

# **Nero**

By Michael Fine

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The story of our politics is the story of who we've become, as a people, the story of what we chose as individuals, and also the story of what we will tolerate. The Left can't accept the existence of evil, of people who are selfish and mean, and too often chose policies that ignore the existence of evil, although there are plenty of people on the Left who are ego driven, selfish and mean, and exploit the generous impulses of others to draw attention to themselves, as they lust after power, mostly to gratify their own empty, competitive egos. The Right can't accept the generous and decent impulses in themselves. People on the Right too often use the existence of evil as an excuse to suppress their own decent impulses, as they are drawn to support actions that are fed by conspiracy theories about how the Left allows evil to roam the streets. In the process people on the Right too often chose leaders who themselves are ego driven, selfish and mean, and who exploit the suspicious, individualistic, and frightened impulses of others to draw attention to themselves, as they lust after power, mostly to gratify their own empty, competitive egos. The notion of mutual aid, the simple fact that we have been able to survive and prosper because of who we are together, gets buried in this battle of egos, which has nothing to do with what we must do and who we must be. Our technology, which comes out of our ability to be and create together, enables these ego driven battles, which turn out to be entirely beside the point. We want to be together and love others more than we know or even love ourselves. We want most to see the beauty of the earth and taste the sweetness of life itself, in all its brief, brilliant, meaningless glory. But instead, we find ourselves starving in the midst of plenty – living comfortable, meaningless lives while wars are fought, while the poor are discarded as if they were empty milk cartons instead of human beings, and while people of color murdered, all in our name as if one act was not connected to the next, as if the left hand did not know what the right hand was doing.

When the immigrant caravan crossed the Suchiate River from Ciudad Tecún Umán, Guatemala, to Ciudad Hidalgo, Mexico, Raphael Amos ran the numbers in his mind and began to plot his next move. It's all about the numbers, Raphael knew, and any event generates predictable numbers with predictable results.

The caravan was made up of Honduran people. Raphael knew Guatemalans and Mexicans. The Guatemalans and Mexicans Raphael knew were decent people, by and large, just like anyone else. Most of the Guatemalans and Mexicans Raphael knew worked hard and didn't complain. Some of the men could be mean drunks. Some of the women had the all suffering looks of the Madonna – their lives were hard, most of them worked in factories, or worked nights as office cleaners or worked in McDonald's or Burger King, and many worked two or three jobs to hold body and soul together. But you don't really know anything about other people from other cultures anyway, about what life means to other people. It is impossible to tell from looking who had a calm and peaceful home life, and whose life was chaos – impossible to tell when a man had another woman or another family on the side or even two other women, and whose daughters ran wild or whose sons were drifting off. The women Raphael knew talked quietly among themselves. Some of the young women were hot, but all cultures are like that.

The market segments the population in various ways that are predictable: hard working men buy trucks and chain saws; women watch telenovelas and buy cleaning products; hot women or want-to-be hot teenagers buy cosmetics, tight designer jeans, lingerie and birth control; and black sheep men buy beer, tequila, vodka, guns, and trucks. That's marketing, not cultural stereotyping. It doesn't matter what culture consumers come from. All that matters is who has a buck and who is willing to spend that buck on what. At the end of the day, all cultures are the same. The proportions may be different. But people are predictable, and their reactions are predictable. The smart money knows how to measure and target market segments, how to predict return on investment, how to keep your head in a crisis, how to find the upside and cover your bets. What does Warren Buffet say? When dark clouds will fill the economic skies, they will sometimes rain gold. Rush outdoors carrying washtubs and buckets, not thimbles and teaspoons. Democracy is a fantastic invention. Everyone is equal when it comes to spending money. And no one should ever discriminate on the basis of race, culture, gender, sexual preference or religious preference, especially when it come to accepting the money consumers want to spend, whenever and however they want to spend it.

The immigrant caravan was a gift from heaven. It was hard for Raphael to believe that the Russians, the Republicans, the Chinese, the Israelis or the Saudis didn't pay off someone who

paid off someone else who paid off someone else to get it started. But who started it and how it started didn't matter. Call it a dark conspiracy. Call it an act of God. Raphael saw it for what it was. A golden opportunity. Dark skies. Washtubs and buckets.

It's also amazing to consider the opportunities technology had created. You can now build a social media campaign for next to nothing. Email is almost free. That gets you old people. Anybody can make a video, and you can say anything you want about anybody. All you need is something that gets at the deep-seated fears of people, or their private, curious lusts, or even their dull-witted sympathies. Cute puppies. Sob stories. Naked women. Girl on girl sex. Instagram. Facebook. Seventy year old men click on pictures of nineteen year old women, the last flare of a setting sun.

The immigrant caravan. You string a campaign together in an afternoon, and if you do it right, do it enough, over and over, then you can sell anything to someone, and you'll make money. Often, lots of money. Evolution has lots of dead ends. All you have to do is find a little pool, a back-eddy in one of the little streams of our culture that has enough human beings with a smart-phone or computer who can click on a certain idea or image, and then cha-ching! The cash begins to roll in. The world is full of opportunities waiting to be exploited. God is great and glorious and produces bounty for those who know God and walk in God's ways.

The campaign went up on January 23, a Thursday. Twelve million emails, plus Facebook and a little Instagram thrown in for good measure. By morning, 430,000 responses. You hit the right buttons, you get the right responses. Cash in the cash register. Money in the bank. These people have no idea what they were buying or who they were responding to. Nor do they care. They just want to be heard, to have their fears acknowledged, so they didn't have to feel lost in a culture that has completely abandoned them. So they didn't have to feel like just a number, in a world that was only numbers, in world that is out of control. Even though they are already completely lost in a world in which they are each only a numbers and is already completely out of control. People are willing to throw money away. Raphael was willing to catch it. They'd never know – they couldn't know – who Raphael was, where he'd come from, or what he believed, to the extent he believed anything.

By January 23, 2020, the day Raphael launched his immigrant caravan campaigns, there were 571 reported cases worldwide of a new Coronavirus that had not yet been named, 267 more cases that had been reported the previous day. 561 of those cases were in China, but cases had also been identified in the US, Thailand, Japan and the Republic of Korea. 16 percent of reported cases were seriously ill, 5 percent critically ill and 4 percent had died. The name of the virus, SARS-CoV-2 (severe acute respiratory syndrome Coronavirus 2) and of the disease Covid-19 (*Coronavirus Disease of 2019*) was announced by the World Health Organization on February 11, 2020. By then, Raphael's campaign had run its course. It worked. He made a little money. There is nothing to fear but fear itself.

But no more immigrant caravans. Everything now was Coronavirus.

He'd put up *those* campaigns when the time was right. There really is a sucker born every minute.

One day, when Raphael was on the third floor landing of his mother's house, he heard a thump and some thuds -- someone here, moving about.

The third floor tenant was an anxious Korean woman with two kids. Raphael had come to fix a stuck window. The tenant told him no one was going to be home, so it was fine to go in. Raphael had paused to look out the window of the landing. From that window, Raphael could see Route 95, the train tracks and the hospital and the green, pink, yellow and brown houses on the hill across the little valley in which the highway and the train-tracks lay. He liked to pause there and look from that vantage point -- for a moment, the king of all he could see -- and take time to wonder about what humans had built for themselves, out of a land that was supposed to be the land of milk and honey, where the streets were supposed to be paved with gold.

He jumped when he heard the noise. It was midday. He didn't think the tenant was home.

Then his mother's cleaning woman came through the door, carrying a vacuum cleaner, a mop, a broom and two yellow plastic pails. The vacuum cleaner banged against the door frame as the woman came onto the landing.

"You scared me!" Raphael said.

"You scare yo mas!" the woman said. *You scared me more.*

The cleaning woman was probably Guatemalan. She was shorter than Raphael but more powerfully built, with long dark hair that she wore in a pony tail that hung half-way down her back, strong, broad shoulders, skin that was smooth and a warm deep brown that was a different color entirely from Raphael's skin, which dark and powerful, and she had lustrous deep brown eyes that were secretive and wise, hidden and knowing.

"English ok?" Raphael said.

"Little bit English," the woman said. "Un pocito."

"You clean here?" Raphael said.

Raphael remembered that the woman was new. She had worked for them a few months, which was better than some. The cleaners who lasted only a week or two were more trouble than they were worth. His mother often went through five or six before she found one that stayed a year or two. And one who actually cleaned, as opposed to one who just moved things from place to place and left the lights on.

"Si. Aqui," the woman said.

"And downstairs? My mother's place?"

"Si."

"And other places?"

"Todas places. Aqui. Providance. Hohnston. Smeethfild. Ist Side. Siempre."

"From Guatemala?" Raphael said.

“Honduras,” the woman said.

A new immigrant for sure.

Honduran people were no better or no worse than Raphael’s people, he thought. Honduras has gangs and lots of rapes and murders. His people, during the civil wars, had done worse. Honduras as a thug culture now, as far as Raphael could tell. His people were a tribal people, a people of communities, communities that sometimes went to war with each other, communities that each had their own culture, their own warmth, their own drama, but also their own corruption, violence, and chaos. Then those communities reshuffled into militias, and destroyed one another. Now they were all broken up and dirt poor, and those who could leave were scattered all over the globe. Lots of gangs, in Honduras, gangs that got their start in the US. No kind of place for a man who looked like Raphael.

Honduran. Immigrant caravan. She might know about the next one before it kicked off.

Now *here* was an opportunity. Chance favors the prepared mind.

A different woman came down the steps of the address he had been given in Central Falls, a woman with dark hair and confident eyes in a tight blue satin dress and blue high heels who knew what she was doing with every inch of her body. Surely not Maria the cleaning woman. Someone else.

But it was Maria who got into Raphael’s car.

They went to a restaurant on the Hill. It was too cold to sit outside.

“We talk English,” Maria said. “To learn.”

“Hablo un poco Espanol,” Raphael said.

“Muy bien,” Maria said. “It’s good.”

“What did you do in Honduras?” Raphael said, and pulled up Google Translate on his cell phone. “Cual trabajo en Honduras?”

“Medico,” Maria said. “I am doctor.”

“Si? And you clean houses?”

“Si. Empezar. To start,” Maria said.

“What kind of doctor cleans houses?” Raphael said. You have to talk down to women. Never tell them what you think. Keeps them off balance and coming back for more. Neuro-linguistic psychology. They think you are important. Desired by others. That makes you desired by them. Raphael read all about it in a book.

“Good kind,” Maria said, her eyes flashing in a way that said, don’t you ever put me down again. *The kind who bends a difficult world to her will*, she thought.

A doctor. Raphael could not believe his luck.

Somewhere out here, a pandemic was brewing, whipping up its own fears and craziness. Dark clouds. And with a doctor, new opportunities.

She wanted something from him. He was sure of it. They all do, and always did. He just had to figure out what. And then perhaps come to an agreement from which both sides benefit.

They went out twice more. Raphael could feel Maria getting closer to him. He teased her with the Audi. With swank places. Al Forno. Entoteca Umberto. One night he took her to Boston, to 9 Park. She teased him back with beautiful clothes, dark eyes with long lashes, and with the smoothness of her skin, which made him forget that she cleaned houses all day, and made him think of a woman who lived her life in luxury, for pleasure, on a whim.



And then the world closed. Stay at home. Like an eclipse of the sun. Darkness at the start of the spring. Dread overtaking hope.

But work didn't pause for Raphael.

Suddenly there were hundreds of millions of human beings with nothing to do but look at their cell phones and computers, stumbling about in fear of imminent unpreventable death, people who had nothing to think about except who was to blame for this mess. The President helped stoke the fear, of course. He always helped. China one day. Blue state governors the next. Senile Joe Biden the day after that.

But Raphael knew how to play both sides. And so he stayed busy. He had two lists. Will you stand by and watch us elect a leftist democrat and bring in total socialism? US Billionaires got \$434 billion richer during the epidemic! We need to tax them all!

Raphael tried to talk to Maria by phone. That was better than not talking but not by much. The languages. They stumbled over words. It was hard to listen. Your soul stays inside when you are thinking, when you are searching for a word you don't know or barely remember, when you are trying to sort out masculine and feminine endings or tenses. Their heat had come from being together, from seeing and feeling each other struggle to connect, from reading each other's faces and gestures. And from the teasing, the flaunting of worlds, hopes, desires, and expectations. That just didn't happen by phone.

Maria had to stop cleaning. No one wanted a cleaner from Central Falls in their house. Raphael wrote and sent the checks every week anyway. It was the decent thing to do. Maria had three kids. This shutdown wasn't going to last forever. Chance favors the prepared mind and the aware wallet.

The end of winter became the beginning of spring. The forsythia bloomed, brilliant yellow gold entwined in a spindly tan bramble. Birds returned. Daffodils and tulips appeared and then disappeared – yellow again, and then red or pink or purple or blue, first a cup of color, then petals of color on the ground at the feet of green stems and broad dark green leaves. There was light in the morning and at night. The air filled with pollens, a pale yellow-white dust that sweetened the spring coastal breezes. Still, the world felt strange. Raphael climbed to the third floor landing from time to time to look out over the highway and railroad tracks and to see the houses and mustard colored brick buildings on the next hill.

Now there was no traffic on Route 95. Few trucks. Raphael missed the grunt and rumble of the sixteen wheelers all day and all night, chugging through the rain and the darkness. Life felt empty, the way a man who has lost a leg perceives its absence, and checks, over and over again to see if the leg is really gone.

Early one evening in late April Mama called Raphael. She never called to chat. She called when she wanted something.

“Ta bo Maria cleanup gi,” Mama said. “She si.” *Please take a box over to Maria the cleaning woman. She’s sick.*

Raphael hadn’t said anything to Mama about Maria. And he didn’t think Maria had said anything to his mother either. His mother was just doing her thing, ignoring people most of the time, and then marching in to take over their lives whenever it suited her.

Ain’t nobody’s business but my own, Raphael thought.

“Le bo a do,” Mama said. “Si pep dar. Do ga insi.” *Leave the box at the door. Don’t go inside. There are sick people there.*

“Yeah Mama,” Raphael said. “Yo se.” *Anything you say.*

Raphael put on a mask and gloves. He'd never been inside Maria's house. They said Central Falls was infected, that everyone was sick, but it didn't look different –the same old rickety wooden triple-deckers crammed together like boxes and jars in a packed refrigerator. No lawns or yards. No trees. Cars lining the streets and parked everywhere there wasn't a building.

It was evening. The sun was low on the horizon. The light was warm and strong, although the air had cooled.

Maria came to the door in a nightgown and a mask, and stood behind the storm door. She looked like she had been run over by a truck. Her eyes were red and glazed over. Her once beautiful dark brown hair was matted and wet with sweat, and her skin, which had been smooth and lustrous, was now pitted and hollow. She looked like a sponge that had been rung out and curled as it dried.

Raphael put the box on a table that stood next to a rusting porch slider. Then he went away.

That night he started to read online. There is no cure for this Coronavirus. There was nothing he could do for Maria. Everyone in that house would get sick. Most likely everyone would recover. Some might die. Maria was a doctor. She knew what to do. Raphael didn't.

There is a little gadget, something called a pulse oximeter, that lets you know if you are in danger. A link in the post about pulse oximeters took him to a website. You can order them on-line. \$38.99. Raphael ordered one for Maria. Amazon Prime. He even paid extra for next day delivery. \$38.99 for the gadget, \$14.98 next day shipping and somehow, miraculously, no tax. \$53.97. Not terrible.

And then it hit him. If he was buying a pulse oximeter for Maria, a couple of hundred thousand or a couple of million people were also ordering one for someone they knew or for themselves. Everyone was terrified. There was now something to fear.

What was the most outrageous way to frame that fear? *Exclusive Secret Gadget Used By Both CIA and Russian Intelligence Saves the Lives of the Rich and Famous.*

The campaign formed itself in Raphael's mind.

It's all about the numbers, Raphael knew, and any event generates predictable numbers with predictable results.

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