

Getting It Wrong

by vic fortezza

As Gino exited the supermarket, plastics bags in tow, he began doing curls with his right arm. He'd been doing this for years, reasoning that he might as well get some exercise during the walk home. Earlier, he'd worked his triceps with a dumbbell and done stretching and his daily routine for his back, which had eliminated the pain by 95%. On the way to the store, he'd done some deep breathing, which helped keep his blood pressure in check. Now he was suddenly battling high cholesterol, which his doctor had given him three months to lower, or face medication. He was back on the spartan diet he'd practiced the 15 years prior to 9/11. While many of his friends and ex-co-workers ate or drank to excess or smoked or did drugs, he was of the mind that taking ibuprofen two days in a row was evidence of not living right.

On a day in the winter of his 35th year, he'd stepped on a scale and discovered he was 202 pounds. By summer he was 180 and continued to remain in that vicinity. He'd drank nothing but seltzer or skim milk for many years. He went from three slices of pizza to two at a sitting, and refused the chocolate cupcakes his mother had always given him, to her chagrin. It hadn't been as difficult as he'd expected — until the Towers fell.

As he was about to cross the street, two policemen stepped from a car parked on the opposite side at the foot of the lot of a pet store chain, which Gino used as a short cut. He noted that the number of the vehicle was the same as the one that had been before his building a half hour ago. Were he given to paranoia, he would have suspected he was being followed.

He recalled the petty theft he'd witnessed recently. He'd given the license plate number of the getaway car to the owner of the shop, which sold cell phones. Unfortunately, the vehicle was unregistered. Gino appreciated that the owner did not point him out to the police. His description would have been vague: two tall, thin Afro-Americans in the early 20's, one in a red hoodie, the other in a black

one. He wouldn't have been able to pick them out of a lineup in a million years. He was amazed they'd taken such a risk for so little gain. He assumed the knuckleheads had been apprehended. Perhaps it'd been an out of state plate that required time to track.

"Gino Conti?" said one of the officers.

Damn, he thought, wondering where the investigation would lead, if he would face the harassment of reprobates. "What's up, boys?"

"Would you mind comin' down to the station-house to answer some questions?"

He tried levity in an effort to appear casual. "I'd rather go home and try to make some money on the internet." Was that what this was about? he wondered. Was the unemployment office cracking down on the \$50 a month he earned doing online surveys, or perhaps the occasional copy of his novel, at \$10, he sold.

"Please cooperate."

He knew better than to cross the authorities, even if he were in the right. "Sure." He tried to look on the bright side: it would be a new experience and would fill time. He was relieved there was no one around on this bitterly cold January mid-morning. He was hesitant to thank the officers for not having approached him in front of his building. He feared it would be misinterpreted as guilt or arrogance. Of what was he guilty other than not having lived his life right, however? He couldn't be arrested for that, although he wasn't sure he shouldn't be.

He sat quietly during the short drive, feeling silly with the grocery bags in tow. Fortunately, he hadn't purchased perishables.

He was led to an interrogation room and told to take a seat. He was not that nervous. He'd been suffering a sense of resignation since having lost his job two months ago. He was certain he would never marry, never have kids, never enjoy real literary success, never have the means for a comfortable retirement, never see the end of the war on terror, never be truly happy. He didn't have much to lose, and he blamed no one but himself. He kept busy to ward off bitterness and cynicism. He was civil to his neighbors, pleasant to friends, family and customers, and hoped he would remain so till the

day he died. He did not want to be an old fool or a crab.

A man poked his head into the room. "Sit tight. We're waitin' on the Feds. They should be here any minute."

Feds? Then it was serious. But what was it? Had there been more than the one rape he'd heard about in the complex long ago? Was the Russian mob doing things right under his nose? Had another gang of home-invasion thieves moved into the co-op?

His gut contracted at the thought that he'd been accused of something even more heinous than rape. That would be a death sentence, even if one were innocent. He was always cautious. He wouldn't get on an elevator alone with children. When they came by on Halloween or to sell candy, he kept his door wide open. Other than the fact that he was far removed from his 30's, he knew he fit the "profile" frequently cited on crime shows, and sensed that his neighbors were wary of him.

Suddenly his eyes were forced shut by a troubling recollection. When he first started exploring the web, the porn sites he visited would trap him in a hyperlink, opening page after page, making it impossible to escape without pulling the plug on the machine. Later, he would spot certain sites amongst his Favorites, somehow added by the ruthless purveyors who were out to get, he imagined, those who would not pay to view smut. One featured violence, another the most vile, criminal behavior. Given that, he should have never visited another porn site. Perhaps he should be arrested for having been so weak. Yet surely they knew he was down to one visit per week and that he viewed only standard fare, if there were such a thing. It was all he could take these days. He was aghast that so many beautiful women, including so-called amateurs, had adopted such a lifestyle, lucrative though it probably was. Some men shared a wife with others. He would rather put a bullet through his head than do that. Then there was that small part of him that wondered if the participants were right to take such pleasures, and that he was simply envious, as he was of the lovers in books and film. Of course, such a lifestyle, at 57, was beyond him, at least without Viagra, and it would be absurd, pathetic, cheating, to pursue such behavior

artificially, especially at such an age. These days it was “one and done.”

Gino was shaken from his thoughts by the entrance of a balding middle aged man, who was followed by a younger who seemed cast of steel. He was reminded of every cop drama he'd ever seen. Although he remained calm outwardly, he was certain his blood pressure was rising. The older man sat directly opposite him and opened a folder whose contents were thin. The other stood almost at attention at the door.

“Mr. Conti, I'm Agent Murphy. That's agent Troy. As members of the Department of Homeland Security, we have to investigate every lead that comes our way.”

Gino sat frozen, stunned. He did not know what to say.

“Someone gave your name to this precinct.”

Gino stared into the cold blue eyes, puzzled. “I'm suspected of terrorism?”

Agent Murphy did not reply.

“But this can so easily be refuted. Just google my name. My history's on the net for anyone to see.”

“We have run a search on you.”

“Then what's the....” He paused, beside himself. “You think someone's assumed my identity — that I'm not me?”

“As I said, we have to check every lead.”

“Especially since I happen to look just like those bastards.” He regretted not having shaved. He wondered if God were punishing him for hoping interrogators would continue to use water-boarding to pry information from suspects. He doubted he would have to undergo it himself, but he wasn't 100% sure. “What can I do?”

“The quickest way is to let us contact your family.”

“Where were you yesterday when I drove them all to Jersey for my great-nephew's twelfth birthday? I got him a football and taught him how to do a button-hook and a square-out.” He regretted his tone and looked away. “I suppose a committed terrorist would assimilate like the Nazi's did at the Battle of the Bulge.”

“Let us call your parents.”

"If you've visited my website, you know they're gone."

Agent Murphy cracked a smile. Vito was not amused. He found the situation humiliating. He was of the minority who supported torture, wire-tapping and the action in Iraq. He would not say these things aloud for fear of sounding desperate and insincere. Another thing he deserved to be arrested for was freeloading, not having served in some capacity overseas in time of war.

"I don't want you callin' my sister. She's twenty years older than me and she has emphysema. And she's been through a lot lately with one of my nieces, who's been involved with a married loser since college and is in hock to the IRS and who tapped into one of our joint accounts to pay a bill."

He had not understood how Rita, who was a CPA, had a good job and lived at home, had always been in financial straits. He'd had no idea she had a lover, having assumed she shared the same gene of aloneness as he. He'd felt sorry for her. It was now clear why she'd never brought a man to family dinners. She paid her own airfare and hotel expenses at every rendezvous. Gino would not condemn her, as he knew what love could do to a person. He'd once quit a job to be free of a woman who had not returned his affection. It did no good. He loved her from afar for ten more years. Although he no longer loved her, she was as large a part of his past as if they'd consummated the relationship. Given how low that failure had laid him, he was worried that Rita, who was high-strung, would lose perspective completely and do something much more foolish than anything that involved money.

He repositioned himself in his seat to relieve pressure on his back. "How 'bout callin' my ex-employer? I was there almost 25 years. You can call my high school football coach too. He's in Florida."

"Why d'you suppose someone would accuse you?"

He shrugged. "To get my apartment? That's the only thing I can think of. It's almost always about money. Even though it's only a studio, I suppose that's incentive enough for some."

"Do you have any enemies?"

He shook his head. His eyes then brightened with realization.

“Nah, I can't believe he'd go this far. There's a skinhead type kid on the other side of the building. For some reason I seem to rankle him. Maybe he doesn't like my face. My guess is he thinks I'm gay.”

“Why would he think that?”

“It's one of the annoying aspects of our age: ‘This guy's always alone; he must be gay.’ He broke a few windows in my old car, at least I'd bet it was him. The other day when we had that dusting there were slurs scrawled on my windows. At least he's graduated from vandalism, which was a real pain.”

“Have you confronted him?”

“I've never said a word to him. I avoid confrontation, which I'm not sure is a good thing. I tell myself it's better to let him stew in his own ignorance, but maybe I'm just afraid of getting' my butt kicked.”

“You look like you can handle yourself.”

“He is thirty years younger than me, and I haven't had a fight since adolescence. I might fall on my face tryin' to throw a punch. The only violence I do these days is to a golf ball.”

Agent Troy covered his mouth.

“What's his name?”

“I don't know and I don't care to. Besides, I really don't know if it was him. It's just instinct, and my instincts haven't always been right.” Especially with women, he thought. “I wouldn't want to accuse anyone without hard evidence. Maybe he's just a jerk.”

Agent Murphy glanced at the contents of the folder. “You do some writing.”

Surely if they'd read any of it they would know he wasn't a threat, although his novel and some of his short stories might corroborate the so-called “profile.”

“Guilty.”

“How would you characterize it?”

“Just like my golf game — ordinary with a few good moments.”

Agent Troy chuckled. Murphy smirked, apparently irked at his partner's breach of professionalism.

“I mean politically.”

“Neutral to a right bias.” Gino wondered if the possibility of his

being a home-grown terrorist had been raised. He repressed the rage aroused by the thought of being linked with Timothy McVeigh. He knew he had best cooperate to end the farce as quickly as possible. The sad part was that while the agents were pursuing this wild goose chase real bad guys might slip through the cracks. Fortunately, he had nowhere to go. It was too cold for to hit the links or to sell books.

Yeah, you got it tough, he thought ironically, recalling the plight of his golfing buddy of 20 years. In a span of six months Billy had lost his job of 30 years, had nearly lost a younger sister to a massive heart attack, and lost his older brother, who had survived a heart attack years ago, to a freak fall on the front steps of the house they shared. Life had a bizarre brutality that sometimes rocked even great people. His eyes glazed, saddened by the thought of what such grief had done to a perpetually sunny, indomitable disposition. Bill's poor mother had buried two sons, the eldest having succumbed to a heart attack a decade ago.

"You've had a lot of stories published."

Gino shrugged. "I've been lucky. It's no big deal. If they were any good I'd've been nominated for a minor award or made honorable mention in contests. There're a million small press 'zines out there, and ezines. I would've been better off learnin' how to make a lotta money."

"I tell myself the same thing every day."

Gino raised an eyebrow in surprise. "No. We need guys like you. You make a difference." He hoped it hadn't sounded like brown-nosing. "I go around in a sort of pseudo life, convinced I've done it all wrong." He noted the wedding bands. No doubt these men were fathers.

"This guy's clean," said Agent Troy. "We're wastin' time."

Again the light of realization came to Gino's eyes. "Wait a minute. We can wrap this up in a flash. Find out if Tommy Urso still works this precinct. We went to elementary school together — Saint Mary's, and high school, Lafayette. I ran into him about ten years ago and he told me he was assigned here. I can't believe I forgot it.

People are always amazed by my memory. I hope he hasn't retired. I hear city cops can split after 20 years and collect half pay immediately."

He again had to stick a cork in his anger. If it were up to him, no one would see a dime of pension until age 65. It was criminal to stick taxpayers with such a bill. He'd recently run into an old friend who was making \$100,000 a year as a teacher. He'd never known one worth half that much. He told himself he must be defective mentally to have eschewed the public sector gravy train. Perhaps he should be arrested for that.

"I'll check it out," said Agent Troy, hurrying from the room.

Agent Murphy looked Gino in the eye. "I liked the story about the young soldier in Iraq. What was it called?"

Gino smiled, impressed by Murphy's thoroughness in testing a suspect. "Home."

The agent nodded. "Right, right."

"Feel free to quiz me on all thirty-two and the articles, though it wouldn't prove a thing. Any terrorist is committed enough for memorization."

"You're too cool about all this."

He recalled how easily he'd memorized the plate number of the getaway car. Nothing seemed to be of great consequence any more. It was as if his life were already over. "I've done a lot wrong in my life, but this is way off base."

"We've only found parking tickets and an illegal left."

Gino coiled, miffed at the injustices city drivers faced. Not one of the violations had been deliberate. "And that makes you suspicious?"

Murphy did not reply.

"I suppose it's good cover to keep out of trouble."

The door burst open. Agent Troy was trailed by a stocky man in a lieutenant's uniform. Gino smiled at the cherubic face. The once lush, sandy, curly hair was now thin.

"Gino, Gino Con...." Tommy's memory searched for the name.

"Close enough," said Agent Troy. "Let's get atta here, Steve."

Agent Murphy rose. "Sorry for the inconvenience."

"I suppose I should be happy somebody's still takin' all this seriously. It's comin' up on seven years since nine-eleven. A lot of people are complacent again. Beside, it's not a total loss. You guys've given me somethin' to write about, in a fictional context, of course."

The others laughed.

"I was All-Conference in football and track," said Agent Troy, straightening his tie.

Now everyone laughed.

Gino visited with Tom for a while. They chuckled as they recalled the nuns who'd thrashed and humiliated them, the priests who'd intimidated them, the antics of the zaniest students. Gino was glad Tom didn't share the bitterness several of their Catholic school classmates felt toward the church. Anyone who hadn't recovered had only himself to blame. The staff had only been trying to do good.

He mentioned Ann Amato, whom he hadn't seen in more than 40 years. Tom's eyes spread with surprise at the name, his first girlfriend, who'd attended a Catholic high school. He'd married someone else. Unfortunately, he was divorced, as were so many cops. Gino was certain the stress was considerable.

Tom urged him to contact the precinct if there were any more harassment. Gino thanked him. He didn't anticipate trouble. He'd lived in the building almost 20 years and had never had a problem with anyone but the skinhead, and that had involved but a few fleeting encounters.

He was surprised someone so mild-mannered had become a policeman and climbed so high. He would have expected Tom to have followed his dad into trucking. No doubt a lieutenant commanded a six-figure salary. Gino was only mildly envious, as Tom, another of the good guys, deserved success. Despite a divorce, he'd done life right. He had children. Gino hurried home to his computer.

