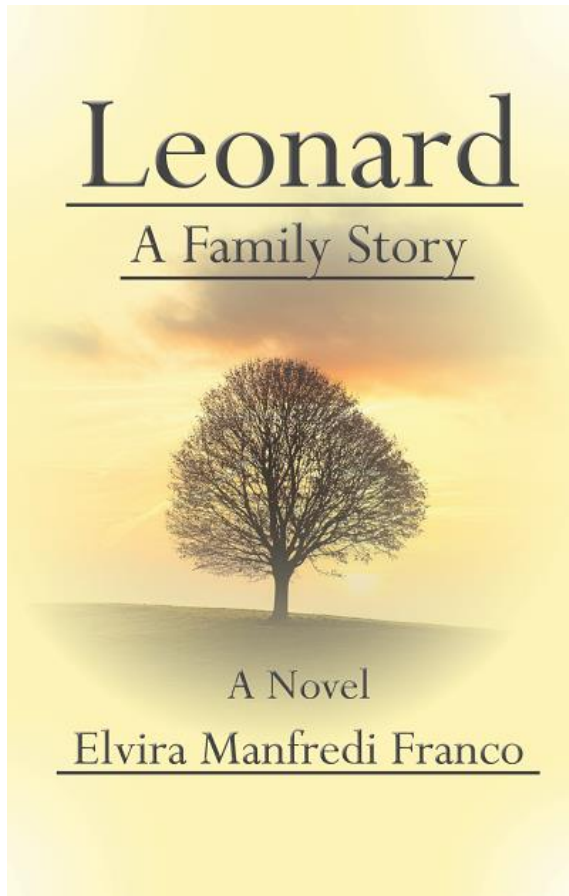




Leonard is a retired mail carrier who can't connect with his family. He mourns his dead wife, until she appears on his television screen and helps him to overcome his depression and to appreciate his children.

Leonard: A Family Story
By Elvira Manfredi Franco

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Leonard

A Family Story



A Novel

Elvira Manfredi Franco

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Chapter I

There were days when Leonard did not get up at all from his recliner, except to go to the bathroom. Or perhaps to the kitchen for a snack. Sometimes, if he woke up in the middle of the night, and he was still in his chair, then he would get up and go to bed. Otherwise he snoozed right where he was. Getting up to go to bed was a distraction from the recliner, and getting up in the morning was a distraction from his bed. But in the end, there was no point to any of it.

He could not say that he was lonely, exactly. It was just that he didn't care. His children came to visit. His daughter Paula came, more or less regularly, usually on Friday afternoons. He knew when to expect her, and braced himself for the visit. She walked in without knocking, or ringing the doorbell. "Hi Dad, it's me!" And then she started:

"Dad, when was the last time you opened a window?" She pulled up all the blinds and all the sashes, no matter what the weather outside. He didn't complain. The fresh air felt nice, though he would never have bothered to open the windows himself.

"It smells like a barn in here," she said, invariably. As if she knew. *'When was the last time she had seen a barn?'* In the summer she was more careful about windows, and opened

them only if it wasn't too muggy outside. "Use your air-conditioning! It's like walking in soup here."

The air conditioning was something relatively new. They installed it when Irma, his wife, had started having trouble sleeping. She said she couldn't breathe, and the AC helped -- a little.

Paula moved on to the kitchen: "Did you eat the stew I left you last week? Where is it?" Sounds of things being moved around, fridge opening, hands digging in it. "Look at this, you didn't even touch it! What's the point of my going to the trouble?"

"I don't like stew," he said. It wasn't true. He just didn't feel like heating it up. Cereal was just fine, maybe crackers. Cold pizza was good, too.

"I brought you a frittata this week. Do you know what a frittata is?" She fussed in the kitchen. Whatever a frittata was, Leonard hoped he wouldn't have to heat it.

"And you should eat more fruit. If you don't go near a vegetable you should at least eat some fruit. I brought you some apple slices, they are easy." More grumbling. "Now I have to throw all of this away, what a waste, and where did these nachos come from? They are moldy, and besides, you know you are not supposed to have them."

He heard the lid of the garbage can being lifted, and then slammed.

“Look at this! Garbage from last week. No wonder it smells in here. What would Mom say?”

“I’ll ask her,” he said, without irony. His daughter should go already. Every time she came it was the same words, like she pushed a button and out they came, never anything new. She meant well, he should be grateful: many children, he knew, once they were grown up, they wanted nothing to do with their parents.

After Paula was done in the kitchen, she moved to the bedroom. “I can’t keep doing this, Dad. I’ll have to get you a cleaning woman... and you should get up from that chair once in a while, you’ll end up getting bedbugs. There is an epidemic of them, you know.”

“I don’t need anyone.” But she didn’t hear him. She was at the dining room table now, going through the mail that had accumulated there.

“So much junk, I can’t believe it. It’s been two years since Mom passed, and look at this, they still send her the St. Jude’s calendar.... And advertisements for prosthetic girdles? What are they? Mom never used one of those... And here is the water bill. I’ll pay it out of your check book but you should really learn to do it online. I’ll help you.” More shuffling. “You still

have Mom's computer, don't you?" Irma had taken to the computer easily: she Skyped children and grandchildren, and played cross-words puzzles. She had enjoyed it, but nobody had touched it since she had died.

After Paula was gone, Leonard turned to the TV, and waited for the blurry signal that sometimes appeared on the screen before Irma came on.

"Such a bossy woman... Talk, talk, talk...I know she means well, Irma, I know, but she is a pain in the you-know-what..." Irma smiled, listened, patient. She was just like he had always known her, her smile a gentle touch on his soul. He never questioned how she got on his television. Too many questions may spoil the miracle. He didn't want to jinx it.

His son, Al -- short for Albert -- came whenever he was in the mood. He was divorced, no children. Leonard figured his son must be lonely. They had that in common. This was Al's way: ring the doorbell, open the door, knock on it, then step inside.

"Hi, Dad!" His voice boomed. "I brought pizza," he said, or Mickey D, or whatever. Now, that was food you brought to someone who didn't go outside! Not stew or frittata! Al always brought paper plates -- that was thoughtful -- and Coke, and sometimes beer. Leonard ratcheted up his chair, and they ate in front of the Sports Channel. Sometimes, if it was Chinese,

they went to the kitchen. Too many containers, and they needed utensils.

“Hey Dad! You stink. When did you last change your underwear? Let’s do it now, I’ll help you.” Al guided him to the bathroom. It was easy to accept this from Al. Leonard did not smell anything, but if Al said so, it must be so, considering that his son had a high tolerance for dirty socks and milk congealed in the bottom of cereal bowls. They left the dirty underwear fall to the floor.

“Phew, Dad, look at this.” His eyes took in the whole bathroom. “I am not going to clean this up. Let Paula do it, or pay someone to do it.” Leonard did not want to look at the bathroom. He knew it was a big mess. Even Paula avoided it. The toilet was yellow. The sink was gray with scum. Gray, just like him. Neglected. It used to be spotless. He had never given it much thought, but now missed the sparkle on the white surfaces, the smell of clean. Better not think about it. What was the point of a clean bathroom, anyway, considering what it was used for?

Al shaved him. He had Leonard sit on the toilet seat, the razor going whizzing over his face. He liked that, it was the sharing of a manly thing, but most of all he liked the way his face felt afterward. Smooth. Silky. For a short moment he was able to forget the wrinkles that ran through it, the thick spongy look of it.

“Your mom will like it,” he said to Al, feeling his cheeks with the palm of his hand.

Besides Al and Paula, he had two more children, two daughters, Margaret and Maryellen, twins but not identical. All he knew for sure about them was that they did not like each other. Irma was worried about that, she would have liked to have a happy and close family.

Margaret lived in Canada, all the way across the continent, somewhere near Vancouver. She called him once a week, on Sunday, after she had been to church, as if the services had given her inspiration. Because of the time difference, her call always came while he was taking his afternoon nap. Always the same conversation:

“How is it going, Dad? Everything okay?”

“Yes, everything’s okay.”

“I was hoping to see you soon, but we are going to Hawaii (or Mexico, or Disneyland) for a vacation, and I can’t afford another trip, you know, with the children and all..” or, “I would like to come see you, but work is really keeping me busy right now...” or some other bullshit like that.

“It’s okay, Meg, I’m fine.” He didn’t care to see her, or anyone else for that matter. It would just be another person coming into his home, telling him what to do, ‘clean up, brush your teeth, eat healthy.’ The last time he had seen Meg was at her mother’s funeral -- Irma’s. She had looked all professional, high heels, blond hair (it used to be brown) pulled back. Her husband had not come (“Someone has to stay with the children.”) It was understandable. Plane tickets were not cheap. For a few days after the funeral, she had stayed with Paula, and together they had made the arrangements for the stone and the perpetual care, and who knows what else. He knew that they had had disagreements over those arrangements, but what did it matter? Irma was gone, and no amount of perpetual care could change that. He noted that nobody asked for his input.

The other thing about Margaret: every time they talked, she asked “When are you going to learn to use the computer? Then we can Skype. Mom used to do it. She kept up with the children that way.”

“Soon,” he always answered. But he had no intention of doing it, not soon and not ever. He had all he needed right there in front of him, in his television. If truth be told, he didn’t even remember how many children his daughter had, something about her own and those of her husband ‘from before.’

The other twin, Maryellen, he didn’t know anything about. She, too, had come to the funeral, and had sat in the pew with the family. She looked skinny, anxious, and could not sit still.

You would have thought the polished church bench was burning her backside. She left quickly, with only a wave to him. He had not been sure whether to be angry or relieved that she wasn't coming around. When he had asked Paula about it, she had sniffed:

“The less said about her, the better.”

He did not ask any further. The girls were always fighting among themselves, and Irma had often sighed about that. “Those girls! Will they ever learn to get along?” He had not lost any sleep over it. As far as he knew that was the way between siblings. Right now he was too unhappy to care about them, and they tired him out. With Al, at least, he felt on solid ground. No drama there. Sometimes they watched a game. Leonard had lost all interest in sports, but he enjoyed sitting with his son, something he had never done before. Sometimes, if it got to be too late, Al stayed the night, sleeping in his old bed. Leonard liked that, too, knowing that someone else was in the house, the heavy breathing of his son lulling him.

“Dad, I’m going to bed now, you should, too,” Al said on those occasions as he stumbled into bed.

“In a moment,” was Leonard’s usual response. Finally on his own he would click the TV hoping to get to Irma’s channel. Reaching her wasn’t a sure thing.

Tonight the screen was empty except for a notice at the bottom: 'Broadcasting will resume at 4 A.M.' The notice would soon disappear. In its place, Irma appeared.

"Hello, Irma," he said. "What do you think of that lumberjack of a son?... He brought me fried chicken, nothing like what you used to make, but still...Yeah, he lost his job again, but at least he doesn't have children to support.... He's a good guy, I know... I know, it's late.... Don't nag, I know the house is a mess, Paula tells me all the timeYes, I will brush my teeth, my dentures you mean, hah hah..." That was his old joke, though Irma never thought much of it.

Next time Paula came by, she had a woman with her. He knew something was up when she knocked before coming in.

"Dad, are you decent?" as if he had ever walked around indecent! "It's me." She walked into the living where she knew she would find him. "And this is Miss Goldstein."

"Oh, please, call me Joan," the woman said. Leonard looked at both of them, and turned the TV sound down, though he did not get up from his recliner.

"Call me Mr. Blockbur," he said, turning his face to the empty TV screen. "What do you want?"

Miss Goldstein was not put off by his ways. She looked at him with an expression between sad and worried. She talked to him ever so sweetly, slowly, as if she were trying to tame an animal, or a child to be brought to their senses. "I come from Senior Services." He had suspected as much. He continued to look away from her. A look had been enough: spiked up hair, black rimmed glasses so thick in their fancy frame that they made her eyes look like those of a giant insect. Three hoop earrings on one ear. What kind of a get-up was that to go into people's homes? Wait until he told Irma.

"We are going to take a look around the house," Paula announced. She, too, was using a fake voice, aiming for a mixture of concern and authority, but she did not ask if it was all right by him to poke around his place. But that Joan Whatever-her-name had more sense. She turned to him:

"Mr. Blockbur, is that OK with you? Do you mind?" (that fake smile!) "Your children are concerned about you, and I would like to see if there is any reason why they should be."

She was speaking directly at him. He nodded -- ever so slightly, and waved her off. Thank God his hearing was still sharp. He kept the TV sound off, hoping to eavesdrop on what the two said. But their voices were only a muffled background as they opened and closed doors and cabinets. When they came back to the living room he quickly turned the sound up, pretending to have been absorbed in a show the whole time.

Spiky Hair sat on the sofa, and Paula on the yellow chair. It had been a long time since anyone had sat on the sofa. He looked at the woman as if she had broken some spell, as if she did not fit there. And Paula in the yellow chair!

“That was your mother's chair,” he scolded her.

“Dad, this is important,” Paula scolded him in turn. “Miss Goldstein -- Joan -- has something she wants to talk to you about.”

He snorted. But he was curious to hear what the woman had to say. Maybe now someone would clean the bathroom, but he didn't want to look too eager. Because, he told himself, he wasn't. He didn't want anyone in his home moving things around, upsetting his routine.

“As I said, Mr. Blockbur, I am from Senior Services at your daughter's invitation. I am here to assess your situation, see if you need any help, if we can help you, we just want to make some recommendations. From what I see I have to tell you that your situation is approaching a desperate state....”

Desperate? What did she know about desperation? Desperate were those first few months after Irma died. That was desperation, with him all alone in the house, the empty, empty house, not even an echo of what he had thought was his life. He had been angry, so angry that one day he had thrown all the dishes (well, maybe only a good number of them) on the floor,

one by one, smashing them on the kitchen floor until he was spent. They were their everyday dishes, but Irma had loved them, with their silly flowers on the border. Cleaning up had taken him the whole afternoon. At least that had kept him busy. He had sobbed through it all, searching for the shards that had scattered on the floor and under the cabinets.

That was when his conversations with Irma had first started. He was crying his eyes raw, calling Irma so hard he thought he might have a heart attack -- and that would have been lucky. He was in front of the television, surfing the channels, not knowing what he was looking for... That was when he heard her voice.

“Lenny, what did you do that for?” It was definitely her voice. *‘Now I’m going crazy, on top of everything else.’* He had hit a channel he didn’t even know existed, never heard of.

“I don’t know!” He cried. He did know: he was angry, angry as hell at her for leaving him when he wasn’t ready. Sure, she had been taking pills for this and for that, and her legs had become like tree trunks, but still she didn’t have to die. He had to admit that lately they were always angry at each other, but if all the people who were angry at each other had to die, there wouldn’t be anyone left. Sure they had fought, but it was out of habit, at the end of the day they still sought each other’s closeness, side by side, in bed.

She had become hard of hearing, and he had to scream to be heard. She had trouble moving, and she often asked, “Lenny get me this, please, get me that.” Sometimes he pretended not to hear her.

She had gotten old, but so had he. When he looked in the mirror and saw that most of his hair was now growing out of his nose and in his eyebrows instead of his head, he got angry and came out of the bathroom ready to find something to scream at her for. One time he was so angry he told her that she was old and ugly. He really meant that he was old and ugly, but the words were out. She was sitting at the kitchen table, reading one of her magazines, and lifted her eyes to him, then she started crying, just like that, just sitting there, her face changing in front of him, dissolving into deep hurt. She took her glasses off, and the tears that had been trapped behind them flowed down so copious he couldn’t stop staring. He couldn’t stand himself for making her cry, and that made him even angrier, so he stomped out of the room.

That night he made dinner for her, but he wasn’t sure she realized that this was his way of making amends. That, too, was desperation: hurting the only person in the world that really mattered. And being incapable of doing anything different.

“Dad, did you hear what Joan said? Dad?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said. He had not heard a word, but Spiky Hair was no dummy.

“Mr. Blockbur,” she said, obviously repeating something she had just said, “your situation is bad, but not so bad considering you have been on your own for so long.” She must have noticed her blunder, because now she was backpedaling. “Maybe desperate was not the right word.” She was not condescending, he appreciated that, and the fact that she could acknowledge that she had made a mistake. “But I do think that you need some help before it gets any worse. I would like to see a person come in, maybe just a few hours a week, fix you some lunch, tidy up a bit, nothing major. Just a little help. I’m going to put the request in, and I will let you know when it goes through.”

Leonard signed the papers, pretending to look the other way. He had not asked Irma -- there had been no time -- but he was pretty sure that she would approve. She always liked a neat house and since she had gone neatness had gone too.

Margaret called from Canada. “I hear you will get an aide. That’s great. I will feel so much better knowing there is someone looking after you. I am sure next time I come down the house will look like a castle.

He snorted. ‘Next time’ wasn’t coming any time soon, he was sure of that.

Paula came the following Friday, as usual, looking pretty self-satisfied.

“Have you heard from Senior Services yet? They are taking their own sweet time. Another case of hurry-up-and-wait. I’ll have to give them a call, push them a little bit.” Then she went snooping in the kitchen, “Next time Al is here, ask him to take the garbage out. I filled it with all your expired cans and boxes, I don’t think you’ll ever make blueberry pancakes. That stuff should have gone out a long time ago, soon you’ll have a house full of bugs.”

“Yeah,” he said. She was just trying to clean up because she wanted to look good when the aide came. It didn’t make him feel any better towards her.

“And all this junk mail, you can add that there, too.”

“Yeah,” he said,

Al came on Sunday. “Let’s watch the game,” he said, slumping in a chair. “I was supposed to watch it at Vinny’s but his wife wants to go see her parents. Bummer! But that’s married life for you. So we’ll watch together, you and me.”

Al was still missing his wife, Leonard could see that. He wondered if Al had felt about Alice the way he had felt about

Irma. If so, he must be a pretty miserable guy. But at least Alice was not dead.

Al pulled the yellow chair up next to Leonard's recliner and opened a bag of Cheetos. The chemical greasy smell acted like a trumpet to Leonard's nose. He greedily put his hand in the bag: he hadn't had one of those in a long time. Irma had liked them, too, and sometimes they shared a bag sitting together just like he was sitting now with his son.

The room had not changed in a long time. He and Irma had talked about making some renovations, but never got around to it: the light gauzy curtains needed a good wash; they were flanked by heavier drapes, in what had been a shade of goldish weave. They too needed to be cleaned. The yellow chair had been Irma's favorite, pulled up close next to his recliner, augmented by a patchwork cushion that Irma said was just right for her. The chair matched the yellow damask of the sofa. They had planned every piece of furniture together, and had plastic covers made to protect them. After the kids were gone, though, Irma had said: "Enough with this," and the plastic went. The upholstery had faded over the years and now it was an unidentifiable beige color, the pattern almost invisible under the weight of years of use. But the two of them had been unaware of it, and just enjoyed its comfortable, familiar presence.

"I hear you are going to have a girl come in to help you," Al said. "I hope she's hot. Let me know when she starts, I want to

check her out.” Then the game started and between that and the Cheetos they did not talk again for a while. At half time Al ordered burgers and fries on his phone.

“You should get one of these,” he said waving his phone in the air, “I’m surprised Paula hasn’t gotten you one yet. Or at least a Pendant: ‘I’ve fallen and I can’t get up’.” Al intoned in a falsetto voice, imitating the TV ad.

Leonard shrugged. “I don’t need one, but I’ll ask your mom.” She had told him it was okay to have the aide, but the matter of the Pendant had not come up. He wasn’t sure he even wanted one. Pendants were for sissies. Besides, he wasn’t that frail yet, regardless of what Paula and Spiky Hair believed. It wasn’t like he couldn’t walk or move. He just didn’t feel like it.

Paula had warned him that Spiky Hair would be coming to introduce his aide. It was lucky that Al was there because otherwise he would not have answered the door bell. A man came in with her. A big, muscular fellow, thick hair pulled back in a man bun.

“This is Jim,” Spiky Hair said, “he will come twice a week, Tuesday and Friday, from 11:30 to 2:30. Is that OK with you?”

Leonard nodded. He was thinking: ‘couldn’t any of these people have regular haircuts?’

The man approached him with his hand extended, “Pleased to meet you.” An accent, he couldn’t place it. Maybe South African? When he was on his mailman route, he had had a South African woman as a customer, he couldn’t remember her name now. She had never given him a Christmas envelope, not even a plate of cookies. That, he remembered. He shook Jim’s hand, surprised at its warmth.

Al came in, and though he greeted Jim nicely enough, he kept his eyes on Ms. Goldstein. She winked at him. Leonard saw that; he smirked. Al followed her and the man as they took a tour of the house. Leonard sank deeper in his chair. ‘What a bunch of clowns,’ he thought. Al included.

After they left, Al asked his father: “Do you think she is a lesbian?”

“He’s a man.”

“No, not him. I mean the boss, though it really does not matter. I don’t like glasses on a woman, and she is too skimpy in the boobs department. But I got her number anyway.”

Leonard had noticed the woman’s chest, too. He had liked a soft and generous chest. Irma had had one. She was really perfect that way. That was something about her that had not changed over the years, He had loved that part of her to the very last. He had loved playing with it, making her giggle, swat his hands away while enjoying it, too.

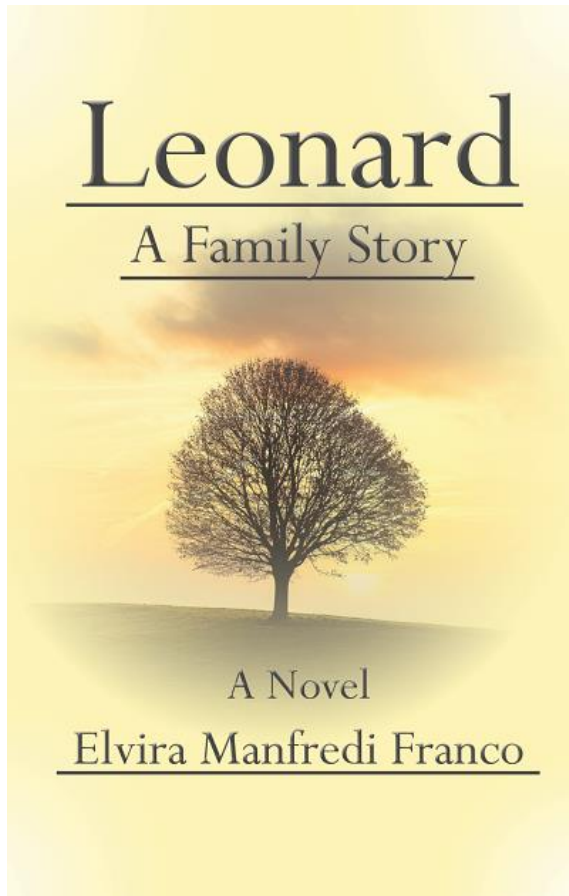
Al's comments about Spiky Hair's appearance had made him think about the Home Health Aide, as the young man, Jim, had called himself. He had never heard of a man doing that kind of job; even on television, when they had to portray one, it was always a woman. Would this man know how to cook, or even make a sandwich? How about cleaning the bathroom? That was really where help was needed. The place was filthy. Even Irma had asked about it (how could she know?). It had annoyed him, but only a little: "Stop nagging," he had said. It sounded just like a conversation they might have had when she was alive, "You know I don't like to handle those chemicals, they can't be good for your health. And if I like to piss on the floor, I will do it." At that, Irma had disappeared. He was sorry to see her go, but at the same time it felt just like old times, just like they used to bicker.

Leonard turned to Al: "What do you think of the man? I mean, a man to do a woman's job?"

"Be careful, Dad. There aren't jobs for a man or a woman anymore. That's out these days. Everyone's equal." Al thought for a moment. "He'll be all right. Just don't get on his bad side. He looks strong enough to break you in two if he gets mad." Al was more interested in Joan Goldstein. He spent the rest of his time weighing his chances if he should indeed call her. "Her hair was funny, but her clothes were not outrageous, I don't think she would be too embarrassing to take out... I wonder if she likes to watch a game..." and so on, until Leonard had to

tell him to stop. “Call her if you need to,” he said. “Just don’t bring her around here.”

Jim proved to be remarkably gentle. He helped Leonard get out of his chair. He offered his arm to guide him to the toilet. Of course Leonard did not need so much attention, but it was nice to get it -- at the same time that it was annoying. The whole thing made him uneasy. He liked clear-cut, and, as he saw it, this was not clear-cut, no matter what Paula said.



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