

## The Monte Carlo

Elliot McIntire, November 2023

It was cheap, I will give you that. I had arrived in town with only a few dollars in my pocket, so finding a place that I could afford until I got a job was not easy. I finally found a room upstairs over an Italian restaurant. Its location was good. It was just a block from a transit station, with bus lines and subways running all over the city from there, so I could get around fairly easily. But a room over an Italian restaurant, even if cheap, can have some serious drawbacks.



If low rent was a major attraction, the noise and smells were certainly not. Living over a restaurant means there is the constant, pervasive odor of cooking from the kitchen, and the odors from the dumpsters behind the place were sometimes overwhelming. And then there was the noise. My room was right over the kitchen and the shouting from the cooks came right up through the poorly insulated floor. It was an Italian neighborhood, and the Monte Carlo Italian Restaurant was a center of social activity. There was a dance or a banquet almost every Friday and Saturday night and often someone was celebrating some event on other nights as well. These parties often spilled over into the street right under my one window, and frequently lasted well into the early morning hours.

Still, it was hard to complain too much. It provide me with a place to live while I looked for work, and Gino, the owner, extended me credit at the restaurant until I got paid. I don't think he would have done that for just any renter, but then he found out he had been in the same unit in the Army as my dad, and I guess that counted for something. The room itself was small. Just big enough for a single bed, a chair, a small chest of drawers and a small desk. The bathroom was down the hall, and I shared it with four or five other men. I hardly got to know any of them. They mostly moved on within a few days or weeks of moving in. After a couple of months I had been there longer than any of them.

The Monte Carlo had been founded by Gino's grandfather Giuseppe Fantini, who had emigrated from Sicily in 1908, and it had been a family business ever since Giuseppe opened his first small shop in 1915. It was clear that tradition was very important in the family, and Gino's fondest hope was that the restaurant could continue in the family for at least another generation. Gino was only 58 but he hoped to retire within a few years, and his concern was for the future of the business.

Since I could easily get a meal, I ended up eating there frequently, and slowly got to know Gino's younger son, Georgio, (every one but the family called him George) who oLen worked at the register when he wasn't in school. He was half way through a computer science degree at a local college, and wanted more than anything in the world to get a job with a tech company and get out of town.

What he feared most was ending up being pushed by circumstances to take over the family business. His older brother Claudio had already moved to Chicago. His baby sister Sophia's husband was a mechanic and his older sister Maria's husband was a foreman at a

manufacturing plant in New Jersey. Neither of the sons-in-law showed any business aptitude, nor were they at all interested in the restaurant.

If it was fairly quiet when I came in for a meal I could often hear Gino and his son “discussing” things in the kitchen. Sometimes these discussions got fairly heated and it seemed that they were nearly always about Gino’s hopes that Georgio would “come to his senses” and take over the business soon.

I was sympathetic with Georgio’s situation, since I had come to New York partly for similar reasons. My father, although a loving and generous man, had very fixed ideas about what his sons’ lives should be like. He had already convinced my older brother Allen to abandon his budding career as a drummer, arguing that “you can never make a living at that” even though Allen had, for a couple of years, been working fairly steadily as a studio musician in Los Angeles. So Allen was now working as a manager at a drug store in our home town, wishing he were almost anywhere else..

And I had repeatedly heard “What are you going to do with a literature major? Are you going to teach school? You should get a job in business” which I had no interest in. So I came to New York, and while I worked at a variety of jobs for a year or two while living over the Monte Carlo, I eventually got a position with one of the major publishing companies and I was able to move to a small apartment. I gradually took on more responsibilities at the company and have now been an editor there for several years. It’s a job I love. I can’t imagine doing anything else. Happily, my father has come around to accept that this is the best place for me.

I do not have many fond memories of the Monte Carlo. That was a difficult period of my life. But not long ago I found myself in that old neighborhood and realized that I was just a block or two away. So on a whim, I went in. A much older and wearier Gino was behind the counter. He didn’t recognize me, and I didn’t remind him of who I was. I saw no sign of Georgio, but I hope that he is now working somewhere for Google or Adobe, or a high-powered startup, far, far from the food business, coding to his heart’s content.