

It's murder being Daddy's girl

Her father may be America's most notorious mobster but Victoria Gotti has still managed to top the New York party hit list. Hasn't Papa's girl done good, says Jeffrey Podolsky

Easter Sunday at CZ Guest's faded brick estate in Old Westbury, Long Island, is always special. Those lucky enough to be escorted through the front door – painted chocolate and primrose, the riding colours of the late Winston Guest, the multi-millionaire polo player – gather in the least formal of the salons, the one without the famous portrait of CZ by Salvador Dalí.

They are enveloped by chintz-flavoured furnishings and endless vases of exquisite dendrobium orchids, which CZ, one of New York society's last grandes dames, has nurtured through winter in a greenhouse. White-jacketed butlers offer the guests – who know one another all too well from one patrician Manhattan event or another – Bloody Marys, bullshots and CZ's secret blend of iced tea. On the terrace are then lovebirds Joan Rivers and the banking heir Orin Lehman admiring CZ's madcap dogs romping around the brick-walled rose garden. Everyone eagerly looks forward to filing into the dining room, where a buffet laden with meat and vegetables just harvested from the garden awaits them.



GOTTI NEARLY DIED IN CELL

CZ, however, has other plans. There will be no Easter dinner until everyone has met the guest of honour: a mysterious curvy blonde with enormous green eyes who – *quelle horreur!* – is dressed in a tight, black cocktail dress accented with eye-popping jewels. 'I want you to meet my friend Victoria,' drawls CZ, as she escorts the young woman around the room. 'Isn't she *divine*?'

Her guests, needless to say, are dumbfounded. 'CZ was just beside herself,

squealing with delight at the fabulous social coup of producing the Godfather's daughter,' one guest recalls. 'I just thought, "What is *she* doing here?"'

Despite her Las Vegas-chic attire, Victoria Gotti chatted amiably with her new friends, charming them with endless Daddy-knows-best stories of what a wonderful man and loving grandfather John Gotti is, sending baskets of Easter eggs and bunnies to her children. 'My dad stops at nothing to please



Above, Victoria Gotti leaving court with husband Carmine, in White Plains, New York. Left, John Gotti. Opposite page, Victoria Gotti, 1998

the kids,' she said. This may well be true when you consider where he has to place his orders from. The once mighty Godfather, now 61, is a permanent guest at a federal penitentiary. He sits like a potted plant 21 hours a day in a six-foot-by-eight-foot cell, with only a radio and a 12-inch black-and-white television to keep him company.

For a decade, until his imprisonment 10 years ago on murder and racketeering charges, John Gotti was the world's most famous thug, a brash Armani-clad tough guy

who sported monogrammed Gucci socks and custom-made French silk shirts. He was gangster chic, an iron fist in a hand-sewn Loro Piana glove. He rose to the top ranks of organised crime by launching a violent campaign for control of the Cosa Nostra's most powerful family. He courted the press and became the most flamboyant, fascinating gangster since Al Capone. Even today, serving a life sentence without parole, he remains America's most recognisable Mob figure.

Since Gotti left New York, his daughter Victoria, 37, has assumed his status. She is no longer just the Boss's daughter. She is a

woman determined to write a new chapter in a dark family history. She is a bestselling author who has had three hits (the literary kind) – steamy mysteries that have earned her an invitation to speak at Harvard Law School (and to host a mystery weekend at a resort in the Poconos). She is cut from the same cloth as the Dapper Don and undoubtedly possesses his kin-do spirit: savvy, tough and charismatic. They even have the same cleft chin. 'She's her father's daughter in every way, shape and form,' said Gotti's former defence attorney, Bruce Cutler. 'She's the apple of his eye.' Victoria is widely considered the smartest of Gotti's

‘She is cut from the same cloth as Papa. They even have the same cleft chin’

four children, the most articulate interpreter and guardian of the Gotti family name. Her father, brother and husband are all serving time in jail, but she still denies any connection to the mob. Indeed, she insists that her dad was a plumbing-supplies salesman, despite six vanloads of evidence to the contrary.

Her influence is far-reaching. Last summer, she became a weekly columnist for the sensationalist tabloid the *New York Post*, from which she dispenses worldly wisdom on family values, politics and celebrity-dom. Her credo is: 'It's better to use a pen than to get thrown into one.' 'They're the first family of New York crime,' says New York *Daily News* gossip columnist George Rush. 'She's the friendly face of the Gottis, the best of what people like about that very New York quality of bravado and defiance. It's unprecedented for any child of a reputed crime figure to carve

out a career for herself without being stained by her father's reputation.'

Victoria is herself weathering difficult times. She has a life-threatening heart condition and is currently caught up in a messy divorce. The man with whom she has most recently been linked, Andy

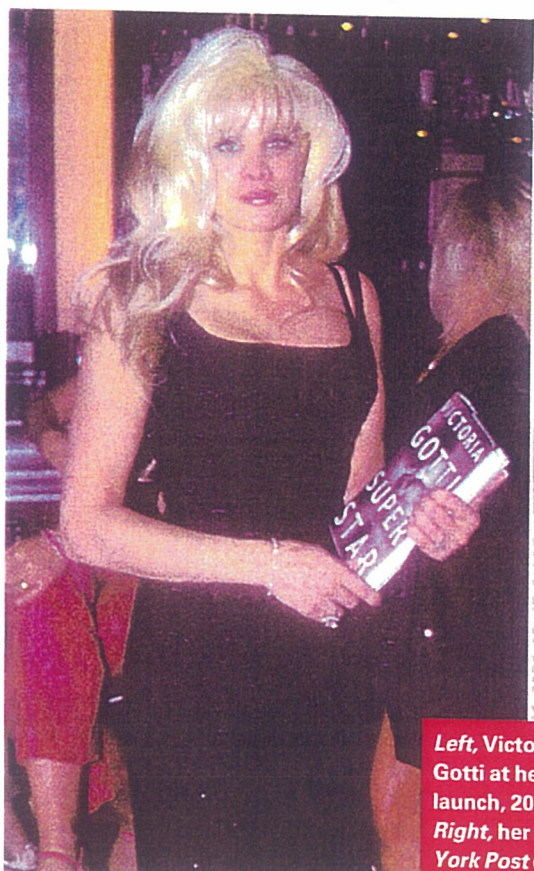
Capasso, a sewer-contractor, died last year of cancer, and her father has terminal throat cancer. 'She's very stoic,' says her friend and fellow *Post* columnist Linda Stasi. 'She doesn't carry her heart on her sleeve. She's very upset and distraught over her father. She's in the middle of a divorce and learning to cope as a working, single mother. It's a whole new world.'

Not entirely. Since achieving literary fame five years ago, Victoria has become a curious presence on the Manhattan social scene, bouncing from lunches at swanky boîtes such as Cipriani to Thursday nights with the girls at her favourite haunt,

Baldorias. 'We talk about girl things,' says Stasi. 'She comes from a background where traditionally women are not up front, but she's like her father. She's more outgoing and gregarious. She likes to go out and have fun.' Victoria – who has

claimed, 'I've been invited to more parties than I have hair' – turned up at everything from last year's Council of Fashion Designer Awards to a literary fête for Dominick Dunne's latest book. 'She's obviously the most fascinating person in the room,' says *New York Post* gossip columnist Richard Johnson. 'You recognise all the bookish people, but then you see her and you wonder, "Who's the blonde with the great figure?"'

Victoria's secret: black velvet Armani dresses, black form-fitting Azzedine Alaïa suits, black body-hugging minis, or a plunging black taffeta ballgown. 'She dresses as if she's always ready for a funeral,' says a former colleague. 'She's out there a lot. She likes to have a good time. When you see her, she's always on. That great body in high heels, plus she doesn't skimp on the make-up or lipstick.' But, when she was honoured at a fundraiser for the American Heart Association at Tavern on the Green two years ago (you couldn't help noticing a small electronic device taped above her right breast; she wasn't wired – it was a heart monitor), the event was marred by cops in a Jeep outside the restaurant training binoculars and a video camera on her guests. 'She is a real-life embodiment of Michelle Pfeiffer in *Married to the Mob*,' observes Rush. 'The long-suffering wife who's filled her part of the bargain, kept her mouth shut and cut herself out a career as a novelist and a good mother.'



Left, Victoria Gotti at her book launch, 2000. Right, her *New York Post* column





Clockwise from left, John Gotti in New York, 1990. Victoria leaving court after her brother was denied bail, 1998. John 'Junior' Gotti attending court, 1999



'It's not like she can deconstruct Saul Bellow,' says a publishing colleague. 'But she can talk to anybody about anything – art, music, movies, literature. She's an over-the-top babe who's both interesting and charming.' At parties, she's regularly hounded for dates. ('She's definitely got a great rack,' observes another *Post* colleague.) When she refused one of her many admirers, he offered to buy her a mansion. 'I've already got one,' she replied.

And she wasn't being coy. Home is a \$5 million, six-bedroom pillared extravaganza around the corner from chez CZ, in Old Westbury (the Oxfordshire of New York), on the gold coast of Long Island's ritzy North Shore. Custom-built to resemble Tara from *Gone with the Wind*, Victoria's mansion (known locally as 'Caesar's Palace') boasts stables, a tennis court, a brazenly turquoise pool, a hot tub and a basketball court for her three boys (Carmine Jnr, 14, John, 13, and Frankie, 10). With its gold-tipped Corinthian columns, the interior reflects a liking for baroque gold leaf. The dining room includes a life-size black-and-gold statue of a panther, a giant white leather sofa, dark-wood bookcases full of middle-brow thrillers and an enormous fireplace decorated with family portraits in gold frames. Above the kitchen sink hangs a colour photograph of her father, smiling in his prison cell. 'I wake up and there are children to feed, beds to make,

and I work,' she said. 'We don't live in a Francis Ford Coppola world.'

That may well be, but her present domicile is a far cry from the cramped three-room Brooklyn apartment where she grew up with her parents, John and Victoria, and four siblings. Angela is now 39 and a homemaker in the New York borough of Queens; John, 36, aka Junior, became acting boss of the Gambino crime family after their father's imprisonment and is now serving a six-year sentence on racketeering charges; pet-shop owner Peter is 26; Frank died in 1980. 'We were very poor,' Victoria recalls. 'My mom had us cooking and cleaning at eight.' Mrs Gotti made the children's clothing and cut their hair herself. Victoria, introverted and shy, was bookish from the start. 'My first library card was like hitting Lotto,' she said.

By 1980, the Gottis had moved to the largely Italian-American neighbourhood of Howard Beach, Queens, a blue-collar suburb of New York, where a tragedy took

place that would haunt them for years. A neighbour, John Favara, was driving along when he accidentally struck and killed 12-year-old Frank Gotti, who was riding a friend's mini-bike. Favara disappeared several weeks later and was never seen again. Law-enforcement officials believe Gotti had him 'whacked'. After Frank's death, Victoria grew up fast, helping her mother take care of the children. A precocious 16-year-old who earned straight As in school and skipped two grades, she enrolled at St John's University in Queens.

One day, while working out with the college track team, she developed stabbing chest pains and was diagnosed as suffering from mitral valve prolapse and ventricular tachycardia, which can lead to sudden death. She has since written a book on the subject, *Women and Mitral Valve Prolapse*, and become a fundraiser for the American Heart Association.

Until the day she left home, Victoria had to observe a curfew. After a brief stint as a fashion designer, in 1984 – to her father's dismay – she married her first sweetheart, Carmine Agnello, now 41. 'My father thought I had a gift to go far,' said Victoria, who had ambitions to be a lawyer.

Last summer, Victoria pulled the plug on her marriage to Agnello, a multimillionaire

scrap-metal dealer (they were dubbed 'Beauty and the Beast') after government surveillance tapes revealed he was having an affair with his bookkeeper. After being caught ordering associates to torch a rival business in a police sting operation, Agnello pleaded guilty to extortion, racketeering and arson, agreeing to forfeit \$11 million and serve nine years in prison.

Despite her pending divorce, Victoria is still married to the mob. Her devotion to her father is unrelenting. She has little to say about the 'odd jobs' he did for a living. During her childhood, Victoria said: 'I just remember him leaving in the morning and coming home for dinner.' Well, most dinners. When she was five, her father was imprisoned for hijacking a shipment of garments outside JFK airport, and, when she was 10, he missed two years of rigatoni after being convicted of rubbing out a fellow gangster. 'Even after visiting him, I didn't know,' she said. 'I was told that he was away in a facility that he was helping to build.'

'She's obviously smart enough to know her father was a gangster,' says a former *Post* reporter. 'She's no dope. It's a game that they play. They make-believe they don't know, but of course they do. It's like *The Sopranos*.' Victoria is nevertheless loyal to her father, who she says was the victim of an FBI witch hunt. 'When you live under a microscope for 15 years,' she said, 'Mother Teresa would have a hard time.'

How, then, does she explain an ordinary businessman attracting the kind of attention usually reserved for Madonna? 'There is something about John Gotti the public craves,' she said. 'I've lived with the man all my life and watched him enter a room. He has this charismatic, magnetic way about him.' The man who was once a magnet for crowds now lives in virtual

isolation at a super-prison in Marion, Illinois, surrounded by razor-wire fences and observed by guards in bulletproof towers. Known as 'the monster box', it is considered to be the most oppressive prison in the US. Gotti's meals are passed to him through a slot in his cell door. He is allowed only five visits and five 15-minute phone calls each month. Regulations bar Victoria from bringing him so much as fruitcake, let

alone a prosciutto and ricotta sandwich. 'Give me that, with a couple of hot peppers on a loaf of Sicilian seeded bread, right now, and I will let you hit me with a pipe right down the middle of my head,' he once said to her. During visits, father and daughter are separated by a thick wall of glass, but that hasn't stopped Gotti from complaining about the novels she sends him. 'How many times did I tell you that I don't read murder mysteries?' he fumed. 'You think I'm a liar? Or do you think I don't know what I like? That's all they were. If there's one murder, it's a murder mystery.'

Victoria's success as a novelist is no mystery. She gallantly shopped her first book, *The Senator's Daughter*, around under her married name, Victoria Agnello. Eventually, Forge Press paid \$70,000 for it. The book opens with a spaghetti murder – a gangland-style hit of a union boss, 'the devil's apprentice, a man who wielded his power with complete absence of mercy', who's shot in the face over linguini and cappuccino. It received mostly good reviews and became a bestseller. In 1997, Crown Books signed her to a \$1 million three-book deal for two novels and a family cookery book, including her Dad's favourite recipes. 'She's not a one-shot thing,' says Bob Asahina, the former president of Broadway Books. 'To publish three books means she must have something.'

Still, if it weren't for her background, it is doubtful that Victoria would have landed a column at the *New York Post*. Her appointment – coupled with the firing of the award-winning political columnist Jack Newfield – took even the most jaded media-watchers by surprise. 'To have the daughter of a Mafia kingpin writing a

enforce family values. ('If you teach your child hate, he will grow to be angry and practise violence. If you teach your child love, he will grow to be kind and compassionate.') She has complained of the poor service she received while flying first class and, after 11 September, confessed to rushing to her doctor for multiple prescriptions of Cipro, forbidding her children to drink tap water, and even stocking up on gas masks. 'It's an embarrassment,' says Wolff. 'She's obviously a moron. You can't even read the thing.'

Following the collapse of the World Trade Center, she gained entry to Ground Zero and rhapsodised: 'A police lieutenant approaches and asks if I'm OK. I nod as my mind and body are temporarily paralysed. Our eyes meet; there's no need for words.' To the consternation of her competitors, she landed an interview with New York's police commissioner. 'I can never get through to him,' says Leonard Levitt, who writes a police column for *New York Newsday*. 'She seems to be able to talk to all sorts of people in law enforcement. Maybe she's got something I don't have.'

With her father and brother in jail,' says George Rush, 'there's a dearth of Gotti news and tabloids seek to fill that anyway they can. She's used people's fascination with the Gotti legend to the max – and more power to her. She may not be a great prose stylist but she has a good heart, and that matters in New York.'

Victoria's column may be limited in scope but her ambition to reinvent herself has no bounds. To the Don's delight, she is carrying on the family tradition in an unlikely but

novel way. 'It's like having the last name Kennedy,' she once said. 'All this conspiracy, innuendo, the mob, the FBI. Will it die down? No, so you get used to it... They say the Gottis are murderers, but every family in America should have the kind of

family values we were raised with.' Despite her proud stance, it is unlikely that the bookish blonde will ever manage to rub out her family's past and supplant it with her own accomplishments. And that is a crime, considering what she has achieved while her loving mentor wastes away behind bars. 'He can't win,' she has said. 'I can't win, no matter what I've done in my life. The difference with me is I don't care.' □

Give me a prosciutto and ricotta sandwich, and I will let you hit me with a pipe

column is about as base and vulgar as you can be,' says *New York* magazine media columnist Michael Wolff. The column is, at its best, the reflections of an unabashedly windy Long Island housewife. She rails against 'cyber sickos' who prey on children, decries the perils of high-school football, supports more government investment in state schools and criticises parents who encourage sexual promiscuity and don't