

Experience

My father was a mafia boss

My first inkling that my family was different came when I was six and found a gun hidden under my dad's bed. I knew he'd served in Vietnam and assumed it was from then. I even told friends how proud I felt: my father, the brave soldier.

A teacher overheard me talking about the gun and quietly mentioned it to my parents. Dad told me, "What goes on in our family stays behind these walls. We don't ever talk about it to anyone else." I remember wondering why it was such a big secret, but it didn't feel strange; it was just the way we did things.

We were a very traditional Italian-American family. My father, Salvatore Gravano, worked in construction, while my mother was a housewife and looked after my brother Gerard and me. Home was in Staten Island, surrounded by friends and family. Everyone knew my dad, and even as a young child I could sense he was important. When he entered a room, the energy changed. People would rush over to shake his hand and kiss his cheek. He made time for them all, lending money and buying them groceries if they were struggling.

One day, when I was about 10, Dad sat me down in the kitchen. He told me I would probably start hearing some things about his life and he wanted to explain it in the best way he knew how. He told me some men in Italy had formed a secret group and vowed always to protect each other and their families - even if it meant stealing or hurting other people. Then he told me he was part of that same group here in America. It didn't sound scary to me - it was nice to know we were being looked after.

My mother was a shy, quiet woman who'd married Dad just before her 18th birthday. She was old-fashioned



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and loyal, steadfastly standing by her man and never asking questions - the perfect mafia wife.

As the years passed, Dad's business grew. We moved to a bigger house in an expensive suburb and I went to a private school. Mostly it was children of wealthy lawyers, doctors and businessmen. That's when I began to realise how different we were. For a start, Dad didn't look like the other fathers. He had tattoos on his arms, wore flashy jewellery and swore a lot. But I didn't find

it awkward - I thought he was cool.

I knew the mafia were accused of crimes, from murder to racketeering, but I was too young to understand what it meant and I couldn't reconcile that gangster image with my father. What I know now is he was living two lives: at home he was the doting husband and father, but he was also rising up the ranks of the Gambino organised crime family - and being closely watched by the FBI.

Over the years I heard the stories of violent mob crime, especially

after mafia boss Paul Castellano was murdered in 1985. I wasn't totally naive and part of me suspected Dad had been involved. I knew he'd been there when Paul was killed, and he disappeared for two weeks after.

Sometimes I'd come downstairs and find Dad sitting by himself in the dark. I'd make a joke, then Dad would start chatting away as if nothing was wrong, though we both knew it was. It was just our way of dealing with the things we couldn't talk about. I guess Dad thought he was protecting us - what we didn't know couldn't hurt us - maybe he just didn't want us to know about that side of his character.

When I was 19, everything changed. The FBI were closing in on Dad and he'd agreed to testify against high-ranking mob members in return for a shorter sentence for his own crimes.

I was horrified. We'd always had it drummed into us never to "grass" on people: when my brother and I fought as children, we'd both be punished - one for fighting, the other for telling. Now I felt Dad had betrayed us all and I refused to move with my family when they joined the witness protection programme.

In return for his co-operation, Dad received a reduced prison sentence of five years. It took me all that time to forgive him, but now, with a daughter of my own, I understand how he was trying to protect us, using the only power he had left.

People ask if I resent being a mob daughter. A few years ago, I might have said yes, but I've now come to terms with everything that has happened. I don't condone the violence Dad was involved in, but I can't change his past, or what he did, and I don't see the point of wondering what if. **Karen Gravano**

Do you have an experience to share?
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