

chapter *one*

A voice from behind, like a warm bath, and a gentle hand on my shoulder—I turn around and there he is, Jack Del Piero himself—there we are at the provost’s annual party for new faculty, one week before the start of the fall semester at the College of Western Connecticut, where I’m to assume a post in the Program for Theoretical Meditation on Film and Video. They know me at the college as Hank Morelli, freshly minted Ph.D. out of the University of Chicago—twenty-six years old, with a prize-winning dissertation on “The Crisis of Temporality in the Cinema of Michelangelo Antonioni.” I know myself as lonely and hungry for adventure after too many years in the library. Indisputably, the program was Del Piero’s, to which he’d improbably ascended to the chairmanship, seven years before, following the sudden death of the program’s gigantic founding chair—Big Fred Ozaki, a man whose critical works were still revered and condemned across several continents.

The next day, as he showed me about campus, he told me how much he appreciated my reaction to his initial greeting. As

he put it, his “doing me from behind.” It pleased Jack greatly to imply that he was homosexual. Near the end, I asked him why. He shrugged his shoulders and replied, “Why not?”

“Usually new faculty tell me with their first glance they know me by reputation, they’re honored to meet me, they’re in awe, a little in awe, and though I’ve been dead for thirty years they nevertheless detect the lingering bouquet of putrefaction. A little in awe? Formerly so. With a glance, they tell me they’re unsuccessfully, with devastating embarrassment to themselves, trying to suppress embarrassment on my behalf. They say all these things in a first glance, then quickly flee me, ‘Excuse me, sir, can you tell me where I can find the women’s room? I need to vomit my guts out.’ Is it obvious, Hank? I’m the college’s star paranoid. You, on the other hand . . .”

He breaks off midstream—not reaching for the precise word, but distracted, or maybe liberated. I prefer to think liberated. From himself. (As if I knew.) Del Piero drifting off to the good place behind his eyes. (So I hope: a good place for Del Piero.) He comes back from wherever he’s gone.

“You didn’t do awe, Hank, you did actual open-faced interest—you oozed sincerity, forgive my tone. Haven’t had open-faced interest since Big Fred died. Your childlike innocence is a terminal illness. Mark my words, kid, you’ll get the ladies but you can’t save yourself—children never can. Some broad is going to eat you alive.” He takes me by the arm and says, “Me? I’m darkness visible,” grinning, “which is why I’ve got Nadia. Would you like to meet Nadia? She calls herself Nadia.”

At the instant of Jack’s approach, the crowd scurries from us radially like cockroaches when you turn on the light in your kitchen at three in the morning. Okay? Now you know all you need to know about the academy-loathing attitudes that bonded Jack and me, two academic self-loathers. Del Piero, who flashed and disappeared in the avant-garde sky so long ago.

He had exactly a year and a half to his credit at Haverford College when, on his twentieth birthday, he left and proceeded to break through with four films in four years. Then, at twenty-five, he begins the journey to oblivion. No more interviews. No more public appearances. Silence—even as his experiments in pornography are honored at Cannes, Venice, and Toronto for “the beauty of their images and an original cinematic language,” while being denounced by cardinals and daytime talk show hosts for the usual reasons. When Jack is twenty-eight, Ozaki’s landmark philosophical meditation on his films appears, *The Pornography of Everyday Life: Notes on the Structure of Postmodern Beauty*, an international sensation, which ensures Jack’s place in the history of film and the tenured position at the college that Ozaki secures for him when Jack is twenty-nine. When I met him, he was just shy of his sixty-second birthday.

The College of Western Connecticut is not, obviously, Harvard or Stanford—schools that wouldn’t touch Ozaki with a ten-foot pole, whose book, though widely read, debated, and occasionally venerated, was scorned at the old elite places as “original nonsense.” Ozaki’s sexual tourism (his true cachet) was so outrageous that it got him noticed regularly in *People* magazine and *Vanity Fair*, where he was once referred to as “King Stud, all 350 pounds of him.” The provost, a bottomless consumer of celebrity gossip, hires Ozaki, then Del Piero, after which he makes the decision to pour disproportionately the college’s limited resources into Film and Video, to the lasting resentment of all other departments. The program becomes the college’s flagship, the place where all ambitious film studies scholars want to be. As a consequence, this nowhere school without a history (founded in 1967) awakes to find itself prominently on the academic map. When I told my mother what I was being paid, she said, “Don’t tell nobody.”

The roaches retreat to the walls of the provost’s reception hall, and Jack and I are left alone at the center like newlyweds

at the postnuptial celebration, to dance, all eyes upon us, our final dance before leaving for the honeymoon—the provost circling, nodding and smiling, the happy father and mother of the bride and groom rolled into one. He utters a long sentence, declaimed in operatic Italian, ever circling. Neither of us understands. Not even a word. He tells us that we're his Italian-American trump cards in the great American diversity show. We were (still circling us, very drunk) his "Negro equivalents, so why should I hire any more of those people?" Jack and I thought of ourselves as ex-Italian-Americans who'd broken out of prison, though neither of us, truth be told, had ever done a minute of ethnic hard time.

I must correct two impressions that I've given you: 1) That Del Piero was a great talker. He was not. His self-lacerating monologues were infrequent, if mordantly brilliant, interruptions of long silences and longer-yet times of periodic grunts and one- or two-word ejaculations. I exaggerate to make a point. The man taught to great acclaim, though it was hard to imagine him actually functioning in the classroom. The program's meetings he chaired rarely exceeded fifteen minutes—no exaggeration—and his memos were virtually nonexistent. As were e-mails, faxes, and phone calls. No one complained. 2) You may think that I'm a great talker. I am not. Sure, I talk well enough about my dissertation, but only because I've memorized all the words. Otherwise, I have difficulty speaking grammatically and fear that my working oral vocabulary rises to the level of a not unusually bright eighth-grader. Strip Jack and me of our official identities and you'll take us for stereotypical Italian-American dummies—Yo! Tony!—graduates, at best, of two-year technical institutes. My students like and admire me, but, then, what teacher worth his fraudulence can't bamboozle his students? I like to write because when I look in the mirror of my prose I see a fluent and fluid self, a man who exists only in the magic mirror of his sentences.

The provost staggers away and Jack says that his “theoretical-ly-inclined colleagues” were deeply impressed by my dissertation, but that he hadn’t gotten beyond the title.

“What’s wrong with the movies,” he says?

“What?!”

“What do you have against the movies?”

“I like the movies.”

“Then why didn’t you say the movies of Antonioni?”

“Oh.”

“Or at least the films of?”

“Uhh . . .”

“Speak to me, Morelli.”

“Gee.”

“Golly jeepers creepers Morelli, something wrong with the films of?”

“I don’t think so.”

“You’re turning red. I sympathize. We’re here. Here, this is how they talk: The Crisis of Temporality in the Cinema of Michelangelo Antonioni. Christ.”

“Okay.”

“You want to be taken seriously. Here. By them.”

“Is that a sin?”

“Yes. Never write like these people.”

“I’ll try not to.”

“What the fuck’s wrong with time?”

“I get it.”

“Do you really? What’s wrong with time?”

“Instead of temporality?”

“Hank, I fear those big words. They make me unhappy.”

“I’m sorry.”

He makes the sign of the cross.

He says, "I don't do theoretical meditation and I no longer do alcohol. Hence the club soda. And I don't go to meetings where they want you to acknowledge the bastard who doesn't exist, which is why I'm a white knuckler."

I can't respond.

"Aren't you going to respond to my intimate revelations? It's your turn. I talk, you talk. Gift me with your speech."

I can't respond.

"Back and forth, Hank, like tennis."

I mime an elegant, one-handed backhand slice.

"You obviously play the game. Great backhand."

"Never played."

"Atta boy! Bet that martini's too wet. You want a proper one? Say, bring me a gin martini, up, four olives, no vermouth. None. Then they put in just enough to give you truly dry. I make proper martinis for guests."

I don't respond.

"I imagine you saying you can't respond. I keep a full stock of the hard stuff. Strengthens my resolve."

"Interesting."

"You can do better than that."

"Wow!"

"Good. I miss Ozaki."

"I can imagine."

"I believe you do. I knew Antonioni in the seventies. Just before he and Monica Vitti split. She destroyed him, vice versa. Knew her in the non-Biblical sense."

"You actually knew them?"

"He wasn't a talker. (Sort of like you.) He was a maker. She was a talker. Tremendous comedian. He sits there. Reads. Takes notes. Stares a lot. Suffers persistent low-level depression. Or he doesn't read and take notes. Just sits and stares. Or paces, staring

and depressed. After seventeen years of this she tells him, You bore me. He goes to the window. Hands on hips. Staring. Comic faces she made were an enormous turn-on. For me. She made them for me. But I never had the nerve. Had my shot, though. Had my shot. That was back in the seventies, when I . . . He never turns from the window to look at her. She walks out of his life and he's eviscerated. Never again makes anything worth a damn. You're thinking how does Del Piero know this? Over drinks in her apartment, while candles flicker at twilight. Self-conscious heavy petting. I thought of going down on her. That was it. Didn't have the nerve."

"I can't take my eyes off that mesmerizing mouth of hers."

"No longer the case. You don't want to know."

"Can imagine."

"Let's hope not. Alzheimer's in addition. Watch her movies, Hank."

"Alzheimer's in addition to the ever-enlarging disasters of her body. Her time-ravaged face."

"Did you have to spell it out? Have you no decency, sir? Took her seventeen years to realize she was bored. Bitch."

"Maybe it snuck up on her, the boredom, from close behind, late in year sixteen. The boredom did her from behind."

"How to go, Hank!"

He says, "I seriously screened his great stuff—of the early Vitti period—after we met. Killed my desire to make films. Never told Big Fred the story. What was the point of work after *L'avventura*? And let's not forget *Il grido*. The Scream."

There are tears in his eyes.

"I haven't forgotten," I say. "Did a whole chapter on it."

"Vitti did a dub for *Il grido*. Before they were involved. He hears the voice and that's it. Never got over her."

"Some asshole," I say, "big-shot film commentator, called her horse-faced."

"Cocksucker!"

"Several senses of the word, Mr. Chairman."

"Nice, Morelli: You're improving, even as we speak."

"You never read my dissertation?"

"I took it in."

"You didn't interview me, either."

He leans in, he whispers: "I took you in."