

The "Martin Scorsese" Syndrome

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When I was in high school, I felt like the only Italian kid who didn't act like a character from a Scorsese movie.

High school lunches are not renowned for their quality, and high school students are famous for making fun of them. I take food very seriously, so when I ate school lunches, and detested them,



I did not have the heart to complain in a funny manner. However, I did like to laugh at how my friends skewered the food. The jokes weren't particularly subtle, but I thought it was funny when people like Griffin and Smiley would dub the plastic cups of apple juice "urine samples" and the obviously canned lumps of strawberry preserves on toast "jelly ca-cas." So we laughed off our disgust with the mass-produced, processed food.

And then there was the weird pastry with the blue icing that appeared out of nowhere one day.

"What's with the blue icing on this desert?" Griffin asked. "I'm sorry, but I don't eat any blue food, unless it is a berry."

"Don't worry," Griffin said calmly. "I've seen it before. Your mom put that blue icing on my penis last night."

Normally, my sympathies were more with Griffin than Smiley, but I couldn't help but laugh loudly at that one. I wasn't yet used to Smiley's outrageous humor, and it had not yet become tiresome. At the time, I was friends mostly with the Irish, German, and Jewish kids in the school, and the Italian-American students, who I had ethnicity in common with, but little else, sat a few tables away. My estrangement from members of my own cultural background was rooted in a variety of causes, all understandable, but the fact that the situation was understandable did not prevent it from giving me a small, but constant feeling of existential angst and regret. My occasional, half-baked attempts to reconcile myself to the Italian-American community of Susan E. Wagner High School generally did not go well, and on this particular occasion, things went particularly poorly.

It was during one infamous lunch period that one of the Italian guys, Salvatore Russo, was walking back to his table with a tray of food, staring down at the pastry desert as he walked. It looked pretty good, except for the fact that the icing was blue. He called over to his friend Rocco, who was already seated. "Hey, Rocco! What's with this pastry, man?"

"It's good, Sal. Just what a growin' boy needs."

"But what's that shit they put on it?"

Overhearing him yell this out, in his angry tone, and thick Brooklyn accent, I couldn't help but laugh. Unfortunately, Sal heard me laugh at him. He literally slammed his tray down on the breakfast table and stalked over to my side. "What's so funny? What, do I amuse you, or something? Does something about me amuse you?"

"Sorry, man," I said. "I hate the look of the blue shit, too. So I'm laughing in agreement."

"Oh, you're laughing in agreement?" Sal asked. "Is that it?"

He kept glaring at me.



"What?"

"What, what?"

"I'm asking you if you're laughing at me, huh?"

"You were just funny, just then, that's all," I offered, feebly.

"You mean, let me understand this cause, ya know maybe it's me, I'm a little fucked up maybe, but I'm funny how, I mean funny like I'm a clown, I amuse you? I make you laugh, I'm here to fuckin' amuse you? What do you mean funny, funny how? How am I funny?"

"I don't know, man!" I yelled back. "You were just funny just now, man!"

"Whaddaya mean by that?"

"You know what I mean."

"No, no, I don't know, you said it. How do I know? You said I'm funny. How the fuck am I funny, what the fuck is so funny about me? Tell me, tell me what's funny!"

I was very afraid for a long moment. Then I said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute!"

"What?"

"Are you quoting Goodfellas to me?"

Sal stepped back. "What?"

My friends around me, who had been shrinking in their seats up until this point, not wanting to get involved or cause a rumble between the multiethnic table and the Italian table, suddenly sat upright in their seats.

"He is quoting Goodfellas!" David Litvinov laughed. "He is!"

Sal looked more confused than caught out, as if he had unintentionally quoted the scene verbatim. "I'm not quoting nobody," he insisted.

"You're quoting Joe Pesci," I said. "Are we playing a scene here?"

"No, I'm serious, man. I'm mad at you," Sal insisted.

"I tell you what," I said, "if you want to frighten me and threaten me, go back and write your



own speech. Don't bite off Martin Scorsese."

"I'm not biting off nobody."

"Dude," I said, "go write your own dialogue, then we'll throw down, alright?"

I was cocky there, but my friends were there laughing with me, so I was safe. He sat back down and said nothing of it to his friends, not even to explain to them why we laughed off his threats. They hadn't heard the exchange, so they didn't know how much like an idiot Sal had made himself look.

Of course, Sal was not the only tough who got most of his "dialogue" from Scorsese movies. I doubt things have changed much since, but during my teenage years, in the 1990s, gangster movies were like a religion to Staten Island Italians. Scorsese may have tapped into a really accurate portrayal of what Italians had been like during the 1960s and 1970s, but the modern-day, middle-class Italians had lost their edge and strove to regain the toughness of their parents and grandparents by doing impersonations of characters from gangster films. It was really annoying. Some of them were still tough, some were still blue collar, but it was often hard to tell where their real personalities ended and the characters from *The Godfather* and *Saturday Night Fever* began.

Effectively, of all the thousands of movies produced during one hundred years of American cinema, only three counted as must-see viewing on Staten Island – *The Godfather*, *Goodfellas*, and *Saturday Night Fever*. And they were not only must-see films, but also a way of life to virtually all the Italian kids I knew growing up. I wasn't fully aware of the phenomenon until I reached junior high school, when the cult of the gritty celluloid Italian was at its most grotesquely obvious. It seemed that everywhere I turned in Intermediate School 72, local Italian boys were dressing, talking, and behaving like the characters played by Al Pacino, Joe Pesci, Robert De Niro, Ray Liotta, and John Travolta. I had somehow managed to reach my early teens without ever actually seeing any of these films in their entirety. From the glimpses I did catch of the movies, they seemed tedious, depressing, and pretentious. My mother had watched *Saturday Night Fever* several times when I was growing up, primarily for shots of "the old neighborhood" and the great dance segments, often complaining about how Italians were portrayed in the movie. She really hated the spaghetti dinner scene, in which the father figure curses constantly and keeps slapping his son, Travolta's character, in the back of the head. The scene famously offended the Mormon Osmond family with its blue language, but it offended my mother for far different reasons.

"My parents didn't curse like this," she declared each time she had to sit through the spaghetti segment when it was being broadcast on Channel 11. "And we never sat half-naked at the dinner table smacking each other with wooden spoons. This is ridiculous. There's no love in this movie. Italian families love each other."

But the kids who went to school with me had no such objections. They thought that all three films were very accurate portrayals of Italian life. In fact, the kids had collectively decided to use the movies as a standard against which they measured how Italian they were. If you didn't dress like



Travolta, curse like Pesci, and raise hell like Pacino, then you weren't really Italian. This caused me great consternation, since I was about as far from the movie stereotype Italian as one could get. I possessed none of Travolta's cool fashion sense, had been trained since I was an infant never to curse, and was far more concerned with getting good grades, reading comic books, and getting Melissa Venturoso out on a date than I was interested in raising hell like Pacino.

Also many of the young boys at school liked to walk around claiming that their dad or their uncle or their cousin "Benny" (Benito) was in the Mafia. They made it sound like a noble profession, keeping alive the Great Lie that all real-life gangsters were like Don Corleone, gentlemen of the old school who existed only to protect the Italian people from persecution. If you believed these kids, who clearly didn't know what they were talking about, nobody in the Mafia dealt drugs. Gambling, prostitution, yes. That was a service to the community, as these things should be legal anyway. But no drugs. And if they did deal drugs, it was only to other minorities who weren't Italian, so that made it kinda okay. They said.

Now, nobody in my family or among my friends was in the Mafia, so I was again at a disadvantage. So I found that I had two choices. Either I accepted the verdict of my peers that I wasn't really Italian because I wasn't on a first-name basis with Santo Trafficante, or decide for myself that mob ties and a love of Martin Scorsese films does not an Italian make. I chose the latter, deciding to forget about what everyone else was doing and be myself.

To be fair to these wannabe gangster youths, I also enjoyed dressing and talking like my personal heroes, just as they did. It was only the heroes who they emulated that I took issue with – that and the lack of any variety or creativity in their choices of heroes. Instead of gangsters, I latched onto the heroism of the Doctor, the alien hero from the British science fiction series Doctor Who, and the cuddly, ubiquitous Spider-Man, who I knew from comic books, repeats of the 1967 cartoon, the series Spider-Man and his Amazing Friends, and episodes of The Electric Company. I actually went to great lengths to figure out and emulate how the characters of Spider-Man and the Doctor would react to a given situation. I also took to wearing a raincoat, like Lieutenant Columbo, the only Italian role model I could find on television who I actually liked (although my raincoat was never quite so crumpled). Years later, the actor David Tennant would don a sort of raincoat in his portrayal of the Doctor, making the raincoat still more of an iconic piece of clothing for me to adopt. And my thick, unmanageable hair would sometimes stick up like David Tennant's Doctor, which made the resemblance even stronger. To hell with Champion shirts and high-top Reebok sneakers, the raincoat was the perfect trademark for Marc DiPaolo.

But since I didn't talk the talk or walk the walk, a number of my young Italian comrades actually didn't realize that I had Italian blood. Since no real Italian would wear glasses or be caught



dead reading novels on the bus ride to school, they mistook my Roman nose for a Hebrew nose and assumed I was Jewish, which meant that a lot of anti-Semitism was thrown my way.

"Why are you always readin' all the time?" Salvatore Russo asked me one day, on the yellow school bus on the way to junior high school. This was a few years before the blue icing incident.) Russo tried and failed to pry the paperback copy of *Jaws* out of my hands. Russo was always surrounded by a posse of about ten monosyllabic thugs who all dressed in sweat pants and had spiked hair.

"I like the movie a lot," I said.

"Then watch the movie," Russo exclaimed.

"The book's different," I said, not elaborating.

"But reading ain't fun."

"It's about a shark that eats people," I said. "Books don't get much more fun than that."

Russo was beyond confused. "But you're reading. It ain't fun."

"It's about a shark that eats people!" I yelled, the slumbering Brooklyn accent returned quickly to my voice with full force as I got angrier. "Besides, the book has cool sex scenes that aren't in the movie. I was just reading about Brody's wife fantasizing about having sex with Hooper in the car while they were driving to a cheap motel. It's a damn good sex scene, man, and you're ruining the buzz I'm getting off it, so give me the book back and get outta my face!"

Sal was unmoved by my description of the sex scene. "Well, I just think its just like a Jew to sit reading on the front of the bus dressed in dorky Jew clothes instead of hanging out in the back of the bus with the cool Italians," Russo said stiffly.

"Huh?"

"I said you're a stinkin' Jew bastard, DiPaolo. How about that, you fuckin' Jew bastard?"

Russo was clearly not someone who would benefit from a lecture on the evils of anti-Semitism, so I decided to respond instead by correcting their erroneous assumption.

"I'm Italian, jackass."

"No way," the Russo gentleman insisted. "You can't be."

"My name's DiPaolo."



Russo looked confused. "So?"

"It's an Italian name. It ends in a vowel, and it ain't Shapiro." By then, I had trained myself to use slang words like "ain't" to blend in with the natives, but it didn't get me far.

Salvatore Russo blinked. "What's vowels got to do with it?"

"Italian names always end in vowels."

"So you ain't Jewish?"

"No! Not that there's anything wrong with that."

Sal was interested, despite himself. "So what parta Italy you from?"

"My mom's family is from Salerno and Naples. We haven't checked my dad's family genealogy yet."

Salvatore looked triumphant. "So you ain't from Sicily, then?" He clearly saw Sicilians as superior to mainland Italians.

I shrugged. "Well, you know what they say. There's two kinds of Italians. Italians and Sicilians."

"Yeah? Well, fuck that. You don't know what the fuck you're talkin' about. Fuckin' Italian or no fuckin' Italian, I'm gonna fuck you up all over this fuckin' bus, you fuckin' fuck."

My eyes widened. "Try saying that five times fast." I looked at the thug standing next to Salvatore. "Does he know any other words, or just the one?"

"What the fuck is he talking about?" thug number one said.

"Fuck me," Salvatore said.

"That's what your aunt said last night while I was giving it to her doggy style," I said, not knowing whether or not Russo had an aunt with honor to insult, but he obviously did, and he must have been really attached to her, because he got right up in my face about it.

"Don't you talk about my aunt!"

I tried to remain blasé as I added, "I'm not talking about your aunt. I got no complaints. She's a great lay. As opposed to your mother, who's kinda like fucking a dead rhino."



Since Salvatore Russo was told he shouldn't hit a man wearing glasses, he knocked the glasses off my head, so that I was, functionally, blind as a bat and unable to defend myself. Satisfied that it was now okay to hit me, since I wasn't wearing glasses any more, and it was now a fair fight, Sal hauled off and punched me in the face.

The fight which ensued lasted 89 seconds.

I lost.

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