

The Boss of Bosses

by John Riley

The one thing my father told me that I want to believe is true is that when he served his time at the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary he had the honor of being housed in a cell block with Don Vito Genovese, the mafia kingpin who ran the Greenwich Village Crew when he was a young man and rose to become the boss of New York City. While in prison Genovese put a contract out on Joe Valachi, who he suspected of being a snitch, and Valachi turned to the FBI for help. He spilled his guts to the feds and later testified before Arkansas Senator John L. McClellan's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations. Valachi's testimony was the first public acknowledgment by an active member that the Mafia existed. The entire Valachi episode was later made into a book written by the hard drinking New York based writer Peter Maas and then became a major Hollywood movie. The role of Genovese was played by the beloved French actor Lino Ventura. My father's bourbon and water tinted jaw would clench and his yellow eyes would shuffle toward the corner of the room when he told me what it was like to see the old gangster sitting alone in a six by eight cell stacked full of cigarettes and all sorts of contraband, and how when he put on his black suit to go to trial—much of the Don's time was spent with lawyers—he looked like a new widower on his way to his wife's funeral. There was pride in his walk, my father said, and on Sundays he always had more visitors than he was allowed to see. I know that Genovese finally ran out of appeals and died in prison in 1969; I don't know if my father told the truth about serving time with him. His word was no man's bond. A forgerer, lying was more than second nature. It was an essential part of the job.

