

G All in the GOTTI Family

Out in Queens, among tough-talking hard guys, a literary flower grew.

Victoria Gotti is a nice person, not a bad novelist, a good mother, and a dedicated volunteer for charity.

But does she *really* believe her father was in the plumbing-supply business?

By Nancy Jo Sales

Victoria Gotti at her house in Old Westbury, Long Island.

THE BALLROOM OF WESTBURY MANOR looks like the setting for a wedding by Scorsese. A very large man is standing watch over the door. Chubby little boys with carnation corsages are tearing around grabbing hors d'oeuvre off trays while broad, sturdy men are kissing one another on the cheek, rocking in hugs. The band plays "Embraceable You." The women here have nails, and mink. In the middle of the room, there are tables bearing place cards that say JOHN GOTTI. ■ He's here—that is, John "Junior" (as in JFK "Junior")—but he is not easy to find. People claim not to have seen him, or say he may have left already. Ac-

usually, he's the wide guy in the white turtleneck standing over there under a bright light, a man who has nothing to hide. John Jr. has said repeatedly that his frequent visits to his father in prison are of a personal nature only.

"I'm in a very awkward position," he says affably, palms going up. He's being asked what he thinks of his sister Victoria's new novel, *The Senator's Daughter*. "I have several copies of it," he offers.

Just then his mother, also named Victoria, jackknives an arm between her son and a reporter. Since this small, dark-eyed woman once admitted to having thrown a box of something very foul at a woman who dissed her in a supermarket line (with that age-old insult "I spit into your groceries!"), the reporter backs off. "I have something very important to discuss with him," says John Gotti's wife.

John Jr. smiles indulgently at his mom. "Talk to Angel," he says. He points to another sister. "Angel likes to talk."

Angel has a cascade of curls and looks like a cherub, in blue wool. She's excited about her sister's literary debut. "Vicki always wanted to be a writer ever since she was a little girl. We shared the same bed, and she used to read to me at night. All the Judy Blume books. All the Jackie Collins. I never had to read a book—ever!"

The reporter's card is going around the table, and Angel's dinner partners are telegraphing alarm.

"Everybody's cautious," Angel confides, "because no matter how much good Vicki does, it's still gonna be 'the godfather's daughter. . . .'"

The godfather's daughter ascends to the podium; her supporters cheer. We're actually at a fund-raiser for the American Heart Association in Westbury, Long Island. Victoria has been an active volunteer for many years (she's tonight's host). In 1991, before she became a novelist, she wrote a book on women and heart disease.

She suffers from mitral-valve prolapse and ventricular tachycardia, one not-very-serious and one extremely serious condition.

Victoria is 33 and beautiful in the way of soap-opera divas and TV newscasters (perfect grooming, perfect hair), and she is, in fact, about to become a celebrity. This week, when *The Senator's Daughter* comes out (from Forge books), she will be the center of a media blitz not seen since Ivana Trump published *For Love Alone*.

But tonight, Victoria doesn't want to talk about any of that. She wants to read everyone a letter: "This is from a little girl named Sheena, who is waiting for a heart transplant."

Victoria Gotti has the voice of Cathy Moriarty in *Raging Bull*—low, sexy, New Yawk. There is something sad in it.

"'Dear Victoria, I read your book. It has gotten me through some trying times. You are very beautiful, and I look up to you.'"

Victoria pauses. "No, Sheena, it is I who look up to you."

VICTORIA GOTTI IS CIRCLING AROUND HER KITCHEN, TALKING ON A cordless phone to her mother.

"Mom—Mom—I cannot go to London right now." She holds up a finger with a white nail you could peel a cantaloupe with. "Just a minute," she mouths.

There's a teacup Maltese yapping and dancing behind her; Victoria turns around. "What?" she asks him, palm going up.

"I am a homebody, not a tourist, Mom—"

She rolls her eyes good-naturedly.

Clipped to the back of her slacks is a black metal box—a heart monitor.

Tacked to her refrigerator is a picture of her father, John Gotti, now serving life in Marion (Illinois) prison for murder and racketeering. Here in the photograph he is reclining happily in the sun, wearing a colorful sweater like the ones Bill Cosby used to wear as Cliff Huxtable.

On the kitchen counter, there are several letters addressed to him: JOHN GOTTI. His name is followed by a cell number.

"I was up until six in the morning writing him," Victoria says.

She hangs up the phone. "I couldn't sleep. Carmine"—Agnello, her husband—"saw all these letters and said, 'You couldn't condense that into one?' But every time I wrote him, I would seal it and think of more to tell . . ."

"There was so much I had to tell him."

WE'RE ON THE ROAD IN VICTORIA'S WHITE Mercedes-Benz. Everything around her is white: her car, her nails, her house, the dust of snow here in Old Westbury, where she lives. Victoria's clothes, however, are black. "I hardly wear anything but black," she says—as if she were in mourning.

As we zip back to Westbury Manor (she says, "It's the Tavern on the Green of Westbury"; we're going there for lunch), Victoria's talking about how she found the time to write a novel. "It's not easy, once you do the mommy thing, and the daughter thing, and the sister thing—"

Her car phone rings. "Hello? No, I can't right now." Angel wants to go shopping for drapes.

Every Sunday, the family gets together at either Victoria's or John Jr.'s house. "Everybody brings cakes. I make a big pot of sauce. But please, don't make me into this stereotypical Italian housewife, because I'm not."

Victoria's conversation often drifts back to her boys—Carmine, 10; John, 9; and Frank, 6. "I have raised gentlemen," she says firmly. Her favorite evening is a bag of junk food, a silly movie (she likes *The Cable Guy*), and "my boys."

Do they know why their grandfather is in jail?

The silky hum of the Mercedes can be heard for a time. "If they come to me with a question, I will never lie. . . ."

"We don't discuss it much."

The Senator's Daughter is, of course, a fiction—a portrait of Italian-American crime figures who are "loved and respected," "the working man's hero."

It all starts when Joe Sessio (a character seemingly modeled on Victoria's grandfather John Gotti senior) is murdered at a restaurant, Paul Castellano-style. Mike Sessio, his son and successor, takes it upon himself to help exonerate a young black busboy who has been set up by the bad guys (politicians, law enforcement) by feeding information to the young man's defense lawyer, the lovely and Victoria Gotti-like Taylor Brooke. (She has "thick blond hair," eyes the "bluish green shade of Bahamian waters," and a "fondness for Italian food" and "popular fiction.")

The novel is partly about how Taylor learns to trust Mike Sessio—a "gorgeous," "charismatic" man who closely resembles John Gotti, down to his penchant for snazzy suits. "You've misjudged me," Mike tells Taylor early in the book. Later, Taylor demands evidence from a woman who says she thinks Joe Sessio was "a hoodlum": "Based on what? Hearsay? The news?"

Mike and Taylor wind up together.

You can't see Victoria's bluish-green eyes behind her dark glasses. She says, "My father was a businessman. He was a good father. He came home every night for dinner at five."

THIS AFTERNOON, THE DOORS OF WESTBURY MANOR SWEEP OPEN FOR Victoria Gotti. It was said of her father that he never had to open a door. There was always someone ready at the door of the Ravenite Social Club or his own white Mercedes-Benz—and now, the door of his jail cell.

Staff members scurry to the ballroom to look for something Victoria has lost: the letter from Sheena. "Oh, thank God you found it," she says, placing the treasured possession in her purse. "I have to call her later," Victoria murmurs.

She often reaches out to young people who have, as she does, life-threatening conditions. Recently, she and her husband paid for a lung-transplant patient to go to Disney World, the boy's dream. Victoria says, "Him and I are great buddies ever since."

"It's not because we have money to throw around," she adds.

The table in Westbury Manor's Polo Lounge is hustled aside for her to slide into the banquette. The waiters tell her she's looking well. Victoria orders calamari, shrimp salad, shrimp pasta with a cream sauce. She says, "God knows I love to eat."

"I live nice now," says Victoria. "People will pull up to where I live and say, 'Isn't this just dandy.' But we've worked hard to have a nice home."

Her husband, Agnello, owns and leases several successful auto-parts outfits in Queens. Twice he has been investigated for running illegal "chop shops."

They started dating when Victoria was 16 and married when she was 21. "My father didn't like Carmine," Victoria says. "But what impressed me about my husband was, the more my father said no, the more he kept coming back. Finally, Carmine approached my father in the middle of a business meeting. My father said, 'You just keep coming back! Why?' 'Because I love her,' my husband said. And my father went"—she shrugs—"and looked at my uncles."

"And he said, 'Fine, take her out.'" Victoria smiles.

"I DIDN'T GROW UP WITH ANY SILVER SPOONS IN MY MOUTH." Victoria continues on a theme. "Nothing came easy to me."

She picks at the calamari, hardly eating. She says, "I grew up with extremely less than modest means. Eighth Street by Prospect Park—that was considered back then a ghetto."

Victoria doesn't discuss the reasons for the family's dire straits once upon a time, but her father's early career as a gangster was less than distinguished. Her mother once took him to domestic-relations court for nonsupport.

"Our mother made our clothing 'cause we didn't have any money. My mother still swears they were gorgeous things." Victoria gives a ladylike shrug. "She tried her best."

Her father had to go away for a while in 1969—to the federal prison in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania—after a truck hijacking

on the New Jersey Turnpike went awry.

"When I was a kid," Victoria says, "if you looked at me too long I started crying. My mother would say to my father, 'What is wrong with her?' I was shy, I was a bookworm, I was the biggest nerd you ever saw."

Gotti had to serve another jail term—this time for helping murder the head of an Irish gang—in the seventies; he was re-

"My father was a businessman," says Victoria Gotti. "He was a good father. He came home every night for dinner at five."

leased with the help of Roy Cohn. Then his fortunes took a turn for the better. The family had moved to Howard Beach, and Gotti was "made," running the Bergin crew, earning good money for the Gambinos.

"I don't think things got better," Victoria says, "until I was well into junior high. Where there wasn't a worry about groceries and having a decent home."

Victoria Gotti's life has been visited and revisited by tragedy. In 1980, her younger brother Frank, age 12, was killed when his minibike collided with the car of a neighbor driving home from work. "When my brother died, it was the most devastating thing in my life," she says. "I never knew pain like that, ever, ever. To see my parents go through what they did . . . And I was only 15, and I had the responsibility of college."

A precocious student, Victoria had already enrolled at St. John's University. "My mother was locked in her room for a year. I had to run the house. From that point in my life, it was *Buck up, you gotta grow up.*"

Victoria grows silent. There is something about her that seems to have lived a long, long time.

Not long after the accident, John Favara, the neighbor who hit Frank, was seen being abducted as he came out of the Castro Convertible plant where he worked. He was never found. There's a persistent rumor that John Gotti had him killed, crushing his body in a car.

"I can't really comment about that," Victoria says after a long pause. "I'm just now hearing things. I think a lot of it's made up."

THE YEAR AFTER FRANK WAS KILLED, VICTORIA DEVELOPED mitral-valve prolapse, a condition in which a defect in the valve prevents it from closing properly. In 1992, the same year her father was sentenced to life in prison, her ventricular tachycardia—a severely irregular heartbeat that can send her spinning into terrifying bouts of nausea, dizziness, and shortness of breath—got much worse.

"There was a time two years ago," she says, "when I was very ill. I didn't know what my kids were going to do without me. My oldest, who is so sensitive—he won't sneeze without me knowing it. He was crying himself to sleep at night. I was crying to my mother, saying, 'They need me, they need me.' My mother listened and finally said, 'Why don't you go home and write another book?'"

When she was 26, Victoria wrote her first novel—a book she put away, until now. The rewrite is already in the works. It is, Victoria says, "a big book." Like *The Senator's Daughter*, it will be a thriller with "a lot of romance in it," and an ending that, she says, "I don't think anyone is going to be pre- (continued on page 94)

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pared for. In this book, things do not work out as they should."

She puts down her fork. "I don't want my novels to read like Danielle Steel. How often in life do things go so smoothly? Real life is not like that, unfortunately—it's really not. I've been through a lot of stuff. I've seen too much to write like that."

There are few people in the Polo Lounge now. Lite jazz plays. Across the room, a waiter is softly telling some regular customers, an old couple, that he lost his wife.

"I buried a child," Victoria says. "My first child was stillborn."

That was when she was 21. When she was 22, she was diagnosed with an early stage of cancer in her uterus. The treatment was successful, and she managed to have her boys despite doctors' predictions. (She would like more children; she and Carmine are considering using a surrogate mother.)

She says, "I've been sick for a lot of years. I have known nothing but doctors and specialists. If I could trade anything for a guarantee that I could be around long enough to raise my children, I would."

Victoria looks taller when she stands up on her ankle-strap heels; sitting next to her here in the booth, you realize her frame is tiny. Very different from her father.

He is, she says, the one person in the world to whom she can tell anything. She sent chapters of *The Senator's Daughter* to him in prison as she was writing. "My father, he's a very articulate man. His favorite author is John Le Carré." Victoria's proudest day was when he sent back a note from prison saying, "You've got it."

She visits Gotti once a month. "He knows me better than I know myself. I'll walk in, and he'll say, 'You lost about four pounds? I hope it was intentional.' And I'll say, 'No, no, I'm fine.' I'm not even aware of it. Then I'll go home and get on the scale, and it's four pounds, on the money. You can't hide anything from him."

Omertà is the Mob code of silence; it extends, of course, to family members. It is an awkward responsibility for a writer, a person who feels the need to tell.

"When I write," Victoria says, "I can be whoever I want to be, I can travel wherever I want to. I can do whatever I want. . . ."

Victoria gets in her white Mercedes-Benz and drives away.

In *The Senator's Daughter*, Mike Sessio thinks to himself: "His father had been the devil's apprentice, a man who often wielded his power with a complete absence of mercy. . . ."

"And yet, good or bad, Joe Sessio had been his father and that connection, of blood and bone, of genes and chromosomes, spoke louder than all the rest of it." ■