

## **Leave the Gun, Take the Cannoli.**

by Francesco Pasqualino

*They were remarkable in so many ways that the gifts they bestowed  
almost equaled the havoc they so thoughtlessly wreaked.*

Pat Conroy

I was the first in my family born in the United States. My parents, like millions of other immigrants, came to this country to escape the poverty and lack of opportunity in their ancestral birthplace. For many, there were no options but to seek other places, to travel thousands of miles from a homeland offering little hope. As a witness to the struggles of my own family, I have come to understand the immigrant's plight, how it left a wandering ache to drown their hunger in the dark, roaming eyes of the immigrant sea.

In 1952, two years before my birth, my parents left their seaside town of Siderno Marina in Calabria, Italy. Like many other immigrants, they relocated to cities where family and friends had forged a path to follow. As a child of immigrant parents, growing up in a small community of family and friends immersed in the struggle to build a better life, I absorbed their spirit of hard work and determination.

From the time I was tall enough to push a lawnmower, my father put me to work in the landscaping business he started shortly after my family's arrival to the States. On summer vacations from school, I worked six days a week, eight to ten hours a day, without pay. Other than Sunday, there was not one day of idle time. I worked until school started again in September. There was no discussion, and I never complained.

The summer of 1971 started in the usual routine of landscaping, but in early August my father ended my outdoor days and put me into restaurant work. That was the year my family opened a pizzeria, the summer before my junior year of high school.

My father Guisepe, and Pietro Piscioneri, his compare (Italian word for friend), went into partnership. They each put in a thousand dollars, rented a tiny storeroom in a great location in Pittsburgh's, largely Italian, suburban neighborhood of Penn Hills, where we lived. We were open within a month.

Little did I know then, but this seemingly small investment would change the course of my life, not only my career choice, but also on a personal level. Each day, I was meeting new people in the simple pleasure serving food brings.

The timing, and location of our pizzeria's opening couldn't have been better. As the migration from cities to suburbs that began in post WWII America's new-age of prosperity picked up steam in the 60's, Penn Hills was booming. Schools, large tracts of housing developments, shopping centers, and apartment complexes were built and occupied as fast as they were completed. People were creating new lives, new friendships, new dreams while raising their family in the comfort of a vibrant, desirable community.

With homes in every style and price range, everyone wanted to live in Penn Hills. While many of the homes were built for the times, small and affordable, purchased with little, or no mortgage, there were also grand-estate homes, as well as upscale neighborhoods like Crescent Hills and Stoneledge, where engineers, lawyers, successful business owners, and other professionals lived. Other sections of Penn Hills retained its pastoral, or wooded feel, with homes situated on many acres of land. There were also homes with historical significance. A few doors down from the home where my family moved to in 1967, was the Morrow house, a beautiful two-story home built in 1840 with bricks made on the property, and wood timbered from the hundreds of acres the house

originally occupied. Next to the Morrow house, still standing to this day, is the original barn, which later became home to a garden club, and now a community center. Until recently sold, the Morrow house remained in the same family, passed down through generations for over 150 years.

Around the busy corner from where we opened our pizzeria, Pietro owned another restaurant, Pete's Rib House. Since Pietro had owned or operated a number of other restaurants, and my family knew nothing of this business, he was the guiding force in the joint venture. Pietro planned the menu, hired the help, managed the books, introduced us to reputable suppliers, and showed us what shortcuts could be taken without sacrificing quality. We turned a profit our first week in business.

Six months after we opened, my family bought out Pietro's half-interest. Pietro was selling everything and moving back to Siderno. Pietro had a way of making money few others could. He could think in dollars when everyone else was thinking in dimes. Pietro set us up in business just to have one more asset to sell before he left for Italy to operate yet another restaurant he had purchased.

Pietro wanted five thousand dollars, a four hundred percent return for his short-term investment. My father and his brother, my Zio (Italian for uncle) Francesco, who my father ultimately made partner, refused the high price until Pietro announced he was selling his half to someone else. Pietro brought in our new "partner" to meet my family. My father pulled Pietro aside and agreed to his selling price. My father had no choice because he knew how valuable the business was, and with Pietro gone, it was completely within my family's control.

Though our menu expanded from just pizzas and sandwiches to include many of

the Southern Italian dishes perfected in my mother Maria's kitchen over many decades, we still make the same pizza he taught us how to make and still use his recipe for meatballs. On my trips to Italy, Pietro, before he passed away, always welcomed me proudly, beaming each time I thanked him for the success we enjoy.

We have since moved out of the small, rented location Pietro found for us. We purchased our own building around the corner, added a dining room, put up an addition a few years later and expanded with another addition a few years later. As with most family businesses, we have not been without problems. In a family business, especially an Italian family, egos can sometimes get in the way. Morphing in just a few short years to head this family business, I seem to always spend some part of my day juggling, soothing, or sometimes refereeing egos. But when these family businesses put aside ego and focus only on business, they are a dynamic force, moving forward and creating comfortable standards of living.

Fortunately for our business, no one in our family was ever afraid of hard work. My father and uncle inherited their strong work ethic from their mother, who as a young widow was left to support her eight children by farming. My father then passed this poverty-born determination to his children by the sheer force of the control of his family mandated by his Italian manhood.

My mother was also an amazingly strong woman. Well into her 80's when she passed away, she still worked seven days a week in our restaurant. In the same stern, watchful way she raised her six children, my mother helped to direct a large staff in cooking and baking of many of her recipes, and the many dishes we have since added to our menu, which evolved from the freshness and simplicity of Southern Italian cuisine.

Like my father who also passed away in his 80's, there was nothing except death that would slow her down.

Naturally being Italian, and having a small business in a largely Italian neighborhood, like Penn Hills, I was exposed, in those early years, to the fringes of organized crime. Many Italian families followed the migratory path from Pittsburgh's Italian neighborhood of Larimer to suburban Penn Hills. In an unpublished, University of Pittsburgh paper, "Paesi d'Italia to the Village of Larimer: A Study of Pittsburgh's Forgotten Little Italy, 1920-1950," which was written in 2001 by James Zanella, Penn Hills was the largest recipient of Larimer Italians, with 20% of Pittsburgh's Italians living in Penn Hills in 1970. Inevitably, you knew or did business with someone, somehow connected to organized crime. Many of my friendships, the girls I dated, the people I did business with, were somehow intertwined with the shadowy darkness of the underworld. Everyone lived side by side with a wink and a nod.

But in the aftermath of the 1972 movie release of Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*, organized crime was romanticized and exploded into the mainstream of American pop culture. More than any other movie, *The Godfather* has been blamed for perpetuating the criminalized Italian stereotype. A study done by the Italic Institute of America showed that after the movie's release until 2002, "Close to 300 movies featuring Italians as criminals have been produced since the success of *The Godfather*." This is in spite of the fact that, "Historically, Italian gang members never numbered more than 5,000, which amounts to less than .0034% of the overall Italian American community."

Americans were enthralled with the image of mobsters that Hollywood had nurtured and embellished. Many of Italian descent, including those who were never

actually involved with organized crime began living as if they themselves were a part of the script. They shaped and molded their actions and behavior, their dress and their walk, their whole persona to fit the image. By the early eighties the manufactured image of organized crime had provided mobsters, and their affiliates, a certain amount of misapplied respect most found too difficult to resist. With dramatic flair they burst into a crowded diner and the place would go quiet for a few seconds. Waiters rushed to light their cigars, and at nightclubs, the valet parkers parked their cars in the good spots out front. They were drinking from the top shelf, and would never again drink the wine their fathers and grandfathers quietly made in their basements.

I admit that after watching *The Godfather*, I too, thought it would be cool to hang out with mobsters. The only excuse I offer is that I was young. When you're young you think you're the smartest you're ever going to be in your entire life. Mark Twain said it best in "Old Times on the Mississippi" published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1874, "When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years." Unlike Mark Twain, most people don't wise up until they are well past the age of twenty-one, and I wasn't any different.

A good bit of my social life in my early-adulthood years was spent hanging out in Italian restaurants frequented by attention-hungry mobsters. Along with their quickly expanding entourage of affiliates, childhood friends, and weak-willed wannabes who were enamored with the rat-pack aura of organized crime, mobsters made the Italian restaurant the epicenter of their life. Mobsters drove in with Cadillacs big and plush as some people's living rooms. They talked loud of big money and big scores. In the

intimacy of a crowded bar, deals were made, plans and schemes were hatched, money changed hands, and drugs were bought and sold in unusually frequent trips to the restroom. The women in these bars wore stiletto heels and short dresses, and lots of perfume and jewelry that talked almost as loud as they did.

Whether connected or not, many of the regulars and some of the bar owners had funny sounding nicknames. Many of these nicknames described unkind physical characteristics, but no matter as harsh as they may sound to outsiders of Italian culture, nicknames were terms of respect and familiarity that bonded Italians, gave them a separate identity from the rest of the world. In the tight inner circle of Italian communities, most people didn't know them by any other name.

At Eastwood Inn, or Tigano's Inn, if you could find a seat at the bar, you could watch the show, an endless, hilarious stream of guys who had more stories than the Empire State Building. While Chef Dom at Eastwood, and Chef Tommy at Tigano's prepared some of the finest Italian food in the Pittsburgh area, mobsters laughed and made fun of each other, then made up for the "insult" by buying everyone a round of drinks. Since there was always a certain amount of danger swirling around mobsters, you had to be careful to acknowledge the person buying, especially if you didn't know him. A simple lifting of your glass in his direction was all that was required for fulfilling the protocol of respect.

On some nights, it would have been impossible to consume all the rounds being bought. Being a young novice to the proper etiquette of having rounds bought for you, I started to very discreetly decline the drinks when I had a few too many upside-down shot glasses in front of me. For those not familiar with the art of "buying a round," if you

weren't ready for the drink, the bartender would leave as a marker, an upside-down shot glass on the bar in front of you which you could redeem for a drink when you were ready.

The owner of Eastwood Inn, Paul Scoleri, whispered to me "Frank do me a favor, just take the shot glass, you don't have to drink it and I still make money." I received a lesson in barroom economics that night, learning about profit margins in selling booze when the bar owner sold the undelivered shots.

Along with the bar owner's see-all, hear-all intelligence came alcohol-induced, philosophical advice. At Tigano's Inn, owned by "Inky" Tigano and his wife, Marge, "Inky", asked me one night, about my goals and dreams, where I wanted to go in life.

"One of these days you're going to die, and the undertaker is going to put you in a casket. You'll stick your hand up, and shout, wait, there was one more thing I wanted to do; and he'll stuff your hand back in the casket, slam the door shut, and you can scratch and claw all you want, but you ain't getting out." He then poured us another drink.

At Tigano's, whether I was there for dinner, or just drinks, I always made a point to peek into the kitchen to say hello to Chef Tommy Morante, one of the most talented Italian food chefs in Pittsburgh. Tommy learned his remarkable talent in the kitchen from his father, Chef Eddie Morante. When Frank Sinatra came to Pittsburgh to perform, he requested Eddie to cook for him and his entourage.

I was introduced to Tommy shortly before Tigano's opened, and on one Sunday afternoon, Tommy invited me to join him, and his brother-in law, Joe Giovannini (whose mother, Rossana was a caterer), in watching a Pittsburgh Steelers football game. Right before the game started, Tommy suddenly remembered he was to cater a half-time party. They quickly went to a local supermarket chain, and purchased off-the shelf groceries. In



his apartment kitchen, Tommy, coordinated an amazing job of preparing ordinary grocery-store ingredients into a spectacular Italian meal.

This personal connection with the owners and chefs of these fine Italian restaurants planted the seeds for me to transform our tiny pizzeria into the fine, Italian restaurant it is today. Being in the restaurant business, my relationship with restaurant owners and their kitchen and waitstaff was different than most of the other patrons. As comrade I was invited into the kitchens and offices of the restaurants and bars. Water seeks its own level and it is only natural to nurture the respect and camaraderie of those who can commiserate.

Bar owners know most of their regulars deep down to their skeleton, so by socializing with the owners I managed to avoid the regulars who had reputations for heavy drinking, drugs, fighting, or long arrest records. While in their place of business, the bar owners, all older than I, acted as surrogate parents, helping me to manage my time, keeping me from getting too swept up in the unfettered revelry that soon began taking over most of the lives of the bar's patrons. Though I quickly grew tired of the buffoonery, I continued to be a regular because the owners and chefs made me a part of their family. The Tigano's, along with Marge's sister Rose, and her husband "Hippo," the owners of Hippo's Pub, thought enough of me to invite me into their home for holiday celebrations, and other family gatherings.

Hippo's Pub was one of the busiest bars in the Pittsburgh area. Every Friday and Saturday night, the place was packed, standing room only. While Dave, "Hippo" and Rose's son, managed the bar, Rose greeted all who came in, making everyone feel as they were part of her family. Although there were occasional alcohol-induced problems, along

with the underlying current of illicit activity that always occurs in all types of bars when hundreds cram into tight spaces, the respect and friendship most had for Rose, and her family, put most of the regulars on their best behavior.

Hanging out at the bar, I oftentimes would hear bits of information that I did not want to hear. Someone would come around and ask a question about “business” to someone you were talking to. At those times, it was best to walk away, excuse yourself to the restroom, or start a conversation with someone else, anything to drown out the things you really shouldn’t be hearing.

Other times, statements were made for everyone to hear, “That guy don’t know nuttin about nobody,” someone drunk and angry would say in overworked mobster dialect. But you knew the guy he was talking about, and you knew he didn’t “know nuttin about nobody.”

I also got fixed up quite a bit. I was young, ambitious, drove sports cars and motorcycles, had that little bit of extra money most single people without children seem to have. Someone was always trying to get me to meet their friend, their daughter, their niece, or their cousin.

“Come over and meet my daughter, she’s a nice Italian girl,” one waitress asked me one night. I told her daughter I had to go meet some friends at Hippo’s Pub, and invited her to join me. Although I had never seen her at Hippo’s, she seemed to know more people than I did. While she stopped to talk to friends, I asked what she wanted to drink, went to the bar and found us two places to sit. Dave asked me if I knew who this woman was. I told him no. He told me she was the girlfriend of one of the biggest

mobsters in Western Pennsylvania, who was now in jail. He also told me jail didn't matter, "You should still watch yourself."

Later that night, she volunteered the same information. She said she wanted to see me again, but would understand if I couldn't. She said it was all right, told me not to worry. She told me her boyfriend said it was okay. We went out a couple times, but fortunately for me I never had to find out if her boyfriend approved of her social life because she stopped seeing me, perhaps realizing I wasn't as connected as she thought I was.

Most of the mobsters I knew were not high-ranking Mafioso, but rather low-level numbers writers, who were more a danger to themselves than to anyone else. Like working a franchise within exclusive territories, they pumped a steady source of income up layers of rank until finally reaching the soft spoken, well-dressed, "gentleman farmer," Michael Genovese, who was reputed to run the Western Pennsylvania numbers business. The low-keyed Genovese steadfastly denied any connection to organized crime up until his death of natural causes in 2006. "He beat us at the game," said Roger Greenbank, the former FBI agent who was in charge of the federal government's attack on organized crime in Western Pennsylvania.

If Greenback was right, Genovese, who moved from Pittsburgh's urban Italian section of Larimer Avenue to a farm out in the country, may have been happy to leave others to do the talking for him. But the talk now was too loud. Mobsters lived high and fast, some slept until noon, and then seemed to hang out for what looked like the rest of the day and night, with the illusion of money as a steady source that never seemed to end.

A lot of those guys were also selling stuff out of the trunks of their cars, stuff they wanted you to believe always “fell off a truck,” but some they just bought at Pittsburgh’s wholesale district and resold to naïve customers eager to make a score on what they thought was someone’s stolen misfortune. I found it hard to believe anyone would consider someone a dangerous mobster when they were always asking your shoe size every time you would run into them.

Mobsters routinely overestimated their intelligence and underestimated the federal government’s. Time and time again I wondered how some got as far as they did. One guy had his boat pulled out of the water by Federal Marshals. It was confiscated in conjunction with his arrest for drug dealing. He had no visible means of support, no job, no legitimate source of income, but with fifty-five thousand dollars cash and the trade in of his old boat, he owned the new boat free and clear. Unfortunately for him, the authorities defined “free and clear” a little differently.

The mobster’s constant bumbling was a continual source of amusement to me. One numbers writer kept his “book” in his next-door neighbors’ shed, while they spent their winters in Florida. You could actually see a trail of compacted snow leading from his backdoor directly to the shed. I heard of another mobster who would walk around his neighborhood late at night with a garbage bag full of old numbers slips and dump them next to other garbage bags for next morning pickup.

The reason many of those old-time numbers writers never got arrested had very little to do with what they thought was their cunning ability in avoiding prosecution. Gambling before the days of state lotteries and legalized casinos was not competition for the government and was considered by law enforcement as a relatively harmless pastime.

The police only went after high profile people who made a lot of noise or where too dangerous to remain on the streets.

And while there were many dangerous people, not all were the stereotypical thugs portrayed in the movies. Some were intellectual, while others were soft-spoken and gentlemanly, the most likable killers you would ever meet.

My initiation as an observer of this paradox of a gentleman thug actually began a year before we opened the pizzeria. I went to Central District Catholic High School, a private, all-boys school where ambitious catholic parents send their children for a solid private-school education. I chose to go there on my own. Central took only the best, and since I was no slouch to hard work, I was up to the challenge.

At Central, the freshman class of 1969 began much the same way as all the previous freshman classes since its founding in 1927. With different neighborhoods converging, inevitable skirmishes for marking territory were almost daily occurrences, sometimes spilling out into the evenings by taking the relatively harmless battles home with them into their neighborhoods. But most found their place quickly, settling into cliques that with few exceptions, defined much of their high school lives.

I spent my entire freshman year wandering the halls of the Gothic-inspired, cavernous building looking for my place. My father, in regimenting every aspect of my childhood, had succeeded in his quest to toughen me, but also unintentionally imbedded in me an insecurity bred from a lack of social skills. I grew up as nothing more than a machine, like a lawnmower clipping away at my childhood in the curse of no time to make friends.

In my sophomore year a group of Italians casually befriended me. They were the

last generation of Italians to grow up on Larimer Avenue. They told me they tried to talk to me the year before, although I didn't seem to remember. They were street-smart kids who accepted me as their friend not only because I was Italian, but also because I had the wandering image of a loner, which was very popular in those tie-dyed hippie days

The difference they made in my life was dramatic. These were the toughest kids coming from the toughest neighborhood. They were well-dressed and disciplined, carried switchblades, and never had a problem getting dates. They walked around with pocketfuls of cash to pay off the winners of the weekly football pools; the ones clearly marked "For Entertainment Purposes Only." If anybody messed with one, they had to deal with all of them.

But in spite of their toughness, they got along with everybody; the football jocks, the teachers, kids of all races, and even the geeks whose crime of being different made them the target of every bully's beating and pranks. I was drawn to them not only for their confidence, but also for their spirit of inclusion, and their gentlemanly acts of standing up for high school's inevitable misfits. By the time we opened the pizzeria, the model of a gentleman tough guy was already firmly planted in my mind.

In the fall of 1971, as I started my junior year at Central, Rod Stewart's *Maggie May* filled the radio airwaves, and I had a hippie girlfriend named Maggie. Maggie lived down the street, and began walking with me to my bus stop every school morning. Free-spirited, pretty and sixteen with long, black hair falling across her back to tight, flared blue jeans, Maggie celebrated Women's Lib by going braless. She was every hippie, teenage boy's dream.

On these agonizingly long, boring rides from suburb to city, Leo, who was one of the very first customers in our pizzeria, rode me into school most mornings. Leo worked for the Port Authority, driving buses. Decent pay, along with liberal sick-leave policies and early retirement benefits made the job a pretty good front for Leo.

On first impression Leo was the most likable guy you would ever meet. A big man with a soft caring voice, Leo always asked how everyone was doing, careful not to omit anyone. Leo could easily engage anyone in conversation, seemingly without pushing himself onto anyone, asking about families, the problems they were having, how their health was, or what kind of job they had. It was not unusual for Leo to go off the route on a rainy day, if someone lived too far from the bus stop and didn't have an umbrella. He delivered them right to their front door. When Leo picked me up at my stop, a crowd always boarded with me. Leo would put his hand over the fare box, not accepting money from anyone. Like buying a round for all of us, he wouldn't take my money, so he could not very well have taken it from the others.

"You're all with Frank," he would announce. "No one pays when they're with Frank," he always added. As far as I knew, the ones who paid full fare never complained, for everybody seemed to like Leo. His good nature, along with his size, disarmed the surliest of individuals.

Leo's charm and friendliness pulled me closer into his inner circle. I saw how Leo made everyone feel as if they were the most important people in the world. When he walked into a bar or restaurant everyone knew him and wanted to hang out with him. As easily as praise, Leo would lavish big tips on the waitresses in such a subtle way as to let everyone around him know the tip was deserved. Other customers felt embarrassed not to

follow suit. On one occasion, I saw Leo put money in a woman's purse while she wasn't looking. He knew she was having problems and wanted to help. He saw me watching and put his finger to his lips, making me a co-conspirator to his humanitarian act.

But once you got to know Leo, startling bits of the violent stories of his life came out. These tabloid-like street stories were deadly serious and very violent, about a Leo you thought you knew. I would quickly learn that he was the most dangerous guy I would ever know personally. What gave credibility to Leo's deadly reputation was when Ron Laufer, a Penn Hills detective I knew, now long retired from the local police department, offered me some advice. He talked to me as a friend "Be careful with Leo," he admonished. "We know he's killed people; we just haven't been able to prove it."

Leo's darker alter ego eventually took control of his life, and his name inevitably began appearing in frequent police reports. Leo was no different than many of the other mobsters of that era who loved the attention these stories provided. They were like brushfire consuming the dry, boring landscapes of our lives. Leo created the myth, but couldn't live off the interest it provided without creating more violence, and then bragging about his crimes to an ever-widening circle of friends. He became a semi-automatic Beretta pistol, pulling a trigger of brutality in rapid succession, each bullet whizzing past our ears, finding its mark in those who were unfortunate enough to play a bit part in Leo's rise to notorious stardom. We hung his misdeeds on our chest as a pinned medal, the prize of bragging to our dates, like Michael Corleone to Kay Adams in *The Godfather*, that we were friends with a cold-blooded murderer of mythical proportions like Luca Brasi.



Not content to be just another numbers writer, Leo played wide and various rolls for the mob, including muscle, stereotypically breaking the legs of those too slow in paying. He didn't have to look very hard to find his targets because they were always hanging around bars frequented by mobsters. Leo preferred to corner his victims in crowded bars where they were both well known, bursting in with the force of a hurricane, pushing people aside, spilling drinks, and then walking quietly out the door, not saying a word to anyone. No one tried to stop him. No one ever called the police.

But when Leo had shot someone and beaten the rap when the victim refused to identify his assailant, he was caught in the radar of the government's stepped-up assault on organized crime. A short while after the shooting, Leo was arrested for numbers writing. The police weren't taking any chances, and sent in a SWAT team, an unheard action for a routine numbers violation. All these precautions turned out to be unnecessary as Leo was always a perfect gentleman to his captors, the most likable criminal they would ever arrest.

When Leo got out of jail, he started working construction, got married and started to build a new house. Leo's wife was pretty, in a soft way, that was unusual for a mobster's taste. They laughed and held hands like school kids. Leo looked happy. But for Leo, a new wife and happiness did not mean a new start, a new way of life. Most of the materials for his new home were stolen. Leo was soon arrested again. The government now charged Leo with violations of the RICO Act of 1970; an offense much more serious than mobsters had ever encountered before. The RICO Act takes a series of crimes, sometimes unrelated, and builds a case for a pattern of organized criminal activity. Those

convicted spend many more years in prison. Leo's wife left him while he was in prison. A few years later Leo died in prison.

Just as charismatic as Leo, but much more generous, refined and intelligent was Anthony "Ninny the Torch" Lagattuta. Lagattuta's obituary article in the January 25, 1996 *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, stated that he was "a flamboyant and notorious convicted criminal and reputed organized crime tough guy." Not a stereotypical mobster, the article also stated that Lagattuta was "a benevolent man who could quote Shakespeare, decipher complicated mathematical problems in seconds and converse on subjects ranging from Greek philosophers to Western novels. He could also play a piano with virtuosity." I never met Lagattuta and heard nothing of the crimes he may have committed, but to have an obituary article in a major, metropolitan newspaper label you as a "reputed organized crime tough guy," you can easily assume he soiled his hands more than once by spreading manure in his back garden. But in spite of this label, people I know who were very close to Lagattuta said he was a generous and kind-hearted man. They would also have you know that those who knew the best, his family and closest friends, knew him not as Ninny, as the media referred to him, but as Nini, a name affectionately given to him as an infant by his aunt. Some may say that all this kindness was an act to deflate attention from his darker side, but by the passion in those who speak of Lagattuta, he would've had to been a pretty fine actor to have fooled so many for so many years. Unlike Leo, Nini died in the embrace of his large, loving family, perhaps smart enough not to die alone and unloved.

But most mobsters were not like Lagattuta. Most of the post *Godfather* era mobsters ended up in prison, or simply faded away in drunken anonymity. In triggering

the public's imagination, *The Godfather* could easily be blamed for bringing about the ruin of this particular group, but the way I saw the fight from my ringside seat is that many mobsters of that era didn't have the finesse, strength of will, or intellect for their lives to have any other outcome.

Today's Italian mobsters may have learned the lessons of *The Godfather* in they are nameless and faceless to the general public, moving like a silent and deadly virus infecting many lives. In spite of the influx of other geographically based syndicates, the FBI states that "Italian criminal societies known as the Mafia have 3,000 members and affiliates in the United States and 25,000 members and 250,000 affiliates worldwide." Most people, including those well versed in fictional or high-profile historical mobsters like Al Capone or "Lucky" Luciano, would be hard-pressed to name at least one of these members. The FBI adds that "Industry experts in Italy estimate that their worldwide criminal activity is worth more than \$100 billion annually." To operate an enterprise of this size, legal or illegal, would require savvy and intellect in more than a few its members. Some may follow in the footsteps of Genovese or Lagattuta and will be charismatic and gentlemanly, perform noble deeds, and may die old and of natural causes. If the probing fingers of history books will remember these mobsters at all, they will be judged with the most ferocious of mankind. I would also judge them for the potential they squandered.

But who are we to judge, for duality exists in all of us, perhaps not so pronounced. And though there are crimes that should never be forgiven, we should not find any enjoyment in judging those whose mistakes are greater than ours, especially when their kindness is also larger than ours.

What I do know for certain is *The Godfather* had an irreversible and positive influence in my life. I saw beyond *The Godfather's* tragedy to the pride, strength and sense of family being Italian truly meant. My parents, like many other emigrants demoralized by the lack of opportunity in their ancestral birthplace, had no intention of ever returning to Italy, and rarely mentioned their past. They dug their heels into the bounty they perceived as the birthright of all citizens of America. A box of imported pasta on a grocer's shelf was more Italian than I.

What began as a youthful, misguided swagger through the bar and tavern playgrounds of organized crime, spawned into a cultural metamorphosis that ultimately would take me on a journey across the vast oceans to my ancestral birthplace of Calabria, Italy. In walking along the lands of my ancestors, I found a sense of place. Without hunger in my belly, I can enjoy the food and wine, the rich history of art and culture, the beautiful country sides, the sea and mountains, castles, churches, piazzas, and the old, rich tradition of family that have consumed my thoughts, and taken over my dreams. Only a bigger-than-life movie like *The Godfather* could awaken the sleepy Italian within me.

## Notes

Some of the names in this story have been changed, others left out, and some full-names were used only if historical facts could identify them.

The title of this story is a line borrowed from *The Godfather*, by Mario Puzo.

The quote below the title is by Pat Conroy, taken from *The Prince of Tides*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986.

The Italic Institute of America Study was found in Italian Culture on Film Statistics from the Italic Institute of America, reported at [www.italic.org/imageb1.htm](http://www.italic.org/imageb1.htm).

For a condensed criminal history of Michael Genovese, see: Torsten Ove, "Obituary: Michael Genovese/ Government Said Quiet Businessman was Mafia Boss," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, November 02, 2006.

For more information on the Roger Greenback and the FBI report on organized crime's impact and history, see: <http://www.fbi.gov/hq/cid/orgcrime/lcnindex.htm>, "Italian Organized Crime – Overview."

The last paragraph is a slightly different version of the last paragraph of *Homewood*, a story I had written and was published by *Voices in Italian Americana*.