upset. Although Grandma rarely showed weakness in front of her children, the tears streamed down her cheeks. She stared at the old apartment building, then out at the street, and then back to the apartment building. Her eyes, my father noticed, were empty and sad, and the expression on her face frightened him.

The Gotti clan stood shivering outside for nearly an hour that night, a mid-winter drizzle chilling them to the bone. “An hour,” Dad said. “But it felt like an eternity.”

Exhausted and fearing for the welfare of her children, Grandma finally took action, marching the entire, rain-soaked clan nearly a mile through the streets of Brooklyn to the House of the Good Shepherd, a church-sponsored residence for “wayward girls” (the facility catered to young, single women who had unplanned pregnancies). It must have been painful for Grandma to beg—she was a proud woman, after all—but that is what she did. For the sake of her children, she asked for mercy, and Sister Mary Margaret, dressed head-to-toe in black, responded with kindness, showing Grandma and the Gotti children to the building’s attic.

In reality, it wasn’t really an attic at all; it was a four-room apartment, a conversion made in the early 1940s to accommodate housing needs for the staff. Although the apartment had only an efficiency kitchenette, it was better than nothing, and Grandma saw its potential. The living room was really more of an alcove, adjacent to the kitchenette; it would likely serve as a fourth bedroom for the oldest male children. The two other rooms would be shared by Grandma and the remaining children, including my father, at least until Grandpa could find his way to the family’s new home. No one knew when that would be, but at that point, one of the three bedrooms would then be used as a master, resulting in eleven children sharing two small rooms. Tight quarters, to be sure, but, as Dad explained, “It was definitely better than the alternative.”

The days that followed would prove nearly as bleak. At the age of twelve, Dad was forced to hit the streets and find work, as were the other Gotti children. Everyone was expected to pull their own weight, especially the boys.

Dad combed the neighborhood looking for employment. Options, he quickly learned, were limited. A corner service station on Fulton Street had recently dismissed two mechanics in an effort to cut costs. A local deli already had two full-time day workers and three part-time night staffers. The manager at the A&P supermarket offered little encouragement, telling Dad he was too young for anything but carrying bags for customers. My father gave that one a moment’s consideration before spotting a crowd of eager boys fighting over customers in the parking lot. Realizing that his pay would consist only of tips, and that the store already seemed overstaffed, he walked away.

Not enough customers, not enough hours, not enough money.

SIX WEEKS LATER, my grandfather ambled down the street to the House of the Good Shepherd, having easily tracked the family down through a network of friends and acquaintances. Along the way, he’d been told of the eviction and the dire circumstances faced by those whom he had abandoned. If his father felt guilt or remorse, Dad said, it wasn’t readily apparent. Accountability was not high on Grandpa’s list of virtues. He preferred to play the victim, forever damning the world and cursing God for having dealt him a raw hand. And so he rationalized his behavior and his vices—the alcohol, gambling, loose women, and the nasty temper as well.

Grandpa turned up at the attic apartment late one night, itching for an argument with my grandmother. At first he rang the bell and waited patiently, but there was no answer. After three tries, he began pounding the door like an impulsive child—pounding and kicking with such force that Sister Mary Margaret nearly called the police. Realizing who the belligerent man was, she told him, “Please, sir. Use the top bell.”

MEANWHILE, OBLIVIOUS TO the commotion three stories below, my grandmother and her brood slept peacefully. Of all the Gotti children, only two were awake. Dad was restless and couldn’t sleep, and one of his younger brothers, I believe Ritchie, was wide awake because he had to go to the bathroom. Since there were seven boys in a single room, and only two beds for them to share, the Gotti sons took turns. One night someone was lucky to get a semi-comfortable cot, and the next one was handed an old army blanket and relegated to sleeping on the floor. That particular night, my father was lucky to have been assigned a cot.

Or so he thought.

Since the attic apartment was a considerable distance from the main plumbing, a bathroom had never been installed. What had begun as a generous offer of temporary shelter for my grandmother and her children had evolved into a more permanent arrangement. In exchange for room and board, my grandmother was expected to clean and maintain the House of the Good Shepherd. This meant washing and waxing the massive wood floors every night, as well as cleaning the mess hall after dinner. And there were additional duties: monthly window cleaning, repairing and sewing (such as pillows, blankets, and quilts), and any other household repairs that had been neglected. Given that my grandmother already had a full-time job at a local butcher shop, this wasn't the most ideal arrangement, and it surely took its toll on her health and temperament. But it was the best that Grandma could manage at the time; until she had saved enough money to rent another apartment, or until her husband returned (hopefully with a few dollars in his pocket), it would have to do.

The bathroom was actually one floor below the attic apartment, and since heat was scarce throughout the old building, the hallway was usually frigid. Not surprisingly, the Gotti children dreaded those nights when they had to navigate a cold and unwieldy trip to the bathroom. Dad would slide out from under his blanket and weave his way through a minefield of sleeping bodies, all the while shivering uncontrollably. If he was unlucky enough to step on someone's hand or foot, the ensuing yelping and fighting would provoke an angry appearance from my grandmother—something none of the kids wanted.

While Dad continued to toss and turn, his brother Ritchie fought the urge to pee as long as he could—and when the pressure turned to pain, he jumped from the bed and stumbled toward the door. As luck would have it, the door wouldn't open. Uncle Ritchie desperately jiggled the handle from side to side, pushing in the door, ever so slightly, and then pulling back.

Push . . . pull. Push . . . pull.

Still nothing.

With Ritchie's bladder on the verge of giving out, he frantically sought another option. He looked around the room for a container, anything he could use to relieve himself. But a quick scan turned up nothing. He was ready to explode. Dad watched his brother make a mad dash for the bedroom window rather than soil himself or his cot. He ripped it open, and peed into the cold night air. How could he possibly know Grandpa was standing beneath the window?

My grandfather was a terror; his ill temper had the shortest of fuses. Beatings were the norm; even at twelve, Dad couldn't escape them. Sometimes the violence was so severe that my father would miss school for days; the blackened eyes, swollen lips, and bruises too painful and shameful to be shown in public. The poverty and abuse, both mental and physical, that my father experienced as a child helped shape his outlook as much as anything else.

When my grandfather finally made it inside and upstairs to the attic apartment, he headed for the back bedroom—straight for the person responsible for his unexpected shower. Of course, my father was scared speechless. He hopped back into bed and pulled the old army blanket up over his head, trying hard to stop trembling. My grandfather pushed in the old wooden door and stormed into the room, stepping over bodies, poking each kid with the tip of an umbrella. The first to jump, he figured, was the one already awake, and thus the most likely culprit. But Uncle Ritchie lay still as a rock—while Dad, still unable to sleep, tossed and turned. He jumped when Grandpa poked him. So naturally, he got the blame.

The beating Dad endured that night was worse than any he'd ever received before. His face was so badly bruised that my grandmother pulled him out of school for several days. As a boy, Dad and his siblings did their best to avoid pissing off their father; what none of them had counted on was the possibility of pissing on their father.

THE FOLLOWING WEEK, my father managed to get a job delivering laundry. He worked after school and all day Saturday for fifty cents an hour, plus tips. He used an old pushcart with rusty wheels to haul the large packages around Downtown Brooklyn, about a mile or so from the Gotti household. At the end of the week he handed his pay over to my grandmother, keeping only \$1.50 for himself. The fact that Dad was forced to turn over most of his wages didn't bother him in the least; mature beyond his years, he felt proud of being able to help support his family.

Unfortunately, his happiness was short-lived. Three months later, in the spring of 1952, my grandfather got restless and left home again. This time my grandmother fell apart. To my father's eyes, the change was remarkable. Fannie became depressed and withdrawn. Nothing seemed to matter anymore.

The days that followed were dark times for the entire family. And for a twelve-year-old, Dad shouldered an unusually heavy burden. It wasn't just the beatings that had stripped him of his innocence; it was the constant verbal abuse dished out by my grandfather. As my father once said to me, "How many times can a kid hear that he's a piece of shit before he begins to believe it? How many times can a kid hear that he'll never amount to nothing, because he is nothing?"

According to Dad, there were two strict rules necessary for survival in the Gotti household (at least whenever my grandfather was in residence): "Keep your mouth shut—and run like hell." Usually he received advance warning before an actual event took place. Simply listening to my grandfather's rants provided insight as to what was likely to happen next. Still, there was no way to know for certain when the proverbial shit would hit the fan.

Perhaps the most cataclysmic event took place in the middle of the night in mid-February 1952. Sister Mary Margaret roused the Gotti children from a comfortable sleep and gathered the family in a downstairs parlor. Dad knew that something was terribly wrong. Where was their mother? Even Sister Mary Margaret's offer of hot chocolate and cookies couldn't mask the dread and fear that hung in the air.

The children, who lived in a state of perpetual hunger, ate voraciously, anyway. When they were finished, Sister Mary Margaret calmly issued the bad news. Their mother had fallen "ill," euphemistically referred to back then as "exhaustion." Today, of course, the condition is more commonly referred to as depression. In its most severe form, it results in a complete emotional collapse. The years of trauma had finally exacted their toll, all the bickering and fighting, the sickness that permeated every aspect of her marriage to my grandfather. It had become too much for Fannie to bear, and when my grandfather took off the last time, she withdrew into herself, to the only place, perhaps, where she felt safe.

Grandma, Sister Mary Margaret explained to Dad and his brothers and sisters, had been admitted to a local hospital and placed in the "hardship ward." Because there were no relatives willing to accept financial and custodial responsibility, the Gotti family was effectively splintered. The children were separated and sent to various places, some more toxic than others. Most of the kids went to live with old neighbors who had become friends; a few weren't as fortunate. My father and his older brother, Pete, for example, drew the shortest straws and were dropped off at the Brooklyn Home for Boys, not knowing when—or if—their mother would ever come back for them.

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