

# FACE PAINTERS®

## Treatment

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### Logline

One boy's search for the American dream and the lifetime it took to achieve.

### Overview

*Face Painters* is a dual-narrative, multicultural epic set primarily in two eras in the lives of the Gravetti family. Told through the eyes of Buono Gravetti, the present time is 1963. Then, serving as an epilogue to Buono's ninety-nine-year journey on earth, our time with him will conclude in 2022. The past narrative is 1928, a retelling of Buono's recollection, as a six-year-old, weeks before immigrating to the United States.

### The Gravettis

Buono: decent-hearted, playful, brave, old-school traditions, insecure and strained adulthood as an illiterate

(Dad) Luca: loving, stubborn, plagued by guilt, can be focused to the point of blindness, battling dementia

(Mom) Isabella: wise, family values, pro-education, pragmatic, loving but no pushover, will speak the truth

(Brother) Michael: college smarts, Wall Street savvy, money hungry, apathetic, self-centered, raciest alcoholic

(Grandpa) Leo: hardboiled businessman, revered, forethought, his love for Buono exceeds that of his own son

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### Brooklyn, New York 1963:

Buono Gravetti, a masterful casket builder from a bygone era, creates stunning caskets in his father's funeral home, which has been the family business since their emigration from Italy thirty-five years ago. However, a change in this decades-long routine looms on the horizon as his father, Luca, struggles with dementia. When business starts to wane and the bank repossesses the hearse, it becomes apparent that the patriarch can no longer carry on, and it's time for Buono to finally step out of his woodshop sanctuary to assume the role of funeral director. But the full-blown illiterate he is, despite his hardworking nature, makes it impossible for him to manage anything. Defeated and with nowhere to turn, the recluse reluctantly looks up his estranged brother, Michael, a bigoted Wall Street whiz-kid, and brings him in as a partner.

Michael's help immediately comes at a price with his first decision to do away with Buono's caskets, claiming "too much effort." Instead, he focuses on selling cheaper, mass-produced metal caskets and refuses to hear about tradition. But his mistake proves obvious when Lieutenant Cavanaugh and his wife, mourning the loss of their veteran son, turn to the woodshop and instantly show their preference for one of Buono's abandoned creations. Michael promptly contrives an excuse, edging for a metal sale, but the dubious lieutenant is humiliated and heads out the door. Michael immediately flies into a rage, mocking his brother's old-school ways, and insists that success can only thrive with his Wall Street aggression—clashing directly with Buono's firm belief that tradition is the best way to succeed and help people as well.

Buono enters Michael's office. He looks over his shoulder while searching for Michael's appointment book. He struggles with the client's names, sounding out the letters until he finds the name and telephone number he's looking for. The following morning, he takes the casket that the grieving couple wanted to McLaughlin's, a nearby funeral home owned by old friends of the Gravettis. There, he tells his elder director to contact the lieutenant and explain that the casket he and his wife desired is now here for them as an offering for their departed son.

### **Chiaro, Italy 1928:**

Buono remembers his life as a six-year-old in the ancient mountainside town of Chiaro, just weeks before sailing to New York with his family. His father, Luca, is a young man and a real live wire as he strides the cobblestone passageways, always with big ideas on his mind and a spring in his heels. As of late, it's the American funeral business he shows great interest in, thanks to his old pal Rocco who is already living the American dream as the successful manager of the Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn. Now, Luca is in pursuit of his very own American dream—to be an American-style funeral director. But he still longs for the approval of his father, Leo, a hard-nosed, big shot capitalist renowned throughout the region who never has anything flattering to say about his stubborn, stargazing son or his job as a gravedigger, one of Luca's dreary errands as the local store clerk.

When a farmer passes away in seaside Rondo, Luca impulsively tries to impress his father by attempting an American-style funeral—by way of Rocco's notes and complete with make-shift make-up, a fancy casket, and all the pomp the peasants here have ever seen. However, the funeral fails spectacularly. In the middle of the chaotic mob wanting to punish Luca for disrespecting their dead, Luca and little Buono are beaten, and Isabella, Luca's pregnant wife, suffers an eye injury. Amid the melee, "Fatman" Providenza, the local strong-arm with his own hidden agenda, sets fire to the chapel at Luca's expense, leading to growing hostility toward Luca amongst the townspeople. Luca is mocked and called a face painter, and his father is shamed.

### **Brooklyn 1963:**

Buono and Michael grudgingly reconcile as Luca's dementia persists. Buono finds his only solace from the Herschel family down the block. Abbey, a diner waitress, is his de facto girlfriend whose husband, a Korean War soldier, has been missing for more than ten years and presumed dead. Her child, Scarlett, is a pint-sized dynamo. The good-natured girl reads classic novels to Buono and always encourages him to read. But she can also prove too much for Abbey, so Buono fits right in as a father figure, as of late trying to teach her not to use racial slurs and making sure she avoids the troublesome Greasers that are always welcoming her risky pluck. The two can drive each other nuts, but the affection they show for each other is precious.

Looking to increase the funeral home profits, Michael takes Buono and the company ledgers to Wall Street to meet with Elias, a flamboyant financial advisor and Michael's longtime business pal. Elias concludes that it would be wiser to build an extension on the funeral home and offer both the metal and wooden caskets than altogether abandon Buono's works of art. Elated, Buono can't wait to start building again; Michael gladly concedes to more square footage. However, one concern Elias does have is that there's lots of money sitting in the Gravetti bank account and earning little interest. He suggests that the brothers invest their savings in the newest big thing—soybean futures—promising great returns on their money. Buono wants a firm promise from Michael that he won't invest in something they both know nothing about. Michael agrees.

Abbey wants Buono to keep his word about providing funeral services for Freddie, a coworker at the diner whose child, Pauletta, is dying of leukemia. But Buono is no longer keen on the idea because, with Freddie being black, Michael's racist attitudes and an emerging drinking issue is now something to consider. It was just weeks ago, Buono reminds her, when Michael affronted a black Bible student by calling him a nig. But still, wanting to please Abbey, Buono will hear the man out.

Freddie's Harlem neighbors are jealous of him because he's one of the few men with a job during a heatwave summer where blacks are suffering most from last-hired-first-fired bigotry. They also call him an Uncle Tom because he works for a Jewish diner owner. As a result, Freddie refuses to mourn with his own kind, let alone ask for their charity to assist in the cost of the funeral. Oddly enough, after reading Uncle Tom's Cabin, he found Tom to be a man of moral fiber and much like himself, he'd like to think. But still, Buono is too afraid to get involved. Freddie understands, and the two shake hands. Buono feels the toil-worn palm of this earnest man, like cut-up bear paws and much like his own, he'll come to realize. Watching the man as he returns to his work, Buono has a change of heart and agrees to build Pauletta's casket and hold her services. And the price for everything will be for Freddie to read him Uncle Tom's Cabin—a show of compassion that will spark yet another blazing quarrel between the two brothers.

### **Chiaro 1928:**

Buono remembers his mother's eye becoming infected after the riot at the disastrous funeral and his father's attempts to make amends for his mistake. Luca puts all his effort toward rebuilding the chapel and, despite all odds, inspires the people in town to join him. In this way, he ends up placing himself in a leadership position without meaning to, earning back the admiration of the people.

A dilemma ensues. One of Luca's delivery trucks has been hijacked by Fatman's thugs. The Calabrian underworld has put Fatman in charge to make clear that Rondo will not be spared from the massive seaport that will soon be remapping the coastline; this even meant burning down the chapel with the archdiocese being the last holdout land-owner in the way. Fatman cautions Luca that he should not be offering false hope to the peasants by repairing the chapel. Luca is undeterred and warns him not to interfere because his powerful father is bank-rolling the repairs and clearly protecting him as well. Although this enrages Fatman, he'll not cross a powerful man like Leo who comes with all the backing of police, politicians, and his own band of motorcycle riflemen. But he might just have to take his chances because as powerful as Leo is, betraying the Calabrians is a sure death sentence. Luca calls this a joke. Fatman remarks, "everything...starts with a joke."

Newly arrived Bishop Pio inspects the progress on the chapel and is quite impressed with Luca's leadership. With a plan in mind, he sets his eyes on the abandoned Christian Day Schools just across the path and impels Luca to rebuild them as well. Luca defies his request, knowing the Calabrians are moving in, and even accuses the archdiocese of trying to use him for their dirty work. But the bishop persists, claiming that a great leader cannot enjoy partiality, and with all of the community watching, he declares Luca their Chosen One. Cheers erupt—women and kids hurry to the school and begin singing and pulling weeds from the ground. Luca fights off workers trying to lift him to the air. He stops dead, spotting Fatman's son zeroing in with his binoculars and making the cutthroat sign. Luca hurries off to warn his father that things have gotten out of hand. This culminates in one of the most traumatic experiences Buono can remember from his life as a child. After trying to stop some of Fatman's thugs from raping his friend by a treehouse they played in, he accidentally shoots and kills one of them, now making Buono and his family an even greater target for Fatman's revenge.

### **Brooklyn 1963:**

Buono sets out to make sure that the company is moving along, but pressure builds as Luca's health declines, and Michael, drunk on his newfound wealth, barely pays enough attention to run the business. Not one to shirk responsibility, Buono tries to take on more duties, but the added burden disrupts his relationship with Abbey. She starts to question her relationship with Buono, noting that she keeps her wedding ring in a drawer just to make it right with him. All this leads to Buono's childhood trauma returning to haunt him. He decides to build a treehouse for the local kids as a way to reconnect with the innocence he lost on the day of his unintentional crime over thirty-five years ago, when it all took place by the treehouse his grandpa Leo built for him.

Along the way, Buono also sets out to learn how to read so he can finally take on a larger role in the funeral home management. Unfortunately, just as he begins to settle into a productive routine, his life is once again uprooted by circumstance. Checks are bouncing, and it becomes clear that Michael covertly withdrew all their money for the soybean venture, leaving Buono and the business with nothing to work with. Although Michael assures him that the money is safely invested, the resulting quarrel is more intense than ever before. Desperate, Michael tries opening up about his gay relationship with Elias and how he would never be betrayed by him, but it all backfires. Stunned, Buono rejects his “fag” brother and his manipulative ways even more, lacing into him with fiery intolerance. Michael is knocked to the floor and is banished from Buono’s life.

Freddie enters the funeral home with his daughter’s body draped over his arms—a Greaser has taken notice. Buono and Scarlett begin preparations for the funeral of the young girl and, in their compassion, decorate the funeral home with Christmas lights—in the middle of a heat wave; Freddie once mentioned that Christmas was Pauletta’s favorite time of the year. They then go to Sears to look for a Christmas tree. There, Scarlett bumps into Molly, Michael’s girlfriend, and mentions tonight’s funeral for the little girl. Buono regrets the exchange, fearing Michael will find out.

As night falls on the funeral home, Freddie and a couple of friends gather for his daughter’s humble service. Buono wants to get things moving, but from out of nowhere, he can hardly restrain his anxiety, watching scores of Freddie’s black neighbors suddenly arrive in a show of loving support. Freddie is all choked up, but Buono is beside himself, knowing the racist Greasers must have seen the throng of people arrive.

Drunken Michael parks his sports car and heads for the funeral home with a Christmas gift for Freddie and with all intentions to apologize to Buono for his past behavior, but before he can get there, he’s attacked by the Greasers; hurt, he staggers away empty-handed. Once at the funeral home, he attempts to warn Buono about what is brewing outside, and just as Michael heads for the visitation room, out from the bathroom steps the black Bible student who just months ago he called a nig. Buono, seeing the two and his brother’s battered condition, believes he’s actually there to make trouble and desperately throws Michael out the door before a scene is made. Still and all, it’s too late; the Greasers’ hostility has boiled over, and they attack the funeral home with rocks and Molotov cocktails. Mourners fight for their lives, and Buono fends the flames, and by the time the police arrive, the funeral has long since been ruined. Furious and despairing at the new problems he must now face, Buono heads to the treehouse, which he burns down in a show of resignation.

### **Chiaro 1928:**

Buono thinks back to the days just before his family’s ship set sail. While his pregnant mom still waits for her antibiotics to arrive, her eye infection is causing hot flashes and odd behavior. Meanwhile, against all her wishes, Buono’s father has become fully immersed in his position as a community leader and is unwilling to abandon his quest to repair the chapel and the school. He enjoys the gifts of bread and wine from the villagers and how Bishop Pio parades him around as their savior. But Luca is also ignoring his father’s dire warnings that even he won’t be able to take on the Calabrian mob. Luca enjoys this most of all, tormenting his powerful father and relishing the attention he felt he was never given. But Luca is still aware of the imminent danger the underworld presents to his family, so he begins devising a plan to keep them safe. He wants his father to take Isabella and Buono to America and unite with Rocco, his friend from Brooklyn, who has already prepared Luca’s employment and all their living accommodations. Leo vehemently opposes this plan that would mean leaving Luca alone to fend for himself. Luca scoffs at the thought of his father caring so much and calls him a liar; Leo slaps Luca clear across his face...little Buono is shocked.

Fatman orders an assassination attempt on Luca, sending a clear message to abandon all his intentions and get on the next ship. Meanwhile, Isabella's feverous eye infection reaches a state of delirium; she faints from a violent outburst right in front of Buono. Luca finally concedes, knowing he has no other choice but to leave. With Isabella's medicine finally arriving, they pack their bags and prepare for their journey to America. But Buono painfully remembers how his father abandoned him and his mom at the last possible second, leaving them on the ship and knowing his grandfather was pressured into providing medical care and bodyguards for his and his mother's safe journey. As Luca disembarks from the *USS Columbo*, he hears the desperate cries from his wife and child. He is manhandled by Leo in an attempt to get him back on board, but the ship has launched.

### **Brooklyn 1963:**

Buono sweeps up the remnants of a car bombing that took place when the funeral home was attacked. He can hear the Greasers down the block taunting him with a harmonica. As the days pass, Abbey and Scarlett help repair the funeral home, and together, they appear the perfect family.

One afternoon, Freddie stops by to show his gratitude for all of Buono's efforts and to reassure him he did nothing wrong. This also included his brother, Michael. Freddie explains that Michael looked him up and sincerely showed regret for all the hardship he caused Buono, further adding that he only came by that evening to give Freddie a Christmas gift—because of the Christmas-themed funeral—a harmonica that the Greasers stole from him just moments earlier when he got thrashed. Freddie smiles and bends a few notes with the new harmonica Michael got him. Turning white as a sheet, Buono steps to a window and stares down the block.

Buono confronts the Greasers and wants Michael's harmonica back. Buono is mocked, and fists start swinging on the dime. No match for the Greasers, Buono is beaten up, but when the ringleader nears, thinking Buono's done with, Buono pins him against a tree and brutally chokes him until the harmonica is thrown Buono's way.

Bloody face and all, Buono joins his father in the funeral home attic where Luca has been spending more and more time gazing at photos of Isabella and magazine cutouts of waterfalls. Buono discovers a photo of himself and Michael as kids, hugging. He sits next to his father, staring deeply into the photo.

### **USS Columbo, Atlantic Ocean 1928:**

The puny steamship bobs and rolls in violent waters. Down in steerage, steel pops and pings from the violent storm battering its hull. Babies cry, a passenger throws up, others fight over scraps of food. Little Buono and his mom are closely monitored by their family doctor and a nurse; a pair of Leo's riflemen stand guard. Later, in the infirmary, Isabella's eye infection shows it has gotten worse, now ravaging both her eyes. Buono watches over her as she hallucinates in a feverish pool of sweat. He overhears his doctor and ship medics arguing over her condition. He sets off to the upper level in search of something. He avoids stewards eyeing his ragged condition, moving from nook to nook, shadowing fashionable women entering a boutique.

### **Concurrently in Rondo:**

The chapel and Christian Day Schools stand completed in all their glory. Bishop Pio leads members of the archdiocese and the entire village in a solemn ceremony.

In Chiaro, Luca arrives home exhausted from completing his vows in Rondo. He waves at Emilio who owns the general store he works at, but the man abruptly looks the other way. Luca has been shunned by his father and closest friends for sending his family off to America without him, and he's been regretting it ever since. Suddenly, he's hit with a thought and races home to rummage through his luggage, sadly finding his wife's medicine that he mistakenly packed in his luggage—not hers. Neighbors outside hear Luca's cries cascade from above.

Drunk, Luca walks the empty passageways. When a couple praises him for all he's done, he covers his face and wails. He tries drinking away his misery at the local pub, but a closer look at his face tells the real story. Everyone eats and sings and celebrates his accomplishments. He jumps up onto a stool and with a long loaf of bread, he sings and leads the crowd like a drunken bandleader. But they all abruptly start heading for a back door, alarmed by ominous vehicles pulling into the plaza. Luca turns around to find hitmen and their Tommy guns drawing near. He looks back at an empty pub and smirks, reminded of what his wife once predicted: "One day, you will find yourself very alone."

Acres of vineyards surround Fatman's elegant villa. On the veranda, Fatman and Oswaldo Garibaldi, Capo of the Calabrian mob, are fed lamb and wine by Fatman's son while hitmen and a bookkeeper stand close by. Luca is escorted in and sincerely praised by Garibaldi for all the dedicated work he has performed in Rondo. He further adds that it all burns as he eats. And since this was all contrary to his wishes, Fatman and his son are violently mowed down right in front of Luca. Garibaldi pours Luca some wine and explains that he has a longstanding tradition of never killing a man whose heart is on the side of good, and that's how he truly views Luca. But he has an ultimatum: get on one of his ships heading to America right now—or he will end his longstanding tradition. Luca easily agrees but in an act of courage suggests that the people of Rondo still deserve a church and a school. The Capo is infuriated and slaps the table. Luca carefully explains that only providing the people work at his new port—Garibaldi's own words—will not benefit him in the end because salaries alone could never bring civility, just more *fat men*. In an act of almost implausible mercy, Garibaldi instructs the bookkeeper to turn Fatman's villa into a school and build a church on the grounds, all for the sake of civility.

At this same time, Leo is leaving Rondo on his motorcycle after having set fire to the chapel and schools, that being the secret agreement he made with Garibaldi beforehand in order to spare his son's life.

Hitmen put Luca onto a fastboat and leave the mainland. Luca discovers his father watching from a hilltop. The two raise their hands at each other in a show of acceptance.

### **Brooklyn 1963:**

Old Luca is hunched over, staring at his TV and oblivious to the CBS news flash: President Kennedy has been assassinated. But when a reporter states the date, November 22, he snaps to and is captivated. He takes hold of the TV and mumbles, "Congratulations...my condolences."

Now, wearing a suit and holding a globe and the magazine cutout of a waterfall, Luca takes off in the hearse, running over bushes and crashing into the funeral home. Kids scream and run for cover as the hearse swerves for them, clutch-jumping down the street and away. Buono, Abbey, and Scarlett arrive home to the chaos. When they learn what has happened, they set off in different directions and into the night, searching for the delirious man through the streets of Brooklyn.

### **USS Columbo, New York Harbor 1928:**

The ship begins to list as hordes of immigrants hurry to one side to view the Statue of Liberty. Buono can't believe she's green—only knowing of Lady Liberty from black and white photos. He turns to his mom, excitedly, waiting for a response. Blanketed in a wheelchair, she barely raises her head, exposing a stained blindfold over both her eyes. A dim smile appears, and she hardly gets out, "She's beautiful."

### **Ellis Island:**

In the communicable disease ward, Buono and dapper Rocco watch Isabella sleep while being aided by a gurgling respirator. Buono looks under the gurney, hearing her urine stream down into a bucket. Isabella begins convulsing; orderlies can't pry her mouth open. She's whisked away in an attempt for doctors to extract her baby. Ward matron Rose and Dr. Michael demand names for the infant; Rocco has no clue, and so it stands—it's Rose or Michael until otherwise noted.

Late that evening, Buono walks the dark hallways, finding his way back to the disease ward. He gets up onto a stool to pray over his mom. When he hears the gurgling from the breathing apparatus go silent, he gasps and stares, knowing she has left him. He holds back a tear while attempting to fix her hair. He removes the mask from her mouth and tries to smooth away the indentations remaining in her sunken cheeks. From his pockets, he produces tins of make-up with the USS Colombo insignia on it—what he stole from the boutique on the upper level of the ship. He begins applying the make-up to his mom’s withered face.

The next morning, Buono is seated in a hallway by an administrator’s office; Rocco strolls by with baby Michael in his arms. Emerging from the shadows, Luca, being escorted closer, and having finally arrived. He kisses Buono repeatedly, vowing never again to leave him. When he greets his old wartime pal, he’s shocked to learn that the baby is his. Luca shows his awful regret for not being by Isabella during their child’s birth, and he must see her right away. He merrily reminds Buono of the promise he made to her back in Italy: a honeymoon getaway to Niagara Falls. He shows the boy an advert of the waterfalls that he wants to surprise his mom with. Buono tugs on his father’s arm, “No, Papa.”

Hunched over baby Michael, Luca sobs, his tears pinging down onto the baby’s parched, little face. An administrator and Dr. Michael sign off on paperwork. The administrator steps to Rocco, handing him Isabella’s death certificate and Michael’s birth certificate, both indicating the same date: November 22, 1928. He turns to Luca, putting a hand on his quivering shoulder and stating, “Congratulations...my condolences.”

### **Upstate, New York 1963:**

Old Luca drives the hearse in the dead of night, fraught in misery. He cries out for Isabella and floors the gas, crashing through a border checkpoint. A sign reads, “Welcome to Canada.”

### **Brooklyn:**

The following morning, an early phone call from the Canadian border patrol awakens Buono, Abbey, and Scarlett after a long night of searching for Luca. Everyone’s thrilled and amazed to hear that the old man is okay, having traveled aimlessly into Canada. Buono wants to leave immediately to retrieve him, but Abbey is too afraid to conduct today’s services without him being there. Buono argues that he’s the only one who can go because his motorcycle can easily be stuffed into the hearse in order to drive the hearse back home with his father.

Michael’s girlfriend, Molly, calls to see how things are going. Buono at once realizes that Michael’s the only person who can run the business while he’s away. Buono has been longing for his brother for some time now, and he tells Abbey he believes this will be a great way for them to reunite.

When the two meet, things are awkward, but soon enough, they apologize for their blunders and for not being thoughtful enough to each other’s needs—Buono especially taking back his homophobic remarks. Buono shows him the harmonica he retrieved from the Greasers; Michael hugs him, and Buono returns the gesture.

Buono prepares his motorcycle to leave. He’s elated knowing he’s just hours away from reuniting with his father and that things have normalized with his brother. He surprises Abbey with an impromptu wedding proposal. Shocked, the gal accepts with a big-time kiss. Buono speeds off with a beaming smile.

### **Ontario, Canada:**

Red tape at the border patrol building delays Luca’s release, and Buono has to spend the night sleeping in the hearse. The next morning, Buono is handed Luca’s release form and personal items; Luca’s free to go.

Buono speeds down the highway while chatting with his father; Luca, in typical fashion, remains detached from reality. When Buono pulls over for gas, Luca is riveted by a billboard across the highway. Desperately, he heads for it, almost getting run over by the passing traffic. Buono screams, jockeying past the vehicles to get to him, and becomes irate—yelling at his father for what he did. Luca is unfazed, remaining captivated by the billboard and now pointing up at it. Buono grabs his father’s hand, preparing to bring him back. He takes notice of the billboard’s advertising: “Visit Niagara Falls, just ten miles ahead!”

Back on the road, Buono is increasingly puzzled over his father’s bizarre behavior. He pulls over and starts going through Luca’s personal items where he finds the magazine cutout of a waterfall. He studies the border patrol release form where he’s reminded of a certain detail: “Date of Occurrence, November 22, yesterday, the day mama died.” Buono comes to realize that his father’s attempt to cross the Canadian border was not made out of madness. He now remembers the events on Ellis Island—some thirty-five years ago—when his father wanted to surprise his mom with an advertisement of his promise to her—a honeymoon getaway to Niagara Falls. Buono looks out his window and takes a deep breath. He takes in the anguish in his father’s face.

The heart-pounding force of Niagara Falls thunders wide and loud. Luca sobs over Buono’s shoulder. From Luca’s grip, the magazine cutout of the waterfall takes to the rising mist.

### **Brooklyn:**

Buono sings to radio tunes as we watch the hearse heading home, crossing the Brooklyn Bridge and with the Statue of Liberty nearby. Turning a last corner, neighbors, emergency vehicles, and personnel block access—the funeral home has burned to the ground. A smoldering hill of ash is all that remains except for Michael’s scorched metal caskets that offer the only hint of the business that once stood. As the ringleader of the Greasers is arrested and taken away, the true nature of the fire will be discovered. While Michael and Molly tanked it up into the night, the merrymaking turned hostile and curse-ridden. That’s when she went upstairs to bed and Michael crashed in the office, but not before binging some more and torching up a cigar. He woke up to the flames and ran for his dear life and forgot all about hers.

At McLaughlin’s Funeral Home, the parking lot is packed while guests cluster by the front entrance, smoking. Inside, dozens of vacant chairs fill a visitation room as the lively chatter from another service pours in and around Michael, sitting entirely alone and debilitated before Molly’s closed casket. His usual show of bespoke fashion and impeccably-groomed traits are gone. The funeral director bows at him and slides closed the doors.

Buono watches his bank manager leaning over his desk and studying a massive bank ledger with a magnifying glass. The manager shakes his head, reaching for a copy of the New York Times. He hands it to Buono, and the headline is revealed:

“SHELL GAME BILKS \$175 MILLION IN LOANS; SEAWATER CLOAKED AS SOYBEAN OIL.”

All the money Michael invested in soybean futures has been lost to a scam. Buono looks up at the manager... “Reading, ain’t it just bitchin’?”

Buono’s despair threatens to overwhelm him, but his kindness to so many grieving families pays off when Lieutenant Cavanaugh returns to inspect the ash heap of Gravetti and Sons. He’s older now and with a year’s worth of grief having since taken to his face. He tells Buono that thanks to him, his son’s funeral was flawless, “his son’s attendance notwithstanding.” He asks how he can help. Buono needs to continue caring for his father, but he has nowhere to shelter him. The lieutenant will make arrangements for Luca to take residence at a veterans’ home in New Hampshire. He tells Buono to pack his father’s things; Buono considers the ash heap.

The enormous Verrazzano Bridge glimmers in the dead of night. A squad car with its colorful beacon light approaches the middle of the span. A cop exits to inspect an abandoned vehicle...Michael's sports car.

At McLaughlin's Funeral Home, Buono sits in an empty visitation room before Michael's casket. He kneels and begins to pray. Make-up shows on his fingers. He turns, hearing the door open; it's Freddie and the black Bible student. Buono is surprised to see them, and he is pleased. They all sit before Michael's casket, and the room returns to quiet.

### **New Hampshire 1964:**

At the veterans' home, time passes, and Buono's visits have brought both good and bad. While his artisan talents are sought by the director for a carpentry course for the young vets, his father's condition has sadly worsened. The elder shows a deathly hue of gray while Abbey and Scarlett try feeding him, and it's not long before he enters severe cognitive decline.

Buono knows the end is near, and just as he prepared for his dear mom's passing when just a six-year-old, he now does the same for his father as an adult. He begins building a beautiful, hand-carved casket, and his timing, regrettably, proves wise. In the morgue of a VA hospital, Buono reminisces about the good old days as he preps make-up brushes. He turns, revealing Luca's body lying on a metal table. He takes a moment to study his father's thin, consumed face: "Funny, Papa, my entire profession began with mama...and will now end with you."

### **Brooklyn 1965:**

An empty lot with a For Sale sign shows in place of the ill-fated funeral home. Nothing stands any taller than a few weeds forming above the dark, sooted earth. Buono's motorcycle sits in front.

Down the block, a banner stretches wide in front of Abbey's home: "Welcome home Daddy!" Abbey stands by the front door, bidding farewell to some friends. She sits in the living room and shuts off the lamp by her side; her expression of ineffable sadness is still visible. Scarlett glares at her from the hallway—barely holding back her angry tears.

In the kitchen, Buono, and Arron, Abbey's husband and newly-returned Korean POW, trade stories of life. Buono pops open a bottle of beer, Arron pours gin into a deep glass, and they toast to survival. Buono watches Arron down his gin hard. He empties the bottle for another round.

Buono steps out the door, preparing to leave. He smiles, seeing Scarlett approach, but she tries slamming the door closed on him. Abbey intervenes, and the girl lashes out, running up the stairs. Abbey steps outside, the cold blue daylight now showing the pools in her eyes. Buono makes light of things, mentioning that her boiler needs to be prepped before winter hits. She smirks, but in reality, they know there isn't really anything more to say. Buono looks down at her wedding ring now displayed on her finger.

Approaching the empty lot, we listen to Buono begin a telling of a fairy tale, *The Elves and the Shoemaker*.

Buono gets on his motorcycle and takes a last look at nothing. Scarlett rockets in, shoving him and the bike hard to the pavement. He grabs her flailing fists and embraces her, picking her off her kicking feet until they come to a still.

In the depths of despair, Buono can't seem to adjust to a life so detached from anything he ever loved. He tries his hand as a yardman at a lumberyard: an impatient customer scoffs at how long he takes trying to pick out the perfect piece of lumber. All the while, an irritated boss is watching, and Buono is called inside.

### **New Hampshire 1965:**

Buono hits the highways to begin a new life as the instructor of vocational classes at the veterans' home. As time passes and seasons change, he enjoys the tomfoolery of the young vets and how they admire him as the wise ol' fella with all the skills of a masterful craftsman. And just as Grandpa Leo would teach him the secrets of superb workmanship, Buono does the same with his young men. They are like his own little elves, plying together bits and pieces of material with their fingers and rapping and tapping away at such a rate.

It snows this evening, and the library is adorned with all the trappings of a Christmas past. The vets enjoy the toasty setting while sipping their hot cocoa and watching Buono read aloud *The Elves and the Shoemaker*.

Abbey stands at the doorway. Buono reads on, unaware of her devilish smile awaiting him, and when he looks her way, he is at a loss for words. She raises her hand to show him no more wedding ring. Everyone watches Buono reflect for a moment. He waves her over, and she nears, sitting next to him and offering a little kiss on his cheek. The vets giggle like little elves. Buono continues reading...Abbey rests her head on his shoulder.

### **New Hampshire 1967:**

While Buono's fairy tale continues, a couple of years have passed, and on this lovely spring day, Buono and Abbey's farmstead is nothing short of a bucolic paradise. Veterans renovate an old barn, swinging hammers and cutting wood. Above, veterans fasten a new sign—Vets and Bassinets—to the façade, making plain Buono's desire to now celebrate the beginning of life instead of the end. Buono and Abbey cross the open barn doors while shouldering a piece of lumber at opposite ends. In between, their two young kids hang on like little monkeys.

### **New Hampshire 2022:**

It's just one year shy of a century since seeing Buono as a one-year-old, and fifty years have passed since Buono and Abbey's lives finally came together on that toasty Christmas evening. At the farmstead, it snows, and the battered Vets and Bassinets sign now hangs by a nail. An awesome treehouse decorated with elves and woodland fairies shows in a tree. Christmas lights twinkle over a large farmhouse.

Buono's old, scratchy voice can be heard from inside as he finishes reading *The Elves and the Shoemaker*. Young adults and grandkids cheer and race out the door, plunging into the virgin snow. Grandma Abbey and a grown-up Scarlett step outside to take it all in. Grandpa Buono hurries by with a devilish grin and heading right for the treehouse. Kids from above cheer him on: "Climb, Grandpa, climb!"