

**THE TERRIFIC ADVENTURES OF MARIO
THE MOST HEROIC FIGURE THE WORLD HAS SEEN
IN THIS
OR ANY OTHER AGE.**

Forward

I wrote the story in this book almost twenty years ago as an eager young media student, over-confident but under-developed and untested as a writer. Publishing it at this point has its dangers. There's the risk a reader might not appreciate it's an exercise in looking back at the juvenile work of someone with pretences of being a more mature writer now. However it is a fact that writers write in the hope someone will read. I *know*, profound isn't it. Having made the effort at some point in my life it would seem a shame if this little story were never shared. As unsophisticated as it is, I like to think it has some entertainment value (if no literary value), and maybe, just maybe a little fun.

Love or Honour?

A question Super Heroes are faced with from time to time

The phone rang, as it often does at the beginning of a tremendous adventure. It rang loud. So loud in fact that it woke Anita who lives three houses down the road.

After some time Jesse reached over her sleeping husband and grabbed the phone which lay near his left ear.

"Come in, the door's open," she mumbled into the receiver.

"Jesse, it's me."

"You're sure it's not somebody else?" she replied, wishing it was.

"Listen Jess, this is rather urgent. Is Mario there?"

"Why? You don't know something I don't know do you? He's not having an affair is he?" As she looked down at Mario she smiled at the absurdity of the idea. That huge nose - the one supporting a pair of glasses Buddy Holly rejected as too daggy in September of 1956. If Clark Kent had worn these glasses he'd never have got off the ground. And coupled with his haircut - part Elvis, part John Farnham, becoming increasingly Peter Garrett - a bucket of Spanish flies could not un-chasten even the most friendly of señoritas.

Jess didn't care. She didn't care if other women were repulsed by the lush green pastures of two-inch hairs sprouting from his nostrils.

"Come on Jess, this is really important."

"I reckon it'd wanna' be if you expect me to wake him at this time of the morning," she said, then looking at the clock she corrected herself with the same discouraging intonation, "a-afternoon, I mean."

"Just please, try quickly."

She dropped the phone on the bed and swapped the receiver from her right to her left hand. Then, closed fist, she thumped Mario in the guts with considerable force. He lurched forward with a huge groan before he was anything near conscious.

"eh you. Get up before I kick the fuckin' shit out of you, you lazy good-for-nothing piece a' dog's body." Sometimes her English was a lot like her mother's, Mario thought. An Italo-Australian variety which, if her hands were busy elsewhere, was so fast that most of the consonants were disregarded. Remarkably easy to understand, however.

"What you do that for?" he complained.

"It's your boss..." she said as she held the phone out to him, "...*again*," she added indignantly.

"What can I say? I'm in demand, huh?" He took the phone, grinning.

"What do you want, arsehole?" The conversation lasted half a minute by Jesse's estimation. Mario said nothing but nodded his head now and then. He closed with "Be there in twenny minutes".

He stretched and groaned and clenched his teeth and said, "Gotta move". He dropped his legs over the edge of the bed and sat himself up.

"Just where do you think you're going, mister?" She reached around and grabbed Mario's dick. Not unlike many of us superheroes, Mario's monster was instantly as hard as steel. He closed his eyes, sat silent a moment. His head was telling him that duty calls, and his other head was telling him that... well, duty calls. Just which duty was most important was still unclear. He had after all only woken minutes before.

"Ah shit," he moaned as he rose and moved toward the door. "Listen sweetie, I'd really like to stay here and grind with you but I've got serious business to take care of."

"Oh yeah, what could be more serious than this?" She threw off the covers to reveal a vaguely Amazonian figure, with nicely rounded corners. This was a pretty tame one from Jess, whose idea of seduction is to knock him down and fuck the guts out of him.

Mario stood in the doorway, looking much like a Classic Apollo himself, except with a furry texture rather than a marble one, and an almost vertical pulsing limb jutting out from the middle somewhere. His eyes sped down the hallway toward the half-open bathroom door, but his erection stayed focused on the bed.

"Princess Fran has been kidnapped." His erection disappeared immediately. "Some fiend has her hostage in a huge castle in Bavaria..."

"You're sounding more like one of those television fruitcakes every day."

"...or Ghana or ah... Dubbo or somewhere like that."

"Hmm, not quite."

"Listen darling, I'll be back soon. I've just got to go out and get the baddies, you know how the story goes - go out and fight a few of them, maybe slaughter a few of them, sort of round the rest of them up and um... save the princess. Shouldn't take too long."

"Yeah, I know the story. Why do they always have to call you? I'm getting real sick of this shit. I mean if I had known you'd be racing around saving people's lives all the time I wouldn't have let you apply for the job at ASIO in the first place."

"That's not true, Jess. We do a lot more than that. As a matter of fact, we do exactly the opposite sometimes."

She flung her head back, adjusted her pose and brought a vixen's gaze to rest upon Mario's stance.

"Why now?" He looked at her in disbelief. "When I want a bit of marital bliss you're always too tired, or you're suffering a sugar deficiency that requires my immediate departure in search of chocolate. But when you're hot to trot I don't have a say in the matter. You use sex to prove you have some sort of power over me. I'm warning you, Jess, it won't work this time. I mean this is my job. I know love and desire are big in those romance novels you read but I'm sorry to tell you, there are more important things in a man's life." Mario was now looking proudly upward, his hand on his heart. "A man *is* what he does for a crust. And I know it seems silly to you but I happen to like saving the world from the seething putrid cesspit of decay that devours from every corner. I am proud to do my duty as an Australian, as a British subject, to offer service to my Queen."

"You're Italian," Jesse said, looking at him in astonishment. Then, considering who this drivel was coming from her surprise quickly faded.

"Yeah, but I'm Australian too," he qualified. "I'm a little Aussie battler. I got that Anzac spirit. I'm just like Bradman and Dawn Fraser, *Australia II* and Kieren-bloody-Perkins so I can never say die." By now he was broadcasting his message as loudly as possible so that the whole of the neighbourhood might hear if they cared to listen. "And I'll drink as much beer as like. You know why? Because I was born in Wan-ga-ratta, Australia, baby-cake!"

She rolled her eyes, unimpressed, shook her head then resumed her lustful pose.

"That is the smallest dick I have ever seen. You must have the smallest dick in the world," she said in feigned disgust, screwing her nose up. "Honestly, I have never seen anything so small. Little boy."

This was a clever ploy on Jesse's part. Though she often used this routine on Mario he still fell for it every time. She knew that once she'd said it Mario was obliged to satisfy his ego and prove once and for all that his dick was not in fact the smallest dick in the world.

"Oh sweetie, you are hilarious." A nervous grin forced its corners past each ear, and a few crackles appeared around the edges of an otherwise velveteen voice. He found it hysterically funny whenever Jess came out with this one. And it must be stated that to his credit, Mario is reasonably well-endowed in the downstairs department.

There they were, facing each other, poised. Had Mario been somebody else's hero events might have taken an altogether different course. As he's ours there's but one thing could have happened next. And Jesse knew it.

He was airborne before his mouth opened to say, "Yeah stuff it, the princess can wait."

Half an hour later Mario was proud of his effort and Jesse more than satisfied with hers. They lay in each other's arms until the soothing silence was broken by the telephone again. Mario picked it up.

"Yeah I know, I know..."

"Mario, there's been a change of plans. You can meet me at the airport at three o'clock."

"Come off it."

"I'll see you in the departure lounge somewhere."

"Hey, it's my little sister's birthday on Tuesday, Roger. Can't this wait until after that?"

"It's your little sister's birthday," Roger repeated in disgust. "Jesus Mario, we're talking about seventh in line for the throne here?"

"Hey, it may seem silly to you, but I reckon there are more important things in life than work. I reckon a man *is* his family, and..."

"Gah! That's enough of that rot. The next flight's at four-fifteen. I'll put you on that one. Ring her up. Say g'day to your mum and dad for me too, hey?!"

* * * *

Mario was never happy to go away without seeing his family first. A quick phone call was not good enough, but it would have to do. Tania answered the phone.

"Hello sweetie."

"Mario." She nearly bounced through the phone with excitement. "When are you coming up?"

"Listen I'm not going to make it up there for your birthday. I'm sorry, pumpkin."

"That's okay. Busy at work hey?"

"Yeah, I've got to go overseas."

"Where to?"

How could he explain that he didn't know yet?

"Um... China." The words that followed came slowly and disjointed - a long drawling effort. Mario isn't comfortable with sappy stuff, even though he's the best in the world at it. "Hey listen... I'm ah... real glad you made it to sixteen, 'cause it's ah... a pretty tough old world out there and ah... well I reckon you're pretty tough."

Coming from anybody else this might have seemed a strange birthday greeting. But Tania idolises every word that comes out of Mario's mouth. He's her hero as well. Mario felt like he hardly knew his little sister anymore. It seemed each time he saw her she had grown so much.

"You say the funniest things," she giggled.

"I might come up in a couple of weeks and you can tell me all about your new boyfriend then. I've got to be at the airport in half an hour. Is Mama there?"

"No, she's gone to Silvy's. Papa's just walked in though. Want me to put him on?"

"Yes please. Seeya sweetie."

Mario was prepared for a lecture. Didn't matter what the lecture was on. Could be anything from rearing children, though Mario and Jess were both too busy to have any, to how to defend yourself in a brawl, which to Papa's way of thinking was all they ever did down there in the city.

"Hello Mario."

"I'm going away for a while, papa. Jesse wants to go up there."

"Sure, be good to have her. Be better to have you come up as well."

"I'll be back in a few weeks. I want to try that Sauvignon you were telling me about."

"Mario, you don't need to be tear-arsing around the world. Why don't you come back to the farm? How could you possibly like it down there in Melbourne? Your brother, he treats the vineyards like cattle sometimes. Why don't you come back home and help us out, huh?"

"I like it down here, Papa. I like my job too."

"Your Mama misses you. We hardly ever see you. How good can life be if you never see your family? But..." he said, as if suddenly resolved to the fact, "...you have things to do. We're proud of you. You look after yourself, huh?"

"Tell Mama I'll call again in a couple of days. Say hello to Tony for me too, huh?"

"Ah Tony. You know, I really worry about him sometimes. He killed eighteen vines last month with this heavy-handedness. Now the only thing growing there is mushrooms."

"He's only twenny-three, Papa. He's got plenty of time to sort himself out. Use the mushrooms in the *bascaiola* - very delicious, you take my word for it."

"All right. It's good to hear from you. And you think about what I say to you just now, huh? And mama and Tania and I would love to have Jesse, so you send her up."

"Okay Papa. We can talk more in a couple of weeks when I get back."

"See you Mario."

"Ciao Papa."

Jesse was ready for a fight when he got off the phone.

"Hey, how you gonna find her, anyway? You don't know anything about her."

"She's into horses."

"She looks like a horse if you ask me."

"And why are you lecturing me, anyway? You're taking time off work, which we can't afford. I can't work that out."

Mario sensed something in the silence that fell between them. Jesse seldom left her busy cafe with "the staff from outer this dimension", as she called them. It's unfortunate for Mario that he senses these things, for he generally says something. As he can never tell precisely what's up, either by instinct, intuition, divine intervention or telepathy, whatever he says will be the wrong thing to say. So he ends up accused of being insensitive. Now if he didn't sense anything he wouldn't say anything so he probably wouldn't be accused of being insensitive. Or so the theory goes.

He tried to make amends.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You deserve a break."

"Just shut up, Mario," she snapped. "You know sometimes you can be so insensitive. What happened to the trip to Bali we were going to have this year? Somebody, I won't mention any names, has got so many parking fines they're sacking half the teachers and half the nurses in the state until he pays." She directed this at him with such seething ferocity that no man on Earth could fail to be humbled.

She did, however, give him a big hug as he left for the airport. He couldn't leave without passing remark.

"Now can you honestly tell me that's the smallest dick you've ever seen?"

Why Do We Expect Too Much From Our Heroes?

Mario speaks seven languages, making him a valued agent. What nobody ever worked out, however, is that he has an equally appalling command of each. Well, you could argue that he speaks English and Italian quite well, but you'll find he has a few problems with these at times too.

So next we find him at Palermo. He'd never been here. His family wasn't Sicilian, they came from Bologna. He'd visited relatives up there, and in Rome. What a shame this wasn't that sort of trip.

He was to meet his contact from MI5 at the corner of Via Matteo Bonnello and Via Gianferrara. But he couldn't remember if it was at five past ten or ten past nine. He took a punt on ten past ten. As he walked up he spotted a couple disguised as British tourists. He thought their disguises weren't quite believable enough. Any professional could tell they weren't what they seemed. But he wasn't interested in slinging off at MI5 for their incompetence.

"Would you like to buy a pushbike?" he said to them. They stopped and looked at him.

"Do we look like we're the type to ride pushbikes?" a tall chap with a grey moustache replied in a refined British accent. Mario couldn't recall if that was the response he was supposed to receive. He decided to assume it was. The chap moved on but the lady stayed to take a photo of Mario, who seemed a curious and exotic native to her.

"Well what have you got for me?" he said.

"I beg your pardon?" the lady said.

"Have you got something for me?"

"George, come quickly, I think this vulgar man is making crude suggestions."

"George stepped up with two huge bony fists held skyward at the end of two lanky arms."

"Oh shit." Mario couldn't risk making a scene on this busy street corner. He couldn't tell them he was here to save their princess either. He ducked and ran as the first god-almighty swing came flying over his head. Mario could tell by the stance that George was Royal Navy, by the swing - probably retired.

"Bloody cowards, these Italians," George asserted along with his courage. "Are you all right Katherine?"

"George, it's so flattering to know that after all these years you'll still defend my honour."

Mario was a little upset by the time he stopped running. He hadn't met his contact and Head Office would require an explanation - more stinking paperwork. All he could do for now was head back to his hotel and wait for Roger to get in contact. How long would it take for the news to get around? Once, in Laos, Mario waited five days by the phone. Sure, he had left it off the hook, but that was no consolation.

After three plates of spaghetti at lunch Mario decided to take the rest of his second bottle of wine up to his room. He lay on his bed watching the ceiling fan go round and around. It took him back to 'Nam, which he found strange because he'd never been there. He drifted slowly to sleep.

He had a visitor at about five that afternoon. She was the Countess Agatha von Gleisschwester. Mario was amazed an Austrian countess could be a courier for the Mossad. But the international clandestine underworld he'd embroiled himself in was a complicated one. He never asked too many questions.

The Countess was officially in the employ of Mossad. But it was not uncommon for the CIA, MI5, even ASIO to coordinate through each other's operatives on occasion. Mario was familiar with the legend of the young countess. He thought he'd better watch himself. Having her on his side was one thing, having her by his side was another.

"Your reputation exceeds you, Countess," Mario said, though he meant something else. It was a genuine attempt at flattery. Fortunately it went over the Countess's head.

"You're to go to Capo Passero, Mario. It's a small villich near Siracusa. Ze Cortelini's are patriarch's of ze villich. You will be familiar wiz zeir involvement wiz ze mafiosa, no doubt."

"Hmm..." Mario nodded. He had a stern look on his face. He was from another part of ze worlt. He'd never heard of the Cortelinis.

"It is understoot zey are involvet in ze import/egsport business. We suspect zey are involvet in ze import of droks srough Honk Konk. Once ze droks have reachet Sicily zey can be shippedt sroughout Europe wiz ease."

"Do you want me to go down zere ant tell zem to shtop? Or woult you like me to offer zem a deal on behalf ze CIA?"

"All I know is zat you're to go down zere and have a look. Get klose to zem if you kan. So far we have been unable to identify ze Honk Konk connection. But zese people are ze ones who have your princess. So, it would seem you have a double-headet donker, so to shpeak. Not only are you saving your princess, but now you are helpink us to solve ze drok problem."

"Well I'm glad I kan help." Mario wasn't sure what the Countess's drok problem was, but he was truly glad to be helpink.

* * * * *

Mario got on the wrong bus from Catania to Cape Passero. But half a day later he was back on the trail. The shadows were growing longer as he reached his destination.

Capo Passero was a small town. Nobody could just rock into town without being noticed. Most of the townfolk had held strong allegiances to the Cortelinis for almost sixty years. Apart from being in the shipping caper, Mario noticed the Cortelinis grew the vine. This was perhaps his way in.

"Hello, I wonder if you can tell me when the Cortelinis will be coming back?" Mario asked the old lady, who was sweeping her front step into the dusty street. "I knocked on their door and nobody answered so I guess they're out."

The old lady looked at him as though he was a twit. She went inside without answering.

"Hey you, Aussie."

Mario swung around to greet a pleasant smile.

"Come over here. Don't worry about her, she just thinks you're American."

Mario walked over to the smiling man who wore trousers that looked as dusty as the street. He was in his fifties, Mario guessed.

"Come in, have some food, some wine. My brother lives in Australia, that's how I know your accent. I visited Melbourne once - that's where Juliano lives."

"I live in Melbourne too."

"Well, it'll be almost like having my own brother here. Then he yelled "Sabina... put some spaghetti on, we have a guest."

Giuseppe Capelli had worked for the Cortelinis for twelve years. Until recently, that was. Luciano Cortelini had died the year before and his son, Christiano, had taken over the show. Christiano had set out to rationalise his newly acquired business concerns. He'd decided that a leaner operation in the village was more equitable. Fifteen of the villagers had lost their jobs. Though the Cortelinis still employed the other half of the village there was a great deal of animosity toward the young Christiano. Giuseppe had his share of grievances.

"What do you think about that, huh? My Sabina makes the best spaghetti this side of Mt Etna."

"Thank you Mrs Capelli, it's delicious."

Someone entered the room behind Mario. The Capellis glanced silently at each other. Mario sat still, thinking perhaps the countess had led him to a trap, that he'd blown his cover, that the Capellis were working for the Cortelinis and the Cortelinis knew who and where he was. Then he remembered the spaghetti. Anyone who made spaghetti like Mrs Capelli was no baddie. He relaxed.

"Mario, I want you to meet my daughter, Sophie." Mrs Capelli could not hide her pride. As he turned around Mario understood what had silenced the Capellis momentarily. For there before him stood the most beautiful young lady Mario could remember seeing since Jess was a little younger. She'd obviously dressed for some occasion.

"Sophie is nineteen."

"Hello Sophie."

"Hello."

Giuseppe watched Mario with intent. "Sophie, this is Mario. He is from Australia." Sophie was thinking how much of a dick Mario looked with those daggy glasses.

He didn't wear a wedding ring when he was on an assignment. Foreign agents were to know as little about him as possible. Mario was totally unaware of what was going through the Capellis' minds. Funny thing is, Mario was thinking very much the same way they were, though not as they might have expected.

"Have you been to Australia, Sophie?"

She sat at the table, opposite Mario.

"No. But my Mama and Papa have been. My uncle lives there."

"So your papa was telling me." How could he arrange for her to meet his brother, Tony? "I hope you can come and visit some time, Sophie, and bring your parents too." Mrs Capelli carried a wide smile as she brought Sophie's spaghetti to the table.

"Sophie is going to Roma next year," said Mr Capelli. "She is going there to make her mark on the big city." Something in his tone suggested his displeasure.

"I'm sure you will, Sophie," Mario assured her with a smile.

"There's very little to do here in Capo Passero, I'd like to work in Roma. Have you been there, Mario?"

"Yes, I have cousins who live there. I haven't been there for many years."

"It's so far away," said Mrs Capelli, "we will hardly see her. Why couldn't she go to Palermo instead?"

Mario smiled and said, "My aunts and uncles say the same thing about my cousins who move to Roma, and they only live in Bologna."

"I have known young people who have gone to the big cities before," said Mr Capelli, "One time you could always tell yourself, 'They will come back'. But now... now they hardly ever come back." Mr Capelli was giving Sophie the shits so he changed the subject. "But tell us about your family back home in Australia, Mario."

When the meal and the familiarisation was over, Mario and Capelli retired to the front verandah. Well, it was more like two chairs on the street, but it was pleasant.

"Listen, Giuseppe, there is something I think I should tell you. I think I can trust you."

"Are you running from something, Mario?"

"No, it's nothing like that. Well, maybe it is." Mario explained what had brought him to Capo Passero. When Mario had finished they both sat contemplating a few minutes, Capelli with a grave look on his face, very deeply in thought. After a while he looked up at the sky and said to Mario,

"Come for a walk with me, I think we still have enough light."

As the two men neared the top of the hill that cast its shadow over the little village, Capelli had a few things to say to Mario.

"Hey listen, Mario, I don't know how much I can help you. There are many reasons why what I am doing now is against my better judgement." They both stopped, panting. "I had a lot of respect for Luciano Cortelini. And I'm not sure I want to do anything to hurt Christiano because of that respect. I know one thing, though, Luciano would never have been involved in making money from droks."

Mario was still unsure what it was these Europeans referred to as "droks", but he really didn't think it was his concern anyway.

"Come," Capelli continued, "let me show you this."

As they reached the top, Mario was awestruck by the scene which opened out before them. Just around the other side of the cape from the village was a large deep-water bay. So incredibly secluded, he thought. So beautiful. The very picture Mediterranean dreams are made of.

"A vast Carthaginian fleet is said to have anchored here during the war with Hamilcar Barca, Hannibal's father. It is said that had the Corinthians founded Syracuse here instead of further north, the whole world would be a different one now. And down through the ages, Portopalo di Capo Passero has offered sanctuary to all. Many fleets and many armies have come here, and never was a battle fought in this place. But not anymore." Capelli pointed toward the far side of the bay where a large construction was in its early stages, but taking ominous shape.

"I have been suspicious of Christiano's intentions for many months now. Though his pier is not finished yet, if you look out toward the south there..."

Mario saw a large cargo ship, many miles out to sea. Was that thing coming in here?

"Before we had little boats in here. We grew olives and grapes, made wine, and caught fish. Little boats were all we needed. This is the third one of these ships to come to us. But I ask you, why do you need such a large ship for just droks?" Capelli quizzed Mario, who hadn't the faintest idea. "I'm sure you know - you tried not to worry me. But I already know."

"How much do you know?"

"I'm not sure, but you tell me if I'm right. These big ships come to the Mediterranean to bring Japanese cars and such things, among other things we know. They go back to Asia - to your part of the world, with Italian cars and such things. And other things, huh? On their way past here they stop to load up with olives, wine, smoked fish and such things. But you and I know much better, don't we?! These guns and big weapons Christiano puts onto the ships, they must go down to your part of the world. To the place where this drok is coming from - probably Thailand or Borneo, I guess. And these Americans who are around here, they are mafia, I know. Am I right about all this?"

Mario scratched his chin. Really not having a clue himself, he said

"I can't tell you anything, Giuseppe."

"I know, there is a lot more to it, and you are perhaps protecting me by not telling me. But there is one thing for certain, Mario, and this is the other reason I'm not sure I can help you.

"These Americans think we look up to them. And they go from place to place doing as they please because they believe they are superior. They use force when people try to assert their own independence, and they believe they have some divine right to do so. And people suffer.

"I will help you, Mario, on one condition. I want you to take my daughter to Australia with you when you leave."

Mario's brain was not a real quick one. Everything, therefore, had to be done on impulse. Sometimes his impulses turned out bad. But sometimes good. Sometimes very good.

"Umm... I think so... okay."

* * * * *

The next morning Capelli took Mario to his friend, Pedro's place. Pedro lived on the bay, where Capelli said Mario could watch the ship being loaded. Mario didn't know why, but as always it sounded fair enough to him.

Apart from being a successful fisherman, Pedro's other claim to fame was that his was one of the two households in Capo Passero which had a phone. Mario called Roger at the Australian Consulate in Rome.

"I told you not to call me here, Mario. Is your line secure?"

Mario checked that the phone wasn't likely to fall off the table while he was talking.

"Yeah, it's pretty secure."

"Are you sure?"

He kicked the table's nearest leg.

"Very sure."

"All right, what have you got?"

"Well I'm sitting here watching a ship across the bay. On the back it has "Hong Kong" written in big white letters. The name is in Cantonese. I'm a little bit rusty but I think it says.. "The Slippery Frog"."

"Are you sure?"

"Aah.. yeah, that's right - Slippery Frog. Hang on it's written in English underneath. I think I can just make it out. Aah.. "The.. Hungry.. Dragon"."

"All right." He was writing it down. "Mario.. " He was about to ask why Mario hadn't met his contact in Palermo but Pedro's phone crashed into the floor and the line went dead. Mario had dragged it toward the edge of the table while he was looking out the window. Just great, now he'd have to explain why he'd used an inadequately secured line. He hated paperwork.

Roger was at the other end cursing the Italian telephone system.

Mario called his family when he got to Rome some days later.

"Hello, mama."

"Mario, where are you? We haven't heard a thing for almost a week. Apart from that magazine article."

"Magazine article?"

"Don't act surprised. You can't hide it now. It was in Zone magazine. Jess has gone into town to her mother's and I don't blame her."

"She's left? Why? What is this Zone magazine?"

"Here, I'll put your papa on. He wants to talk to you."

"Hello Mario."

"Hey papa, what was mama talking about? What is this magazine bullshit?"

"Just hang on a minute while I get rid of mama." Papa turned away from the phone and told mama he wanted some privacy to talk to his son. She left, complaining, and questioning the legitimacy of these `men's things'.

"Mario! Mario, Mario, Mario!" Had he been somebody else's papa his next words might have been "What are we ever going to do with you?". But he's not. So he said, "I know this Countess is a beautiful woman, and very rich too. But you have a family here.. "

"What Countess?"

"That Austrian whore."

Mario recalled a thousand stories of the beautiful von Gleisschwester's love affairs with people ranging from various members of the Kennedy clan, to British royalty, to Bob Hawke, to Bert Newton. Perhaps they weren't all true afterall.

"Papa, I don't know what this magazine says but whatever it is, it's not true. I love Jesse and I don't want to lose her. I wish there was something I could do but I just can't be there at the moment."

"You just can't be here at the moment, huh? Well maybe Jess is too good for you anyway. Why can't you be here at the moment? You give me one good reasons."

"The Countess and I are business associates, that's all."

"Are you with her now?"

"No. I only met her once. I've got to ring Jess up."

"I hope what you say is true. There is more at stake here than any royal lady gives you, Mario. You have your own family now."

"I know. I'll always have you.."

"No, no. That's not what I meant. Jesse is going to make you a papa. Now you think about that one, mister."

Tears flowed freely down Mario's cheeks.

"What can I do, papa?"

"I believe what you say. These silly magazines are full of shit. But I.. I don't know if I can help you. You have to work this one out for yourself. Papas don't always have the answers. Only in stories. We're human too. And you should remember this, especially now."

"I'm going to ring her now, papa."

"Maybe you should come home," he said with a little more authority. "But.." changing his tone again, "..if it's true you can't, then don't call her tonight. She only saw the rag today. Give yourself some time to work out what you will say."

* * * * *

Mario stormed into the airport paper-shop. He scanned the shelves. Finding Zone, he flicked the pages like a man possessed. There it was before him - a full two-page spread, with a bold headline reading "Countess tells - My hour in Mario's room". With pictures.

How trashy can these magazines get? It's obvious from the pictures we weren't getting intimate. They take the pictures and encourage the readers to take your clothes off. Mario's thoughts seemed almost coherent - something that doesn't happen every day.

The Hong Kong Connection Cops a Thumping

The first time ASIO sent Mario overseas he went to Hong Kong. He was very excited. He tried to play it down with his friends and family, as if it was no big deal, as if it was just "part of the job". He was awestruck the first time he looked into that city from the sky. All the way to the end of that amazing runway. And beyond.

This time he didn't even glance at the window. Not that it was all too familiar now, he'd only been here twice since. But this time he snored like a bulldozer.

Mario had been up all night drinking. Getting real pissed, you could say. He'd been drinking for eighteen hours before he zonked-out somewhere over the Ganges Delta. The flight attendant had a lot of trouble waking him to put his seatbelt on for the landing. Waking him was bad enough, but getting the seatbelt on was no joyous task either, with a stench of booze that'd wither a rose clean off its stem, and the thorns too.

He fell onto the luggage conveyor. It wasn't his fault, however. They just took so long to send his case through that he sort of nodded-off while he was standing there. He didn't wake until he got stuck in a sort of flap thing. The conveyor jammed. About two hundred passengers and their friends were left waiting for two hours while security and baggage staff undertook the huge operation of removing Mario from the chute.

When Mario was settled into his hotel room he called in-room dining for a six-pack of Victoria Bitter. When they called back to say they had none he settled for a bottle of Bundaberg Rum - overproof. It wasn't the type of poison that mattered, it was the country of manufacture.

Mario had worn a trail in the carpet with his pacing. The television blared and the bottle slowly shortened like a candle. When his courage was sufficiently fuelled he sat down by the phone. Her mother answered.

"Hello Mrs Demasi."

He was met with silence. Then anger.

"So, lover-boy finally decided to call, huh? I don't think she wants to talk to you, Mario."

"Monica, it's all lies what they said."

"I saw the photos with my own eyes. You tell me what was that German woman doing in your hotel room, huh?"

"Is Jesse there?"

"I will see if she wants to talk to you."

She came back a few moments later.

"She's busy doing her bookwork. She said she'll call you."

With that Monica Demasi abruptly hung up. He was stunned. It took him some time to get a handle on reality. The princess, the countess, the misses - life can get so complicated sometimes.

Mario called back straight away. This time Jesse answered.

"Hello," she said, as coldly as she could muster.

"Jesse.. I.."

"You what, Mario? Are you gonna leave me for.. her?" After spending a day and a half feeling sorry for herself she'd decided he was going to cop it, she was going to share the suffering around.

"No." He was distressed. "It's not true what they said. There's nothing going on with the duchess, or whatever she is. It's all lies, honestly Jess."

"I don't know if I can believe you." She kind of believed him, her doubts were starting to clear. But she was determined to make him suffer - then he'd see what was most important. He'd have to give away this pointless dangerous game of international espionage because he's supposed to be around when she needs him. And if he didn't..

"Honest, Jess.. I don't want to.. I could never be interested in anyone else. And papa told me.. he told me we were pregnant. I mean you're going to.. daddy. I mean we're going to have a baby."

A long moment of silence ensued in fibre-optic crystal clarity as they each did their best to hold back the sobs for later.

"I've got to go now," she said, cutting their line.

Mario's super-heart was tearing inside-out when he finally hung up the phone. Another half a bottle of Bundy rocked him not-so-gently to sleep.

Roger called at about one the following afternoon.

"Who is it," Mario groaned.

"Mario, I've been trying to get hold of you all day."

"Why didn't you just call?"

"I did. And I asked the concierge to get someone to wake you. She said they shook you and everything."

"That must be why I feel so shit-house."

"You didn't notice anything strange at the airport last night, did you?"

"No, not that I can think of. Why?"

"It's just that three agents had their luggage held up for two hours."

"Come to think of it, I did have a bit of trouble."

"Hmm..," Roger suspected a plot to get information from agents' bags. "Well anyway, that's not what I called about. The Hungry Dragon pulled in. Three Cortelini containers were unloaded in Hong Kong this morning. Two are marked to go to the wholesale markets, the other was collected by a Thai company of dubious nature and taken to their warehouse on Dock Eight."

"Did you say... Dock Eight?" Mario knew Dock Eight very well. He'd crawled the length of it back in '89 after he had the shit kicked out of him by three Sumo wrestlers from the Yakuza. He wasn't busting to get back down there.

"Yeah, listen, I know you wouldn't piss on that dock if it was on fire, but we're depending on you, Mario."

"Yeah, well, I never thought I'd have to contend with the memory of that night. But I'll be all right."

"That's the spirit. They're expecting a representative from the American end of their operation to visit some time in the next couple of days. We'll try to intercept him and hold him in Hawaii. We can only hold him up for so long, if we can even identify him. You have to go in there posing as this Yank bastard and find out as much as you can as quickly as possible. Think you can handle it?"

"I dunno."

"That's the spirit. How's your Thai?"

Mario hesitated.

"Not bad."

"Good, you're going to need it."

Mario had the taxi drop him at Dock Nine so he could have a look from a distance before he headed in. He'd stopped at a menswear shop on the way through town to buy himself a tie. When Roger mentioned the tie Mario thought it strange. Although ASIO generally expected its personnel to wear them, Roger had never been onto him for not wearing one. But on second thought it made sense - Americans wear ties, don't they!

He walked slowly around to Dock Eight, then very cautiously along it. He mumbled to himself, "You are shitting yourself, pal". About three quarters of the way up he found his destination. He looked up at the red painted sign above the huge warehouse door. Even the name sounds evil, he thought - "Coca Cola Distributors Thailand." This was scary.

Inside he found two men sitting down to a bowl of noodles. He told them he'd just arrived from America. They spoke back to him in Thai. Thanks a lot, Rog', you could have warned me, you prick. Didn't matter, he reckoned he could handle it.

"We thought Gino Martelli was coming," one of the men said.

"Gino liked the sun in Hawaii so much he decided to stay a while." Yeah, that's the sort of thing a half-wit American mobster would say.

"We're not velly happy with what you sent us. Look at this stuff." They opened the lid of a nearby crate. "Look in there. Crates and crates of that stuff. Where are the guns we asked for? I mean this stuff is useful sometimes, but we've got no use for it at the moment."

Mario looked into the crate and saw what appeared to be the biggest collection of play-dough he had ever seen. He told them they had plenty of reason to be upset - it was all the same colour and a velly ugly colour at that. At least that's what he thought he was saying. What he said actually translated as "Have either of you two got a spare Marlboro?"

Mario was surprised to be offered a cigarette. He wasn't a smoker but he thought he should have one to maintain the Amelican image. He took one drag and just about coughed his guts up. He had to explain he was fine, it was just a bit of a flu he'd picked up in Vegas last week. He sat the cigarette down in the ashtray one of his friends had placed in front of him.

"This stuff is no good to us. Now we want a bigger share of the lansom money from that English woman you're keeping in San Flancisco."

"I'll speak to the boss. Anything else?"

"Do you want to stay and have some noodles with us?"

"No, I've got some other business to take care of while I'm in town," he said, though he was tempted. "It smells delicious, but I've really got to be heading. Thanks for offering."

Mario walked a little faster on the way back down Dock Eight. The place gave him the creeps. He jumped in a taxi and asked the driver to take him to a nice quiet bar where he could make a phone call. Back at the warehouse, Mario's cigarette still burned. When it had almost burned down to the butt it lost balance and took a dive off the edge of the ashtray, which sat on the lid of the half open crate. There was about two and a half tonnes of semtec plastic explosive in that warehouse.

* * * * *

"Mario, thank Christ you're all right. I just heard about what happened at the dock." Roger sounded very excited coming through the receiver.

"You did?" Mario thought Roger must have sent some sort of back-up to watch him from a distance. "Well, I have to be honest, I thought I was ratshit there at one stage. They were expecting some Gino Martelli, but it turned out okay. I'm sorry though Rog', I got nothing worthwhile in there."

"Great stuff. We'll have our friends at the FBI check him out. Did they tell you anything else?"

"No, nothing really. Oh, they did mention that some pommy woman was being held for ransom in Los Angeles."

"You're a smug bastard, aren't you. I've got to tell you, Mario, in my twenty-six-and-a-half years in this caper I've never met an operator like you. Working with you it's.. well it doesn't happen to many of us. That dock was an underworld stronghold, not only for the seething, venomous crime syndicates of Hong Kong, but of the whole of Asia, the whole world even. We're fighting a war out here, pal, and it's blokes like you who are the unsung heroes."

"I really don't think it's necessary to rub it in that much. I do my best. You can't expect more than that."

Roger was in a very laughable mood.

"Yeah, well, I'll put you on a plane tomorrow."

"Good, I'll talk to you later."

"Seeya champ."

"Bye Rog"

Mario felt like he'd failed his queen, but he knew the job would be in the hands of someone more capable now. He had more important things to take care of. He was glad to be going home.

Failure and Depression

Mario was running late for the plane the following morning. Fortunately Roger had told him which gate to board at so that saved a bit of time. He was a little bit upset, however, when he ran the last three hundred metres or so to Gate Six only to find that it remained open for at least ten more minutes. He was asleep, regardless, before the plane got mobile. He didn't wake until other passengers brushed past him at the other end of the journey.

There was no problem with baggage this time. His was the first to come out. What a great feeling to be home. He headed toward the long-stay carpark. With four hectic weeks passed since the day he'd left he wasn't sure where he'd parked the car. But it couldn't take too long to find it. Twenty minutes into his search and Mario was getting bad vibes about the whole situation. That Chrysler was the most precious piece of metal he owned. Apart from his wedding band, of course. What else could go wrong? As if it wasn't bad enough that Jess had left him, now the Val had too.

Five minutes later and he'd given up his search. Something terrible had happened. He'd felt something wasn't right when he first stepped into the carpark. He didn't bother too much about it at first, but a little while later it just became overbearing. There was way too much chrome in this carpark. Eventually it struck him. It was a badge that did it. A badge that said - 'Eldorado'. It was attached to the side of what appeared to be a four bedroom home on gleaming whitewall tyres. It was horrible. He wasn't in Melbourne at all, he was somewhere in California.

Roger thought it was very funny when Mario called to complain he'd been given the wrong gate number.

"Oh you're a card, Mario," he chuckled. "The FBI gave us some info on that Gino Martelli character. He works for this Vido Satriani bloke. You can't get enough of the Mob, can you? When you're settled into your hotel room I want you to phone this bloke called Rex MacDonald at the FBI. He'll brief you on what's ahead of you. And watch yourself, buster. From what I understand this Satriani crowd are very nasty."

Mario wanted to get all this business out of the way as soon as possible. He'd had plenty of sleep on the plane so tonight seemed as good a time as any to get cracking. He called MacDonald immediately and arranged to meet him. Instead of checking into the hotel he gave a taxi driver a tip and asked him to take his case down there for him. He also told him if he ever decided to move to Melbourne, Mario would line him up a job with his uncle Joe who owned a couple of taxis.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mario," said MacDonald. "You're fast becoming a legend around the Bureau I can tell you. First you fucked the Countess, then half the Asian underworld." MacDonald coughed cigarette smoke as he laughed.

"I'm in a bit of a hurry. Could you tell me about the Satriani crew, Mr MacDonald?"

"Sure, sure Mario, I understand. And hey, call me Rex. Or Rexo for short, that's what my friends call me."

"Well, Rexo, what can you give me?"

"Satriani's got a big place down in Orange County. The address is 5178 Tustin Ranch. He has about twenty to thirty staffers patrolling the place at any one time, security cameras, dogs, cable TV, heated pool, Ferrari, the works. It wouldn't be easy to get in there, if that's what you're planning."

"How much does it cost to get up there in a taxi?"

"We have cars at your disposal, anything you want."

"With a driver? I don't know my way around here too well."

"Sure. We've been anticipating your arrival. I think we have all the back-up you'll need, just waiting on standby. Five airborne gunships, two hundred SWOT personnel, the Los Angeles,

California State and the Orange County Police Departments have been alerted, and if you need more, Fort Lincoln is only a stones throw away."

"Do you think I'll need any Patriot missiles?" Mario jested.

"I'll call General Johnson down at Fort Lincoln and see if he's got any. We understand just how much the royal family means to you British. We're here to help the best way we know how."

Mario thought perhaps the royal family meant a lot more to Rexo than to most Australians he knew.

"Well, I don't think we'll be needing all that stuff."

"All the same, it's there if you need it. When do you think you'll be going in?"

"How long does it take to get to Apple County in a car ? I'd like to get this out of the way tonight if I could."

Rexo spat beer all over a passing waitress and dropped his cigarette in his lap.

"You serious?"

"I want to get this out of the way so I can get home. I've got some more important stuff to take care of."

"Roger warned me you were a kidder," he chugged. "Thank Christ. For a second I thought you were serious."

"Don't worry, I won't be needing all those things you got for me. I mean, I appreciate the thought and all, but I can't use them. Just a lift up there'll do."

"When ?"

"Whenever you're ready."

"How do you think you're going to get in there?"

"With all those things you told me they've got there, I still don't see why they won't let you in. If you can't give me a lift up there I'll catch a taxi."

"I get it. You're a swift operator aren't you?! I think I'm starting to learn your secret. Strike while the iron's hot, hey? Well I have to admit, I don't like sitting down and planning things myself. I'm a doer, not a thinker," he barked in excitement. "But I guess you must just be fast - a fast thinker and a fast doer. Just hold it while I go and make a call."

Rexo disappeared for a few minutes and when he returned he seemed very excited.

"All right I've got an agent coming by in a Bureau car disguised as a taxi. He'll pick you up in about ten minutes. I'll get moving now, I've got plenty to do."

"Thanks for all your help, Rexo."

"Well, just doing my duty, I guess." Rexo was flattered.

The Satriani place was enormous. All you could see from Tustin Ranch was the outer wall, apart from the hedges behind the gate. One rule Mario learned as a young fella' growing up on the farm was to always leave a gate the way you found it. So he closed this one behind him. The taxi screeched away with its driver screaming abuse at Mario out the window. Mario felt the agent was over-playing his cover.

He saw a little office just inside the gate to the left. There was someone sleeping in a chair.

"Hey, " Mario whispered. He gave the man a shake and said it a bit louder. "Shit, sorry for waking you. I know what it's like doing this sort of work, believe me. Grab yourself a coffee or something, you don't want the boss to bust you."

"Yeah," the man yawned and stretched. "I've only got an hour to go. Hey thanks for waking me."

"No worries." Mario sat there and had a coffee with the guard, whose name was Bill. Mario had done graveyard shift as a security guard when he first moved to Melbourne. They had plenty to talk about.

"So what brings you here, Mario?" Bill asked.

"You know, just business."

"That's what brings most people here."

"Yeah?"

"Oh, every now and then Mrs Satriani has a big party. But I prefer the ones the kids have."

"The kids ?"

"Yeah. Mr Satriani's got a couple of kids around their late teens. Boy do they have some parties when their folks are away. Old Vido would flip. But the girls.. it's enough to make an old boy like me wish back the past twenty years," he chuckled.

"Is Vido home yet?"

"Yeah, just arrived half an hour ago."

"I'd better go and see him."

"Okay, see you, Mario."

The door was answered by a woman in her mid thirties, by Mario's estimation. She was attractive, but just a little too old for Tony.

"Yes, can I help you?"

"I'm sorry to disturb you at this time of night, but is Mr Satriani around?"

"Nonsense, it's only ten-thirty. It'd be a pleasure to have you, Mario."

Mario was thrown. How could she have known who he was? Was Rex MacDonald one of the baddies?

Cynthia turned out to be a Los Angeles society lady. She was Vido's third wife, and she didn't get on with her two eldest stepchildren. She'd seen the photos of Mario in Zone's exclusive, and she had to admit he looked better in real life.

"Yes, well Vido had a friend of ours, Mr Kostabi - are you familiar with his work?" Cynthia entertained Mario while Vido was busy in his study.

"Did he used to play guitar with the Mentals?"

"I'm not sure. Anyway, Vido had him do this painting for me. Do you like it?"

As an art critic, Mario made a good bricklayer. He made the only compliment he could have while still remaining honest.

"It's not... kitsch enough for my taste," said Mario, whose idea of good painting was purple metallic on a HQ Monaro. "This is a beautiful wine. Too many reds nowadays have too much fruit and too little tannin. Where's it from?"

"Capo Passero. It's this darling little village in South-eastern Sicily. Vido and I have friends there."

Just then, two great big red cedar doors spread open behind them. A pair of gold cuff-links appeared, leading a tuxedo-clad slick greying man into the room.

"I'm so sorry, darling." Mario couldn't help thinking how Vido reminded him so much of someone else, though he couldn't quite work out who. "Frank raved on for ages about Liz's wedding at Disneyland. I told him, I didn't think it was as good as her last one. And I really don't like this gold-digging character she's landed this time. But he said, as long as she's happy that's the main thing. And I couldn't agree more."

Vido passed an appreciative smile toward Mario.

"And this must be Mario. Any friend of my sweetheart's is a friend of mine. How you doin'?" he said with a firmly enthusiastic handshake.

"Oh, you know how it is, can't complain. No bastard listens to you anyway," he chuckled.

"Mario is the Australian man in Aggie's life. You know, the one I was telling you about last week."

"How could I forget, you made it sound so romantic. An Aussie, huh? I have some friends in Australia. Do you know the Romores ?"

"There aren't that many of them in Australia, as far as I know. I do know some of them but."

"Fredrico ?"

"From Murwillumbah?"

"Yes, that's the one."

"No, don't know him sorry," Mario said, though his line of work had brought him in contact with Fredrico Ramore more than once.

"Oh.. shame. Do you know anybody from there?"

"No. I live in Melbourne, which is a long way south of there."

"Well that is a shame. Murwillumbah is a very lovely town. Not far from The Gold Coast."

"I've never been to Murwillumbah, but I've been to The Gold Coast."

"I understand it's one of the most popular holiday destinations in all of the South Pacific."

"I'd like to think so."

This was nothing like any of those American mobster movies. Well the furniture was the same, but Mr and Mrs Satriani were very nice indeed.

"Listen, darling, will you go and talk to my princess? She's not eating again," Vido said with a frown.

"Not eating?" Mario was concerned, but he couldn't show it. "It always makes me wonder when they do that sort of thing. I used to think maybe they just did it for attention, but apparently there's more to it than that. I have a sixteen year old sister who's hooked on dieting. Too many magazines, I reckon. The thing is, she's got a gorgeous little figure, she doesn't need to starve herself."

"I'll go and find out if there's anything I can do for her. Excuse me for a moment Mario." Cynthia slipped through another huge doorway and into the distance.

"You seem very proud of your little sister," said Vido.

"Very."

"Well it's good to see a young man who takes pride in his family. Do you have any children yourself?"

Mario did his best to keep his emotions under control, but Vido suspected something from Mario's reaction.

"I don't know what it is but I seem to have unlocked bad memories for you. I'm sorry."

"No, it's all right. It's just that I've been away on business for nearly a month now and I just found out last week that my wife is pregnant with our first."

"Your first, huh? Why, that's cause for celebration. I do hope you get home soon."

"Me too."

"Well anyway, my princess' problem is a little different. She's not starving herself for any particular reason. It's just that she doesn't like the food we have here. She certainly doesn't like Italian food, but there's nothing else I can give her that's good enough either. I'm thinking of sending her back to her mother."

Mario thought he might have some leverage to get back on with the job. He was about to say something when Cynthia came back.

"We're out of 'Indian Breakfast' again," she said.

"Heavens above." Vido rolled his eyes. "Anything else my lady requires?"

"Pumpkin scones and plum jam. If you can't get any, muffins will suffice."

"Okay. I don't think Seven-Eleven stocks any of that shit but I'll try." Then he turned to Mario and asked, "Coming for a drive?"

"Sure."

Five minutes later Mario was sitting in the passenger seat of what he would later describe in his debriefing as "some sort of Ferrari - some sort of red one". He wasn't sure if they came in other colours.

"So what sort of business brings you to California, Mario?" Vido enquired.

"Well, I don't know how you'll take this, Mr Satriani, but I'm here to take Princess Anne back home."

"I thought you'd say that."

The Ferrari played harmony with the streets of Los Angeles for a few minutes. It was the only noise to be heard inside its cockpit. Vido was first to speak.

"Well, I mean, I didn't know you were going to say that, I just hoped that's what you were going to say."

Vido pulled into a carpark full of kids with half shaved heads and genuine problems. And each one had a cigarette.

"This is where I grew up. On the streets just like these little smart-asses. Now I've made it up on the hill. I haven't forgotten where I came from. It's still a lot like it used to be down here. But all the same, I'd prefer to be up on the hill."

A burly kid of about eighteen sat on the boot of an old Chev Camaro. Mario noticed it was painted a nice metallic purple. He heard the kid say something like "fucking fat pigs" as they walked past. Vido turned around and yelled,

"Hey, fuck off, Casteo, you little prick." The kid was stunned.

Vido continued as they walked inside.

"You see, some of these little shit-heads might make it up to the hill one day. Some of them will stay on the streets. Some of them won't be around to care. Some will die in somebody's war, either here or abroad. Kinda' says something about America, don't you think?"

"There's probably a lot more to America than that," Mario consoled him.

"I'm glad you noticed." He continued walking, but stopped talking for a while. He was deep in thought.

"You can have the princess. I never was into kidnapping. It wasn't my idea, anyway. I had some business associates in Bangkok. Well, they couldn't look after her, so I told them I'd take her off their hands, do them a favour - all in the name of good business relations. For a reasonable share of the ransom, of course."

They were doing laps of the aisles, searching the shelves.

"Well, they've closed their Hong Kong office now and they've blamed us for its poor performance. So there's no need for diplomacy any more. And frankly, I can live without the stress."

"Well thank you Mr Satriani. You've made my job a lot easier I can tell you. Is there anything I can do in return?"

"There is a couple of things. You can call me Vido for starters. And you can explain to me why it is a family man like yourself is hangin' around with dames like Aggie Gleisshwester. But first of all - don't you have Indian Breakfast tea and scones down there? Surely you know what they look like."

* * * *

They rounded a bend on Tustin Ranch, after settling for jelly donuts and "Mr Wong's 100% Genuine Chinese Tea", to find the FBI, DEA, County and State Police on one side, exchanging a few shots with a handful of Satriani's crew on the other. Vido pulled over some distance before the police siege.

"Shit, I told them I didn't want them near the place, honest Vido. I never wanted any of this."

"It's okay Mario, I believe you. I thought it would only be a matter of time, anyway. My nephew, Gino was arrested in Hawaii yesterday. I knew they were after me.

"You see, this is the kidnap of a foreign dignitary, but worse, Middle America and those who run the joint think British royalty is just dandy nowadays. You can see it on TV. How ironic," he said, as though thinking aloud, "British royalty holds a special place in the hearts of those who apparently worship the American constitution. But in truth peace and liberty, those central ideals have given way to a 'star system' which advances the domination - the worship of a powerful few through deceit. Some of us realise that peace and liberty for some continues to this day to come at

the expense of others. The promise of prosperity binds them to the cause but almost exclusively they will not achieve it, it's a promise kept for very few.

"Get out of the car and run now Mario. Go home to your family. There is your prosperity, your liberty, and your peace."

"And what are you going to do?"

"That is my home up the road there."

"You can't go in there, you'll get killed."

"My wife is in there. And two of my nephews. I just thank sweet Jesus my children are away."

Mario frowned. This was all so foreign to him.

"Don't worry, Mario, in case you hadn't noticed, I might be a man of prosperity but I'm not a man of peace. How could I be? I'm not afraid to die. I turned sixty last month. Get out. NOW!"

Mario didn't need any more coaxing. He'd be bugged if he was going to stay in a car headed into that mess. He watched as Vido sped down the road, crashed through his front gate, and disappeared behind his hedges.

His first reaction was to run down and tell them to all stop fighting. Two helicopters flew overhead. Mario had about a hundred metres to go to reach the closest squad car when the bombardment started. He stopped in his tracks and watched again as gunfire flashed from several corners in the darkness and smoke started to waft over from behind the Satriani wall.

"What's all this about?" Mario heard a familiar voice from his left.

"Bill, you're alright."

"Yeah. I'd just clocked off and I was walking up the road when all these cops started driving by me. Thought I'd hang around to see what was going down. I saw Mr Satriani drop you up the road there."

Mario plonked himself down in the gutter beside Bill.

"My princess is in there."

"Way I see it, there's gonna be very few people in there soon. I got some friends in there too."

"These FBI probably expect me to join them but I don't even have a gun." Mario explained.

"Maybe I should be in there beside my friends, but I didn't dodge Vietnam to get my ass licked in this sort of thing."

"I can't watch any more of this."

They turned their backs and walked up the road, glancing back now and then at the noise.

Bill took Mario to a bar in the city where he knew nobody would recognise him, where they could drown in their sorrows. It was close to Mario's hotel. Two hours later they were sloshed.

"But no, honestly, Bill, Princess Fran was in there."

Bill laughed at this one until it made his eyes water.

"I can't believe how serious your face is." He burst into laughter again. "I mean you really look upset about it. Anyone would think she really was in there."

"I know it's hard to believe.."

Bill dropped half his drink in his lap as he convulsed with laughter again. Mario was amused, but underneath he was filled with dread.

"Anyway, I've got to get back to my hotel now. I've got to get up early and write a report on this whole affair."

Bill laughed again and told Mario to give him a call next time he was in town.

Mario walked the streets alone for hours. Maybe because he wanted some time to reflect on what had probably been the worst month of his life, but more likely he had no idea where he was.

Another Digger Returns

The plane trip home was very long. All those hours and not a wink of sleep. There was way too much on his mind. What could he say to Jess? What could he say to Rog'? All the things that had happened had him wondering - what's next? He was just waiting for the next blow.

The Chrysler was standing just as he'd left it - door ajar, keys in the ignition. The one constant thing in a world of trouble. "What a remarkable piece of engineering," he told himself as he fired it up. It did make him feel better, but only temporarily.

The drive home was long and lonely as well. Mario was exhausted. He cruised the streets of Melbourne very slowly that morning.

A week of mail was jammed in the mailbox and another week's worth inside. Jesse had left a letter on the fridge door. He read it again and again as he paced around the house.

*Hope she's a good lover babe,
it's over between me and you.
Jessica*

Mario couldn't believe it. He'd done nothing wrong. All along his intentions had been noble and his aspirations humble. He'd fought for a better world for his family to live in, yet forces beyond his control had turned his world upside-down. He pulled a beer out of the fridge and sat. Maybe he should call her?

With the phone in one hand and the beer in the other he dialled. He heard BANG THUMP behind him as someone came through the door. Coming face to face they halted.

"Hello Jess."

Silence.

"So you're back are you?"

"I didn't save the princess."

"So I heard."

"Oh great, it's on the news, now everyone knows." he moaned, as though he'd been betrayed.

Silence again.

"I want you back too" Mario continued. "I want you to come back to mama and papas with me."

"Are you serious?" She started to smile then did her best to hide it. Mario didn't notice, his head hung in shame.

"It's okay, I understand if you don't want to. I didn't sleep with the countess, but..." It was his turn to feel sorry for himself now.

"Oh.. there there pet," said Jessie. "It's all right, they've got plenty of other princesses where that one came from. It's no big deal." A tear slid down Mario's cheek. "Who knows, maybe you'll get a chance to save another one some day."

"No, I'm not interested anymore. I just want to go back home with my family and make some nice wine. Will you come with me?"

There was a great pause as Jessie milked Mario's vulnerability for all it was worth. Then, bringing an end to her feigned hesitation she said "OK baby, let's go back to the farm," and threw her arms wide around him.

Highlights from the Following Few Weeks

"Mrs Capelli, this is my mama. I told her all about the spaghetti you made for me and she didn't believe anything could taste so divine."

"Papa, this is my friend Mr Capelli. He's just moved here from Sicily and believe me, I have tasted some of the wine he makes and it is wonderful."

"Hey Jess, you didn't notice where Tony went did you?"

"He took some Italian girl for a drive in that horrible noisy car of his."

"I got you this T-shirt when I was overseas, Tania. Hope it fits."

"Thanks Mario, it's interesting. I didn't know Disneyland was in China."