

The 
MORELLI
THING

Fiction by Frank Lentricchia

The Dog Killer of Utica

The Accidental Pallbearer

The Portable Lentricchia

The Sadness of Antonioni

The Italian Actress

The Book of Ruth

Lucchesi and The Whale

The Music of the Inferno

The Knifemen

Johnny Critelli

The Edge of Night (memoir/fiction)

The MORELLI THING

Frank Lentricchia



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For Jeff Jackson

NOTE TO THE READER

The “Morelli” of the title is a man of American history. The major events of his life, told herein, are not fictional. Fred Morelli was born in Fiumefreddo, Italy in 1901 and died in Utica, New York in 1947 — the victim of the most notorious, and theatrical, of unsolved murders in Utica’s long history of unsolved murders. Were I to be asked about the relationship of historical fact to fiction in the depiction of Fred Morelli’s life and death, I would quote Marcel Proust: “I invented nothing; I imagined everything.”

PART I

MOUTH



(Tuesday Morning)

Does she breathe?

Private Detective Eliot Conte leans over the crib, gazing down on his three-month-old daughter, Ann Cruz Conte. With infinite gentleness, the stay-at-home Daddy slides the tips of his fingers over her fragile rib cage. She breathes. One minute from now? Thirty seconds? Ten? Forces himself to turn and leave the bedroom, but at the doorway he turns abruptly back to repeat the three-month-old ritual that cannot banish his fear for his baby's life — or the triggering memory of his two adult daughters murdered in California, three years ago, in the house of his ex and her husband. Unavenged. No charges filed. So many episodes of desperation, when Conte believed that he would never leave the room — that he'd be forever frozen cribside, as his fingertips feel the subtle rise and fall — as he feels the fall, as he prays (this atheist) for the rise.

brings to her lips several times, but does not sip. The sips are fake. They are for cover. She wears a blue jump suit darkly stained at the knees with perhaps grease. She is perhaps a gas station mechanic. She wears a pair of large mirrored sunglasses and a hat that no gas station mechanic would ever wear, and very few Uticans could afford. If one could see behind her mirrored glasses, one would see that she is shifting her gaze from the boy to Bocca and back. The jump suit is closely fit. Her figure is lovely. Among the Golden Boys, Bobby, an exceptional visual artist, takes careful note of her as a possible subject.

Victor Bocca's eyes are open again. He's fixing Angel with a cold stare.

One of the boys says, it's Ray, "How about it, kid? 'No Other Love Have I.' Know that one, by any chance?" Ray sings: "No other love have I!"

Angel replies: "I do know it, sir, but not by chance," and begins to play and croon: "Only my love for you! Hurry home, come home to me, set me free, free from doubt and free" (dramatic pause, a flourish on the strings) "from longing ..."

Angel stops. Looks up.

Victor Bocca has lunged clanging to his feet. He's pointing his cane at Angel. Steps closer, clanging and swaying as he moves, looming over the tragic Angel of East Utica. Bocca yanks the guitar from Angel's hands and by the neck of it begins to smash it, six times on the table, pieces flying—the Golden Boys, had they only been limber as in their youth, would have dived under the table. Coffees spill, pastries on the floor. Bocca hands the severed neck to Angel, finishes off his third double-shot espresso, lumbers

clanging out the door—followed by the black woman in the mirrored sunglasses.

The Vietnamese African-American girl working the cash register rushes back into the kitchen to summon Rock Caruso, who runs out front too late with a baseball bat. Angel and the Golden Boys are paralyzed in silence. Rock only says: “Eventually.”

Angel Moreno, who had not wept when his parents were murdered—he’d simply stopped speaking for six months—breaks down. Shattered.

Angel speaks: “Sir, who was that man?”

Don answers: “A son of a bitch.”

“Name, please.”

“Irrelevant, Angel.”

“Name.”

“Bocca. Victor Bocca.”

Don puts his hand on the kid’s shoulder, offers to drive him home. Shuddering, shaking his head no, Angel rises guitar neck in hand, and walks back to 1318 Mary Street.

In silence, Rock and Judy Tran Mai Brown wipe down the table and sweep the floor. On his knees, on the floor, staring mournfully at a chunk of cannoli in his hand—a fragment of his art, as he thinks of it—Rock says: “He comes in here again with that cane, with those teeth on it? You know where, God willing, I’ll shove that cane, with those teeth on it? Mark my words, Judy.”

The Golden Boys find their voices:

“I’ll make a fuckin’ pilgrimage on behalf of Rock’s wish, I swear to God. On my bare knees over broken glass.”
 “Amen.” “A fuckin’ pilgrimage on behalf of violence?” “Why

not?" "Amen." "Know where I see Bocca every Sunday? Saint Anthony for High Mass. He takes communion every fuckin' Sunday." "I'll lay odds: Conte puts him into the big sleep before he goes to confession." "And Victor Bocca dies in sin." "Why didn't they *kill* him instead of cutting off his leg? Those bastards who showed no mercy to Fred Morelli, they showed mercy to that son of a bitch?" "*If. If* they killed Morelli." "*They?* The Barbone brothers are dead, for what? Twenty-five years? And you're still afraid to say their miserable names?" "Somebody killed Morelli, this is all we know." "It was an assassination." "You imply politics, Gene." "In this town, dear friends, there's only politics." "Amen, Gene. Amen to that." "The kid!"

The man with Utica's saddest eyes says: "I'll tell you the worst sin." Judy nods as if she knows what Rock is about to say. Paulie can't take his eyes off of Judy, because "what's a 60-year difference, plus my wife is gone, so what does my wife know?"

"The worst sin," Rock says, crunching the cannoli in his fist, "we talk about Bocca for years, like gossiping old ladies, instead of *this, this*," as he shakes the fist with the mashed cannoli.

Judy says: "Mr. Caruso, the man who made this mess, he didn't pay for his coffee."

"Bocca's been getting away with that behavior for years."

"Talk," Rock says. "More talk."

"Where is the God of Justice," Bob says, "when you most need Him?"

"That Old Testament prick!" responds Paulie.

“Old ladies,” Rock says. “Like old ladies.”

Don says: “The Old Testament prick is Eliot Conte and he resides at 1318 Mary Street. Soon he’ll come down on Bocca—”

“Like a ton of jagged bricks!” Bob says.

“Worse,” Remo says, “I guarantee worse.”

(Tuesday Afternoon — Evening)

The call from Rock Caruso comes long before Angel Moreno opens the door at 1318 Mary Street — where he enters without a word, retreats in a jog to his room still clutching the guitar neck, closes the door, puts on the headset to listen to the music that Angel listens to while diving deeply into his laptop, his last refuge. He's hacking dangerously. He's Bocca-fixated.

Through the long, perfect June afternoon — it seems never to pass while he waits for help, Conte goes many times to Angel's room, but Angel won't lift his eyes from his computer, or speak. When will Catherine return? In relentless, raw-throated rhythm, Ann cries as he hums walking her about the house, singing softly as he sways to the rhythm of "Rockabye Baby," the lullaby of terror in the tree-tops: And when the bough breaks ... down will come baby ... cradle and all ... Call her, Catherine of Troy. Come home.

Can't do this alone. Where does Bocca live? (*Bocca: Mouth.*) Ann won't stop, and down will come baby, who will not take the bottle, the offer of which spurs her most horrifying cries. Because Ann accepts no substitute for Catherine's breast — likewise Eliot Conte, the stay-at-home daddy who offers his child oodles of useless love. He fears that Angel's reversion to silence will this time be permanent. He fears that Angel is psycho-ward bound. He feels it call him through the long, perfect June afternoon, the old delicious urge: Come away from your domestic irrelevance and sink into the deep hot bath of violence — with all your outsized strength on Bocca's face. Where does Bocca live? Ann in one of his arms, snug against his chest, with his free hand he thumbs the city directory. Lansing Street. Alone. Phone number listed. (*Raw hamburger. Brain ooze.*) Conte dials and hangs up. His children do not deserve the old Eliot Conte. Does anybody? They will say, if he cannot control himself: My fucked up father killed a man when I was still a crib baby. My fucked up father killed the man who killed my guitar. Nevertheless, we love our fucked up father who fucked us up. He resists the voices in his head. He dials.

"Yeah."

"Mr. Bocca?"

"Yeah."

"My baby won't take her bottle (sings) in the tree tops."

"What?"

"Mr. *Victor* Bocca?"

"What are you selling?"

"I'll give you a leg up."

“What? I’m hard of hearing.”

“See you at your house. Decaf. Black. No sugar.”

“Who are you?”

“You deaf, Mr. Bocca?”

“What?”

“I said, soy creamer. I said, Sweet and Low. Tomorrow, 3 a.m.”

Later that evening at 9, Catherine Cruz returns from her monthly trip to Troy to visit her sullen adult daughter. She finds retired detective Robert Rintrona and Conte’s best friend, Utica’s Chief of Police Antonio Robinson, sitting grim faced in the living room as Conte paces, the baby finally asleep in his arms — Angel still in his room since 11 a.m., the door closed, the dinner that Conte had cooked for him untouched at his bedside table.

She freezes: “Something happened? Ann okay?”

Conte reassures her, then fills her in.

She says: “Antonio, arrest Victor Bocca.”

“Your boyfriend here doesn’t want it. Rock and the golden oldies say they’ll follow Eliot’s wishes on this matter. I can make an arrest on my own, sure, but nobody’ll press charges. So what’s the point?”

Rintrona hoists his balls as he says: “The solution to this so-called legal impasse is the swift extra-legal route. I say tonight. I say the idea thrills me.”

The Chief suppresses a smile almost perfectly.

Conte says: “No.”

Rintrona says: “I have something in mind concerning Bocca’s good leg.”

“I don’t deny it.”

“You’re in a holding pattern.”

“Do you deny,” Rintrona says, “that Bocca must pay? That you want him to pay?”

“For the guitar, Bobby?”

“No. Pay. Stop the games. Pay.”

“I do deny it.”

“Bullshit!”

“Let me tell you what I mean by the holding pattern,” the Chief says. “You’re between the old Eliot, who would’ve already done the job on Bocca, and the new Conte, who’s waiting to be born. You don’t know who you are anymore. You’re not fish, you’re not fowl, but in the meanwhile you got a baby who scares you, that you need to take care of, and a seriously damaged kid who —”

“Enough, Antonio.”

“El, you’re looking at your options. Here, in me, you got the way of civilization, the common good, the law.” (Rintrona laughs.) “Bocca is arrested, he pays a fine, he pays for the guitar, he spends 30 days in jail and your hands are clean. Or, over there, you got Rintrona and the tribal way of loyalty to family, and friends who are like family, which is the only law you used to believe in. To hell with the so-called law used to be your philosophy. You disable Bocca. You tear off his fuckin’ flesh. Because who gives a shit how old he is.”

“In other words Chief,” Rintrona says, “Bocca never walks again.”

At which point Catherine appears, relieved. She says: “Angel’s talking. He’s unearthed deep background on Bocca

which he says will interest the former unorthodox private investigator, which is how he referred to you, El. He says he's hungry and requests we all sit down for peppers and eggs à la Conte. He said, à la Conte."

Conte flashes a rare grin and says: "Whatever Angel wants, Angel gets."

Angel appears, computer under arm.

Conte says: "What are you waiting for, Bobby? Set the table for a late dinner of peppers and eggs à la Conte."

"You made the phone call, El," says Chief Robinson. "If I'm a betting man, I lay my money on the Conte of old. Off the record, I say bravo to the Conte of old."

"Fuckin' A," says Rintrona.

Angel says: "Mr. Conte, Victor Bocca as a very young man was in the concrete business with Rosario Marino. Marino's federal file states that he was the muscle of the Barbone family. The federal file states Marino was the trigger man."

(Wednesday Evening —Early Thursday Morning)

She needs to believe in Conte's innocence, but Catherine Cruz knows what she does not want to know—that there is no good reason to believe in his innocence. Later that afternoon, after Don Belmonte and Judy Tran have left, she manages to shove to the edge of her mind intolerable thoughts of Conte's guilt and focus on Angel, who appears to be hurtling toward psychological collapse—not eating—isolated in his room with the door closed—emerging in yesterday's clothes, which appeared to have been slept in—to speak with stiff formality.

That evening, she gathered Conte, Angel, Rintrona, Robinson, and Conte's personal trainer, their friend Kyle Torvald, in order to ... “To do what?” Rintrona asked when she called.

“To save Angel.”

“How the fuck how?”

“I don’t know,” she replied. “Just get here at 7:30 or you’ll have hell to pay. I promise you.”

When she asked Angel if he wouldn’t mind sitting awhile with those who loved him dearly, he answered: “Will there be pastries from Caruso’s?”

“Yes, sweetheart, and a special rum cake with a topping of strawberries and whipped cream made from scratch. Rock himself made it — just for you.”

“Is Rock coming too?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Why are you afraid?”

His response unnerved her and she could not reply. In her silence, he repeated the questions, and added: “All the Golden Boys too, are they invited? They love me too — do you deny it? And that beautiful black lady who has my back — has she been invited? Who, for that matter, has my front?”

Catherine had not yet heard about the presence of an unknown black woman at Caruso’s. She feared that the black woman was an hallucination, and that Angel was likely beyond help.

■ ■ ■

7:25 — all crowded together at the kitchen table, except Angel. 7:30 — still no Angel when they hear him call out, exuberantly, from the hallway leading to the bedrooms: “Be there in two minutes!” At 7:32 sharp, he appears: Not carrying his computer, hair combed for the first time in two days, fresh clothes for the first time in two days, and

sporting a smile that seemed to indicate peace and tranquility. All are tongue-tied, even Robert Rintrona.

Angel says: “Forgive my tardiness. My girlfriend and I were talking.”

Unfiltered Rintrona pours out what the others only think: “You been holding out on us, kid! When do we get to meet her? Where does she live? How old is she? You met at Dartmouth?” Then, making a classic, obscene gesture common among males of a certain generation: “You two are —?”

Catherine cuts him off: “Don’t go there, Bobby — show some manners.”

Angel, unfazed, responds: “She’s twenty, Mr. Rintrona, and resides in Hanover, New Hampshire, but she’s not a Dartmouth student. We met at the Dirt Cowboy Café, across from the legendary campus green, where she works the counter and specializes in the best hot chocolate ever. If all goes according to plan, she’ll visit before the start of the Fall quarter.”

Rintrona: “How tall is she? I need to know.”

Angel, five-five-and-a-half, smiles big, and says: “Five-ten.”

“What’s her weight?”

“Around 140, maybe more.”

“What’s yours?”

“One-eighteen.”

“Kid, you’re in grave danger.”

A pause as they imagine five-five-and-a-half, 17-year-old Angel Moreno at 118, with his 20-year-old, five-ten girlfriend, at 140, “maybe more,” hand in hand, strolling the Dartmouth green.

Conte, unsure of the terminology: “So you were, uh, skyping her?”

“I was, sir.” (With a giggle.)

Rintrona can't help himself: “Was it good for her too?”

Laughter explodes around the table.

Kyle says: “I have to say what that prick did at Caruso's was unforgivable.”

“He was not forgiven, Kyle,” Angel says, “was he?”

(Conte stiffens.)

“Tell you what, Angel, I'll give you a month of free personal training to ease the distress he caused you. How about it?”

Before Angel can respond, Rintrona jumps in: “Yeah, you'll need to be tip-top when the girlfriend arrives. You'll need the stamina!”

Angel says: “Somebody distressed the prick, wouldn't you say, Kyle? Somebody distressed the prick.”

Conte, eager to change the subject: “Who wants coffee or tea?”



After the cannolis, the almond cookies, the Napoleons, the gelato and the rum cake — Angel eats half an almond cookie, nothing more — then like machine-gun fire the questions and the banter thrown at Angel.

“What's your major up there in Vermont?”

“New Hampshire, Bobby,” says the Chief.

“What's the difference?”

“Classics and American literature.”

“What?!”

“Whatever happened to Computer Science? You kidding me? You’re genius level in that area.”

“I tested out on all Computer Science courses, including the most advanced, in the first week.”

“Whoa!”

“The chairman of Comp. Sci. convinced his colleagues to award me a completed major at the end of orientation week.”

“Can you believe this kid, Eliot?”

“I certainly can.”

“Tell me one thing, kid. How did you put up with the cold up there — near Alaska?”

“I had my love to keep me warm.”

“What this kid’s getting at 17!”

“Bobby!”

“When I was 17 they hadn’t yet invented ... uh, sex. That’s the fucking word I was looking for.”

“For God’s sake, Bobby!”

“Hey! He brought it up, Catherine. Not me. He has his love to keep him warm. What do I have since Maureen went?”

“How would you like,” Kyle says, “to bench 150 pounds, Angel? I can take you there by the end of the summer.”

“Take me there, Kyle.”

“What’s her name, by the way?”

“Fay.”

“Fay? That name went out of style in the 1940s. Describe her from a physical point of view.”

“Bobby, you need therapy.”

Conte is expressionless through it all.

“How would you like to know what Fay and I were talking about?”

“Oh, I love you *so* much.”

“Oh, my God! I love *you* so much!”

Conte wants to smile — Catherine does.

“We were discussing the background of Victor Bocca. Fay is a hacker at my level.”

Bobby says: “Hackers do it on the keyboard!”

“Victor Bocca was much more than he seemed. At 18, he won a scholarship to Hamilton College. After two years, during which he did exceptionally well, he quit. No one knows why. Fay and I intend to find out.”

“You making this up, Angel?” the Chief wants to know. “Taking a minor at Dartmouth in fiction writing?”

Angel says, coldly: “Fact. One other thing. Fred Morelli.”

Kyle, Bobby, and Catherine, at the same time: “Who?”

Conte says: “Victim in the most famous unsolved murder in this city’s bloody history of unsolved murders.”

Angel, again coldly: “Fact: They knew each other.”

“They?” says Catherine.

“Bocca and Morelli.”

“When, Angel?” asks Conte.

“Fay and I are working on it.”

Angel has slipped back. He says, in a slow, affectless monotone: “Thank you for your concern and humor. I am fortunate to have such friends and” — looking from Catherine to Conte — “more than friends. Goodnight, and good luck.”

A Tip of the Hat

to

Rodger and Chris Potocki

About The Author

After ground-breaking work as a scholar and literary critic, Frank Lentricchia changed his focus to fiction in the 1990s. Since then he has written a number of novels exploring the complexities of ethnic and artistic identity, mostly set in his home town of Utica, New York, where he was born to working-class parents.