

Dr. Scholnick and the Beauty Queen

G

Gregory Scarpa Jr. made his bones in a highly personal and familial manner: by executing the jealous lover of his father's mistress. The twisted road that led to this killing had begun with an affair between Greg Scarpa Sr. and a former beauty queen from Israel named Lili Dajani.

Lili was a partner with Dr. Eliezer Scholnick, the beleaguered owner of a New York abortion clinic who had lost his medical license in 1976 for incompetence. Lili had worked as a nurse receptionist at the clinic before and after Dr. Scholnick lost his license. She and Scholnick had become lovers, a development that later contributed to a messy divorce and necessitated Scholnick placing the clinic in Lili's name—even as he remained its "administrator."

Profits from the clinic had left Lili financially secure. She owned a home in California, a condo in Las Vegas, and an apartment on Manhattan's Sutton Place. She traveled around Manhattan by chauffeured limousine and was rarely seen in public without sporting a treasure trove of jewels.

Scarpa fell hard for Lili Dajani, in part because she was so different from Linda. Lili was not only beautiful, but exotic and rich, as well. Scarpa didn't have to take care of Lili, to throw money at her. She had resources of her own.

A three-week trip to Vegas, ostensibly to conduct mob business, evolved into a yearlong affair between Scarpa and DeJani, during

which the couple married. This, of course, left Scarpa with the equivalent of three wives: Connie, Linda, and Lili (of which only Connie was the legal wife). When he finally returned to New York, he alternated among three homes. Remarkably, while they might have been agitated by this arrangement, not one of Scarpa's wives tossed him out. As always, they tolerated his wandering, philandering, and criminal ways, figuring, perhaps, that a piece of Greg Scarpa was better than none at all.

Among those less sanguine about Scarpa's prodigious appetite for womanizing was the unfortunate Dr. Scholnick, who, unable to shake his infatuation with Lili, foolishly sought revenge against Scarpa. To facilitate his fantasy, Scholnick solicited the aid of an old friend who happened to be a made man in the Genovese crime family. Scholnick asked his mobster pal to intervene on his behalf, to convince Scarpa that the clinic was owned by the Genovese family; by extension, of course, this would have meant that Dr. Scholnick and Lili Dajani were, in essence, Genovese "property," and thus off-limits to members of the Colombo family.

There was just one problem: None of this was true. It was a complete fabrication, and no one would believe it. The mobster sympathized with the doctor, but there was nothing he could do. "Best leave it alone," he told his friend. "Get on with your life."

Sadly, the good doctor was not so easily dissuaded. Lovesick, brokenhearted, and gripped by a sort of madness, he made what could generously be termed a "tactical error." Vowing to take matters into his own delicate hands, Scholnick told his pal he was going to the FBI. Through Lili he had learned intimate details of Scarpa's illegal activities; surely this would interest the feds, Scholnick reasoned. (If necessary, he'd even testify in open court.) They'd swoop down on Scarpa, toss him in prison, and the doctor would be free to resume his affair with Lili (whose opinion in this entire matter was apparently irrelevant).

This, of course, was a plan not rooted in reality. In the world of the Mafia, such threats are not made idly, and rarely are they successfully executed by a novice. The five families were all

engaged in similar and sometimes overlapping ventures; the last thing the Genovese capo wanted was to have the FBI cracking down on Scarpa through the use of information provided by one of his own friends. That would be bad for business; it would be bad for everyone. The mobster told Scarpa of the doctor's plan. Scarpa reached out to DeVecchio, asking for the usual pertinent information.

"Within the week," Gregory recalls, "DeVecchio gave my father Scholnick's home address, a picture of him, and his daily routine, without asking Dad why he needed the information."

A contract was put out on Scholnick; the job was assigned to Gregory. Greg Sr. had confidence in his son, but to ease his own mind and make Gregory feel more comfortable, he asked Joe Brewster to tag along. Joe was a pro—if anything went wrong on a job, you wanted him by your side.

By this time Gregory was a hardened criminal, more savvy about the ways of the Mafia, less emotional about the wanton disregard for human life so often exhibited by his buddies, and even by his father. Although he had never pulled the trigger himself, Gregory had been witness to dozens of murders. He knew what to expect; he also knew that the time had come for him to get blood on his own hands. Scholnick was a rat anyway, which made him contemptible rather than pitiable. Gregory figured he'd have no problem doing the deed, especially since it would help his father.

A few days later, Gregory and Joe Brewster arrived at Scholnick's apartment building in a car driven by Carmine Sessa. They waited in the lobby, watching carefully at the passersby, trying to spot Dr. Scholnick. Finally, there appeared in the lobby a middle-aged man who resembled the photo they had studied. Joe Brewster stepped up to the man and smiled respectfully.

"Are you Dr. Scholnick?"

The doctor nodded and continued walking toward the bank of elevators.

Joe Brewster engaged Scholnick in conversation while Gregory walked behind them and shot the doctor in the back of the head. As the doctor slumped to the floor, Gregory pumped another bullet into his skull, just to be sure.

Joe Brewster and Gregory walked briskly out of the building and into the waiting car. The three wiseguys then drove into Manhattan and discarded the murder weapon in a sewer drain before proceeding to a neighborhood bar, where Joe and Carmine congratulated Gregory and bought him a round of drinks. Gregory called his father and told him the job had been done. On the other end of the line, Greg Scarpa Sr. smiled, his heart filling with paternal pride.

Killing is not such an easy or forgettable thing, however—not even for a career mobster. Gregory was living alone when he got home that evening, drunk and high on cocaine, he collapsed into bed. But he couldn't sleep. The room swirled and his heart began to race. Gruesome images of the late Dr. Scholnick flickered across the back of his eyes, like an internal movie—blood—spattered scenes of an execution, in all its horrific detail. He saw the doctor fall, a crimson geyser gushing from his head. He felt the gun's report against his hand, smelled the cordite and the blood and the stink of a man's bodily functions letting go. Suddenly Gregory was out of bed, lurching and stumbling toward the bathroom. He fell on the floor, dropped his head against the toilet seat, and vomited.

After he emptied his stomach, Gregory crawled back into bed, mumbling to himself about what a lucky guy he was. Like his father, Gregory had a license to kill, and it came with the blessing and backing (not to mention the formidable protection) of the FBI.

The next morning, when Gregory arrived at Wimpy Boys, the guys in the crew treated him differently. There were knowing winks, the odd pat on the back, an occasional congratulatory embrace. No one spoke explicitly about the execution of Dr. Scholnick, but clearly it was a subject of great interest. Through this single, violent deed, Gregory had crossed a threshold. In the eyes of his friends and colleagues, he commanded greater respect and admiration; he was one of them now. The cost, of course, was a piece of his soul—after that night, Gregory never blanched nor fell sick at the thought of taking a human life. With each subsequent killing (and there were many), the act became easier,

less personal. A glass or two of whiskey and a couple snorts of coke were all the anesthetic Gregory needed to get the job done.

Shortly after the execution of Dr. Scholnick, Gregory was officially inducted into La Cosa Nostra in a ritual that had been handed down for ages. Formally attired in his finest suit, the son of Greg Scarpa was taken to an underground garage and offered a seat at a large table, along with several other Mafia inductees. As the bosses looked on proudly, the rookies joined hands and recited vows of loyalty. A drop of blood was drawn with a needle from each man's trigger finger (signifying membership for life—"blood in, blood out"). Then there were handshakes and hugs, and a party that went on all night, replete with steak and shrimp, top-shelf liquor, and a bevy of high-priced prostitutes. For Gregory Scarpa Jr., there would be no turning back.

So skilled was Gregory that within a year he became a capo with his own crew. In effect, this placed him higher in the pecking order than his own father. Lou Diamond, as Greg Sr.'s attorney, spent many nights with both father and son, and recalls at least one occasion when Gregory attempted to pull rank on his dad. It happened at Wimpy Boys. In response to a request from Greg Scarpa Sr. to retrieve a car, Gregory retorted sharply, "Get it yourself. I outrank you now."

When questioned about the incident, Gregory shakes his head in disbelief.

"I must have been kidding," he says. "I never would have spoken that way to my father. Although it's true that I was a capo and Dad was just a 'soldier,' my father was meaner than anyone I've ever met. I always knew that if I disrespected him in any way, or crossed him in any way, no matter how long it took him, he would have found a way to make sure I would one day be found dead."

This seems not an unreasonable assessment; moreover, given Scarpa's link to the FBI, Gregory's death might well have gone virtually unnoticed, or at least unsolved. Hunter Scholnick, now a Manhattan attorney, was away at college when his father was killed, but had seen him a few days earlier during Thanksgiving break. The younger Scholnick recalls that his father had

expressed confidence that his earnings would soon increase to prior levels, and that life would improve.

"I'm finally going to get my money back," he told his son.

Several months later, as the investigation into his father's death stalled, detectives informed Hunter that they were unlikely to solve the case.

"They had hit a wall," he says. Detectives also strongly suggested that the Scholnick family not try to retrieve the doctor's business from DeJani, advice the family accepted.

"That's what they said to us," Hunter recalls. "'Don't do it. You don't want to get involved. It's probably what got your father killed.' In retrospect, they may have been right."