Written by an award winning novelist, these stories present a rich and candid account of growing up and growing old in Sicily and America. The twenty-three stories are separate, but also linked. Original Sin, the opening story set in Sicily in 1900, pushes a father-son conflict to its tragic conclusion. Its protagonist, Peter Marino, emigrates to America, where his descendants experience the conflicts, hopes, and needs that add up to the human condition.

## Lost Hearts

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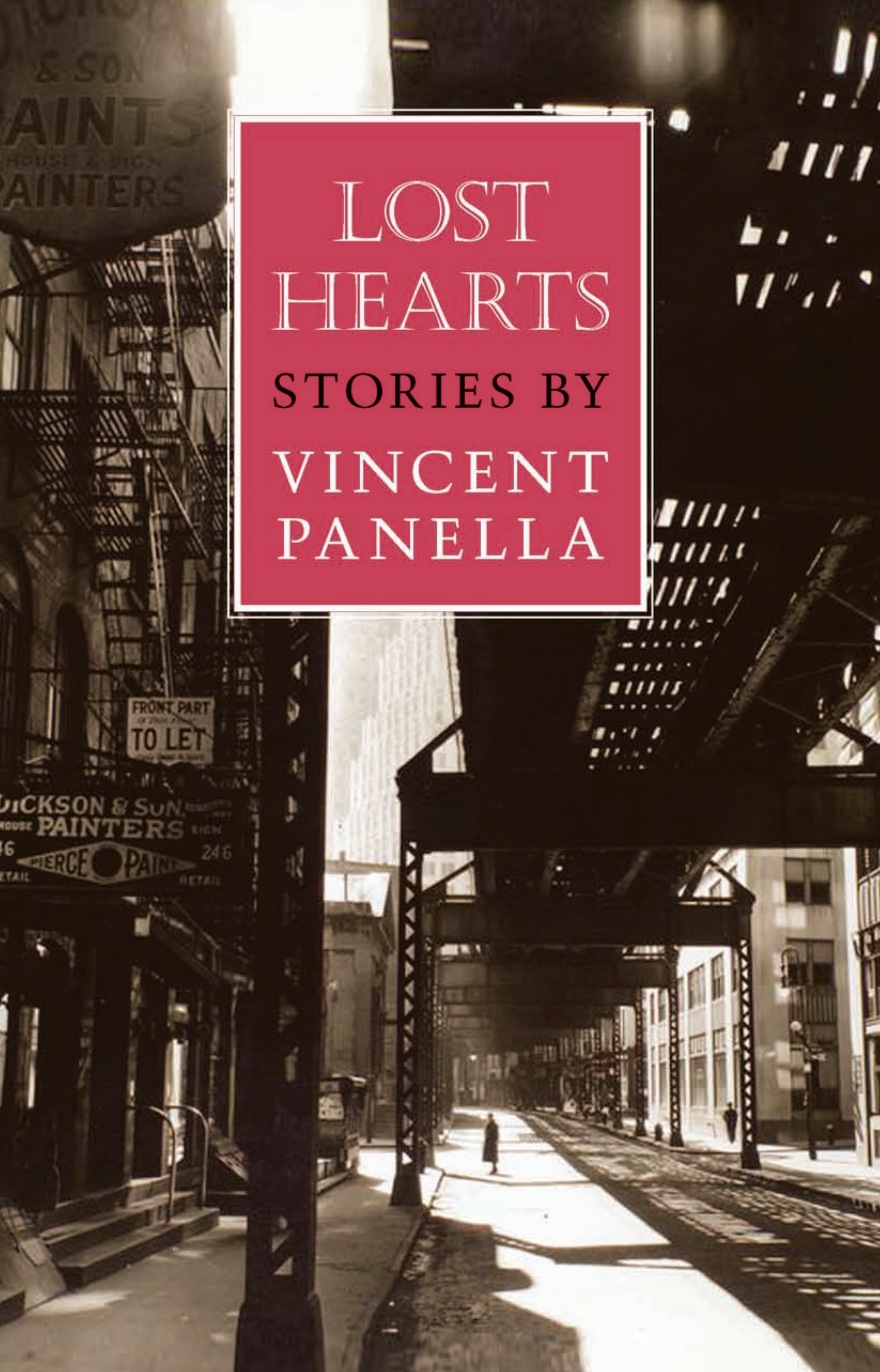
# LOST HEARTS

## STORIES BY
## VINCENT PANELLA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ALSO BY VINCENT PANELLA

*The Other Side: Growing Up Italian in America*, 1979

*Cutter's Island: Caesar in Captivity*, 2000

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*Lost Hearts* is a work of fiction with some use of historical events, people, and places. The Sicilian land reform movement depicted in *Original Sin* is drawn from history, as is the eponymous "Mad Bomber," who terrorized New York City for sixteen years. The Orchid Room and Harry Martins were supper clubs in Queens.

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# Libation

Not a word between them, not on Roosevelt Avenue where a bleak winter light dropped through the el tracks and ran along the car hood, and where Hank drove with one hand holding a cigar out the window to keep it burning. Not a word from Hank and none from Charlie, grateful that the cold air rushing through the car gave him the opportunity to sit as far from his father as possible—against the door, hunched down with his jacket collar over his ears, hands jammed into his pockets.

The car folded into the Sunday morning traffic on Queens Boulevard then gathered speed up the bridge ramp, mounting the roadway as Charlie beheld the skyline through a cage of girders. Not a word between them as they crested the bridge and descended into Manhattan. Nothing along the FDR Drive, where on better days Charlie would recite the names of the bridges connecting Manhattan to Queens and Brooklyn that his father had taught him: 59th Street, Williamsburg, Manhattan, Brooklyn. Still not a word heading south along the river, nothing past the Fulton Fish Market where Charlie's attention was drawn to mountains of ice, mounds of crabs, open crates and weighing scales laden with varicolored fish, and still not a word when they continued past Sloppy Louie's and the piers and ferry slips, finally parking on South Street in front of Number Five, The Marine Bar and Grill, no longer a grill and barely a bar, a place Hank had owned for years.

Out front a group of men huddled against the wind in their miserable clothing. The sober and more fortunate wore watch caps and raincoats or Navy Pea jackets. Those more obviously destroyed by drink and unaffected by the cold wore less. One man, his head freshly bandaged in gauze, reminded Charlie of the picture *The*

*Spirit of '76*. He wore nothing but a blood spattered tee shirt and a sport coat with the collar turned up.

Charlie and Hank were no sooner out of the car when the men surrounded them, pleading for money. "Hank, how about my flop," the word referring to flophouses where they could sleep for fifty cents a night. Hank dismissed all the outstretched hands and reminded the men that there were still a few hours to go until the bar opened up. Then he broke through the crowd, unlocked the door, and slipped inside with Charlie behind him.

The bar was below street level and Charlie followed Hank down a wooden ramp into a tunnel-like room with sawdust on the floor and a disorder of chairs and tables opposite a long bar with back shelves nearly bare except for a few bottles of liquor and Muscatel. Hank opened a door on the side of the room opposite the bar and led Charlie down some rickety steps to the cellar. There he groped for a door, unlocked it, and pulled a string switch. The light revealed a narrow room with a safe at one end and a desk at the other. Canes and umbrellas hung on one wall—all traded for drinks—and shelves built into another wall held cases of Muscatel.

Hank motioned Charlie to the desk chair, then took down an empty soup pot and left the room. Charlie heard the violent echo of water running into the pot and took the opportunity of Hank's absence to open the desk drawer, there finding what he'd seen on previous visits, assorted silver flatware, a porous silver "ball" made of partially melted spoons and forks, and a collection of rings and watches. Charlie picked up one of the watches, considered slipping it into his pocket, then decided against it.

When Hank returned with the pot of water Charlie once again hunched into his jacket—it was cold in the basement. His father, wearing a gabardine coat and a hat with the brim turned up, set the pot on a table beside the desk. Next to the water pot he placed another pot, this one empty, with a ladle and funnel alongside.

Charlie relaxed a little, emerging from the jacket, beginning to believe that his punishment for drinking the night before would not be physical but something else, a lesson on the evils of alcohol.

On the night before, Charlie and his friends had been drinking in a neighborhood bar called Harry Martin's, a supper club fallen to ruin and so desperate for business that the most poorly altered proof of age was accepted. At a certain point Charlie told his friends about the ancient custom of libation, demonstrating this by ordering two shots of Seagrams Seven Crown and pouring one on the floor before throwing the second one down his throat.

Harry Martin's had a square bar, and after setting the empty shot glasses on the bar to the laughter and applause of his friends, Charlie saw someone staring at him from across the bar. The man had a glass to his lips, and when he set it down Charlie saw his father. Hank then came around to Charlie's side, took him by the elbow, and guided him out the door, at the same time telling the bartender that he could lose his license for serving minors.

Hank pulled down a case of Muscatel, ripped it open, and cut the federal stamp on each bottle cap with a knife. He then unscrewed each cap and emptied about a fourth of each bottle into the empty pot. With ladle and funnel he refilled the bottles with water and screwed the caps back on to the point where the stamp came together again. He turned each bottle two or three times to mix the water and wine. Next he filled four empty bottles three quarters of the way with the wine already drawn off, topped these with water, and screwed the caps back on.

Standing over Charlie he said, "This is what you get when you're on the wrong side of the bar." He picked up the pots and held one in each hand as if to show Charlie the evidence. Charlie wanted to say that he and his friends didn't drink cheap wine, but decided to remain silent.

"Think you're a hotshot?" Hank asked, putting the pots back on the shelf. "This is what you get, and you can't tell the difference. Do you know why?"

"No."

"Because it's all garbage, no matter how you cut it. One drink and your taste buds are shot, you don't know what you're drinking. And do you think they don't adulterate that whiskey you were drinking last night? You think they don't fill that bottle of Seagrams with cheap whiskey so they can increase their profits?"

Hank backed up to the doorway and leaned against the jamb, crossing one foot over the other. His overcoat and jacket were open, and he hooked both thumbs into his belt as if to push in his slight pot belly.

"So what do you do there? What do you do in Harry Martin's besides piss away your money?"

"Nothing."

Hank put down the pots and raised a hand as if to strike him. "Don't say 'nothing' to me!"

Charlie sank back into his jacket and closed his eyes. He waited for the blow.

Hank took hold of Charlie's jacket collar and pulled it down. "Answer my question! What do you do in that place beside piss away your money? Look at me!"

Charlie opened his eyes and the number of times his father had hit him wheeled before him, slaps, punches, extended beat-ups for answering back, for challenging.

"Answer me!"

"We drink and talk, that's all."

"Drink and talk? What's this business where you pour whiskey on the floor and everybody laughs? What's that all about?"

"It's just a game."

"You're no different than those bums outside."

They went upstairs, Hank carrying the case of watered wine, Charlie the extra bottles. They placed all the bottles under the bar, and with an hour before opening time they walked over to Whitehall Street and The Bean Pot, a cafeteria style restaurant with a steam table along one wall. Charlie and Hank slid their trays along the runners past a giant crock pot of boiling beans and pans of hot food behind the steamy glass covers. Hank took stuffed cabbage and rice pudding, Charlie spaghetti and meatballs with tomato sauce, and a piece of lemon pie. The restaurant was crowded with ferry passengers but they found a table and began to eat. The lunch was as quiet as the morning drive. Charlie was still unwilling to talk even though the little wine-watering demonstration had been his father's effort to try something other than physical punishment.

Hank drove his fork into a cabbage, and Charlie heard him chew with an audible clicking of his jaw. Charlie ate more slowly, using his fork to cut the bready meatballs into slices, and covering each with some of the too-sweet tomato sauce, probably straight from a can. The food wasn't as good as it looked, and at one point he stopped eating.

"What's wrong?" asked Hank.

Charlie shook his head.

Hank pointed his fork at Charlie's plate. "If you don't like it, you don't have to eat it. You can have something else."

Charlie shook his head again and returned to the spaghetti. His father displayed unusual generosity in the few restaurants they ate in together, The Bean Pot here, Bickford's in Queens. Somehow the act of eating with Charlie made Hank polite and eager to please.

Charlie continued with the spaghetti and meatballs. It was nothing like home. He ate it anyway, certain now that his punishment for the night before would not be physical. He saw that Hank had finished his rice pudding, and knew that if he looked up Hank would be smiling in triumph for the profound lesson he'd taught his son. So Charlie didn't look up. Between them there'd always been a contest to see who was stronger. Hank had always been strong, but now Charlie felt strong too, not yet as strong as Hank, but he was getting there. And like a prisoner, he looked forward to the day when he would be free.

After lunch they walked back around and pushed through the group of men in front of the bar. Hank unlocked the door and went down the ramp. Charlie and the others followed behind. Those with money took stools at the bar, those without seated themselves at the tables and badgered the men at the bar for drinks. Hank put on his bar apron and went to work. The drinkers, many with trembling hands, ordered full glasses of Muscatel, some of them needing Hank's help to lift their glasses without spilling. The bottles on the back bar were soon empty and Charlie watched as Hank reached under the bar for each new bottle, holding his hand over the broken stamp and pretending, when he unscrewed the cap, to twist it extra hard to "break" the stamp. He would then pour each glass to the brim, and as the men drank in long, desperate sips, exhaling in satisfaction at the alcohol's deceptive warming effect, Hank looked at Charlie as if to repeat his words about being on the wrong side of the bar.

Charlie sat at the end of the bar for the rest of the afternoon. He read the Sunday newspaper and watched the men pester Hank and each other for drinks. He'd been coming to the Marine Bar since an early age, at first afraid of these dirty and drunken men, but soon realizing they were poor, weak creatures with no control over their addiction. At one point the man with the bandaged head—who said that the police had beaten him and taken his money—told him how alcohol had destroyed his life. He was a seaman who worked part of the year and drank for the rest. When he came off a ship he put his pay in a savings account and gave the passbook to Hank, who dispensed a certain amount of money each week so he wouldn't exceed his budget.

"Your father's an honest man," he said.

Charlie had heard these stories before, and had even seen the bankbooks kept behind the bar. He wondered what these men would say if they knew that Hank watered their Muscatel. But watered wine probably didn't matter. They certainly couldn't taste the difference, and if anything, weak wine might prolong their lives. According to Hank these men either died of exposure—unable to feel the cold—or from diseases passed between them from drinking out of the same bottle.

In late afternoon the relief bartender showed up, and Hank and Charlie drove back to Queens. It was dark now, and they crossed back over the 59th Street bridge into a landscape of lights on the Queens side. The red neon Silvercup Bread factory sign reflected its print in the river and the warm smell of baking bread filled the air. Hank was smoking a cigar and had opened the window to dissipate the smoke. With cold air sweeping in Charlie remained hunched in his jacket. When they arrived in Jackson Heights and parked at their house Charlie opened the car door to get out .

"Don't go in yet," said Hank.

Charlie pulled the door shut but kept a grip on the handle. He shifted on the seat and pressed his feet against the floorboard.

Hank turned to Charlie, picking up his hat which lay on seat between them. He worked the brim with both hands. "You'll get in trouble if you keep drinking. You'll get in trouble with those friends."

"Have I ever been in trouble?"

"It's just a matter of time the way you're going."

Charlie looked around at the dark and eerie street. A streetlight shining through the trees lent circular form to the bare branches. A man smoking a pipe walked his dog on the island which ran down the middle of the street. Figures moved behind the blinds in their apartment. Everybody was home, and his mother was cooking dinner.

"What am I supposed to do when you drink in bars and come home drunk?"

"You don't have to do anything," Charlie said.

"Listen, Charlie, I can't do that. I can't do nothing."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm your father. I have a responsibility. Am I supposed to let you get drunk every weekend?"

"I don't get drunk every weekend."

"Do you expect me to believe that?"

"It's true."

"Charlie, I'm in the bar business. Do you think you're fooling me?"

"I'm telling you the truth."

"Then I'll tell you the truth. I don't know how to change this behavior. I don't know what to do with you."

When Charlie didn't respond, Hank went on. "These are the most important years of your life. These few years decide what you become. Do you believe that?"

Charlie shrugged.

"How do you think those friends of yours in Harry Martin's are going to end up? Those kids who want to quit school and join the Navy so they can sleep with ten-dollar whores in foreign countries? How will they end up? Driving trucks? Digging ditches? Tending bar? Working with their hands like me and putting up with bullshit from people who might as well be dead? Do you want to do what I do for a living? Or do you want something better? This is the choice you have to make. Which way do you want to live?"

Charlie breathed evenly now, wanting to say that he could live both ways, that he could drink with his friends and stay out of trouble. But Hank would never accept that argument. Charlie squeezed the door handle, unwilling to concede anything despite Hank's admission of helplessness. Charlie wanted to tell his father that all the punishment he'd dished out over the years not only hadn't worked, but had the opposite effect.

"Am I making any sense?" Hank asked.

Charlie nodded.

"You have school tomorrow," Hank said. "Is your homework done?"

"I did most of it on Friday."

"I wish you'd understand," Hank said. "I wish I could make sense to you."

Charlie followed Hank into the house and after greeting his mother briefly, went to his room. He came out for dinner, and when that was over he rose from the table and announced that he was writing a book report for extra credit. This was not a lie. The book was called *Cutlass Empire* and it described how Charles II knighted the pirate Henry Morgan for sinking Spanish ships and sacking their towns in the Caribbean. Charlie titled the report "Sir Pirate," and wrote it neatly on lined loose leaf paper. Then he gathered his books for school the next day.

Before going to sleep he locked his bedroom door. The lock was his privilege, a bargain with his father that in exchange for finishing high school, he would have the gift of privacy. So his room was a special sanctuary, desk, bookcase, radio and lamp on a night stand along with a small generic bust of an ancient face that he called Apollo.

Charlie turned out the night lamp and lit a candle in front of the statue, then lay back and listened to his father snoring in the room down the hall. This had been a day when he assumed that Hank would use his fists. Instead, Hank confessed that he didn't know what to do. His father not only powerless at last, but admitting it. This was a victory, a gift from the Gods. He looked at Apollo's stoic face then blew out the candle and tucked himself in. He closed his eyes for the sleep to come, knowing he would win this war.

# *Frank and Jimmy*

Rose sat at the living room window while Charlie worked in the kitchen, scooping tomato sauce into freezer containers.

"Charlie, do you remember Jimmy the Butcher?"

"Who can forget Jimmy, Ma."

"Oh, those veal cutlets!"

Jimmy the Butcher even delivered, to Charlie's mother anyway. In all the years since she'd been separated from Hank, Jimmy was evoked as a symbol of what she might have done with her life, an alternative to the husband who'd left her high and dry, a possible second marriage to a sweet guy who kept normal hours. And all the talk about him which the family encouraged functioned to ease the pain of his mother's solitary life.

"Jimmy liked you, Ma. He had a crush." Charlie wiped his forehead with a dishtowel as he filled the kitchen sink with pots and pans. He'd been cooking since morning, his turn at what he and Lettie called 'Mommy Sitting.'

"You should have gone out with him. I know he asked you."

"Come on, what do you know!"

Charlie came into the living room and sat next to her. "What do I know? I know this. Why did he deliver the veal cutlets to the house? You were the only one he did that for."

"He never delivered anything! Stop teasing."

"You brought it up."

Charlie returned to the kitchen and stacked the tomato sauce containers in the freezer, leaving spaces between so the cold air could circulate. Either his mother didn't remember about Jimmy, or she didn't know what he knew.

After cleaning the kitchen, Charlie sat down next to his mother again. This was their time together, not much to say, a few old memories, plenty of dead time, the air conditioner humming. He turned on the TV and clicked the channels with the sound off while his mother picked up one of the few books she read, a coffee table volume called *Sinatr*a!, a praise of the singer's life. Here were full-page photos of Frank in classic poses: crooning at the Paramount; wearing his fedora and that cocky smile, a cigarette in his mouth; with Ava at the Copacabana; with Mia on a yacht; Frank in a Tux with JFK; Frank with the other women he'd skewered, and of course his wife Nancy, the damaged one, abandoned when Frank hit the big time.

"Men are such pigs," the mother said. "The way he left her, that was terrible."

"Not all men are pigs," Charlie said. "Not me." Because he was her son, he knew she'd agree.

She took his hand and said, "You're the best. You're my boy." Her grip was weak. She was eighty seven, flaccid here, swollen there, collapsed elsewhere, some front teeth missing. As a young woman she looked like a dark haired saint, with blue eyes and heavy red lipstick and a serious, Mediterranean smile. When they lived in Queens she used to vacuum to Guy Lombardo music, a flowered kerchief around her head with a knot in the front like Rosie the Riveter. The Singer vacuum cleaner with its angry aluminum head sucked air like a freight engine, a one-eyed monster, its headlight probing under couches and chairs while she sang and shimmied to the beat, not caring that he watched.

She and Jimmy even resembled each other, both Sicilian, both blue eyed and black haired, and both with self-effacing smiles. They looked like brother and sister, and Charlie couldn't imagine Jimmy ever hitting anyone, or raising his voice.

At the butcher shop in the sun-mottled shadows of the elevated track Jimmy would set a stool next to the cutting table where Charlie could sit and watch—impatiently then, for the event was nothing but a chore—as Jimmy sliced a piece of veal from the leg, and with that artful action of pounding and sliding, as if the veal were made of clay, mold the slice into a thin, tender cutlet and set it on butcher paper. Later his mother would dip the cutlets in beaten egg seasoned with salt, pepper, and chopped parsley, dredge them in bread crumbs, fry them, and set them on a brown paper bag to drain off the oil.

"Mom!"

"What?"

"Tell me the truth about Jimmy."

"What truth, he liked me."

"Did he ever say anything? Do anything?"

"Come off it!"

"Then why do you always ask me if I remember him?"

"I don't know. I was just thinking about him."

"You must have liked him too."

"I liked him, sure."

"So?"

"So what?"

"So did anything ever happen?"

"Hey, I was married to your father."

"That's not what I asked."

"How could anything happen?"

"In the first place, Daddy wasn't home that much."

"Oh, please! I'm surprised at you!"

"I'm just asking."

"He was a nice guy, that's all. He took care of me."

So maybe she did remember that while Hank—like Sinatra—was chasing the women, it was most likely that Jimmy more than once arrived at the pantry door with a paper bag and the veal cutlets inside rolled up in butcher paper tied with string. Sure he'd stay for coffee, just one cup. And how about a piece of cake, I made ricotta cheesecake. No, please, I have to go. Come on. Alright, but just a little piece.

But it had definitely happened once, and so long ago that Charlie could reasonably argue it hadn't happened at all, that all this Jimmy talk over the years created the memory, and that this memory was a wishful dream for his mother's independence in the face of a father who'd betrayed her.

But no, it had happened. Jimmy had come. Wearing a navy blue jacket with an imitation fur collar, he walked up to the house with his paper bag, unaware of Charlie some distance behind on the side of the house, having taken a fall in the schoolyard, and pushing his two-wheeler with the handle bars askew, a skin flap hanging from his scraped elbow.

Jimmy didn't notice Charlie behind him because he was intent on pushing open the half-glass back door, then pushing open the half-glass inner door to the kitchen where his mother waited in that flowered kerchief with the knot on top. And when Jimmy entered he didn't see Charlie lean his bike against the steps and come in as far as the pantry, pressing a handkerchief to his bleeding elbow where the flesh had been rent.

But Charlie saw Jimmy inside the kitchen, under the wall clock, the jacket still on, the fur collar up. He was hunched over, embracing Charlie's mother, her kerchief knot just sticking up over his shoulder, and something moving under the jacket—her hands reaching around to his back.

He thought he'd heard something, but now in his memory he couldn't be sure, breathing, perhaps a sigh, perhaps his own whimpers of pain that over the years—forty or more—he'd made himself forget.

But he didn't stay there. In the few seconds that he waited in the pantry looking into the kitchen, the outside door still open behind him, he backed away, leaving the door ajar so they wouldn't hear it shut. He wheeled his bike into the garage, and not knowing how to straighten the handle bars, sat on an overturned bucket, its bottom caked with mortar from some repair his father had done. With the handkerchief his mother always made him carry he tried to pull off the flap but it hurt too much so he kept the handkerchief over the wound until the flap stuck there on its own.

He waited, and now he couldn't remember whether it had been long enough for his mother and Jimmy to do anything more than kiss and hug. When the back door closed he watched through the garage window as Jimmy disappeared around the side of the house toward the street.

"How did this happen?" she asked when he went inside to show her the elbow. "Where were you?"

"In the schoolyard."

She inspected the elbow, the flap adhering and scabbing up.

"When?" she asked.

"Just now."

She looked at him for a long time.

When the day darkened his mother closed her eyes for a nap, and Charlie left the house and drove to the cemetery to visit his father. He parked at the grave, got out of the car, leaned against it for a moment, then went to the headstone where a foil covered flower pot with a dead geranium sat askew in the dirt. Charlie walked around the area where the coffin would have been placed. Then he leaned over and touched the ground over his father's heart.

Written by an award winning novelist, these stories present a rich and candid account of growing up and growing old in Sicily and America. The twenty-three stories are separate, but also linked. Original Sin, the opening story set in Sicily in 1900, pushes a father-son conflict to its tragic conclusion. Its protagonist, Peter Marino, emigrates to America, where his descendants experience the conflicts, hopes, and needs that add up to the human condition.

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