

# GIOVANNI

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STREET URCHIN OF NAPLES

JOSEPH C. POLACCO

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Giovanni was my immigrant great-grandfather. I was born five years after his 1939 passing, both events taking place in South Brooklyn. My mother, Vina, related precious snippets of her beloved grandfather Giovanni's (mis)adventures, habits, sayings, and quirks. I should have paid more attention—such a sad, common, refrain.

But Giovanni and I have now interacted: I frame-shifted his life at least thirty years, to 1969. I have benefited from his wisdom and resonated with his doubts. He is surprisingly deep, yet a fun guy.

I know nothing of Giovanni's parents. Three generations and an ocean came between us. *All accounts herein of my great-great-grandparents are complete fiction.*

Five hundred years of voluntary and forced immigration form the fabric of an American weave boxed in a Native American weaving frame constructed over millennia. Giovanni's thread goes back to Naples, Italy, around the turn of the twentieth century. His story is historical fiction which behooved me to make that history an accurate backdrop for Giovanni's family story. While most family escapades and experiences herein are real, several have been transposed to different generations. Last names have been changed and

AUTHOR'S NOTE

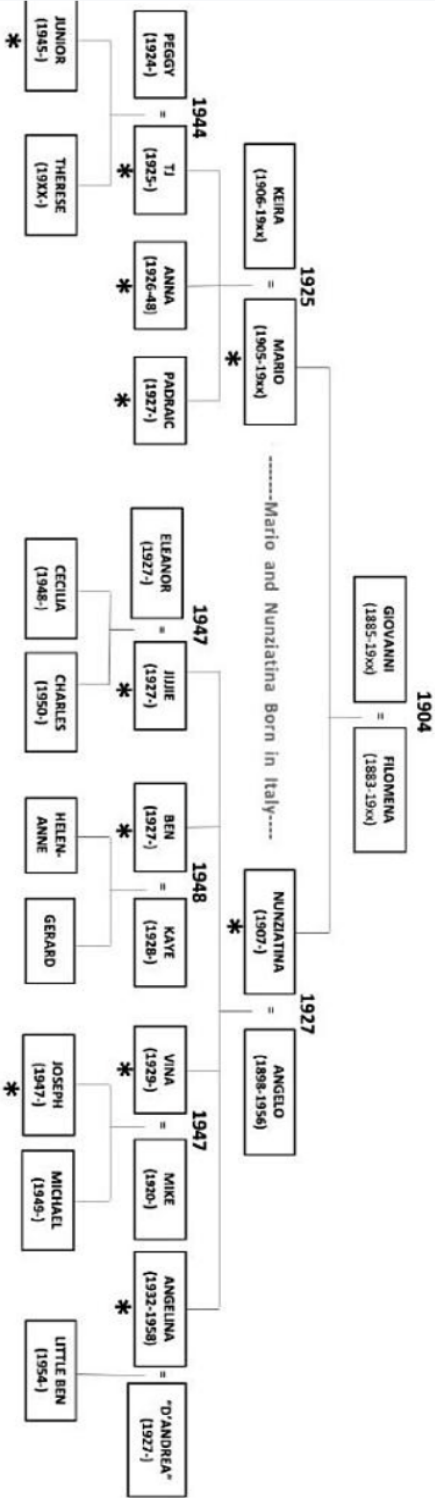
new family members introduced, mainly to portray relations among immigrant groups.

In places I use Neapolitan dialect, and always in context—the goal being to add color, not to confuse. In standard Italian, *nonno/nonna* are grandfather/grandmother, and *zio/zia* are uncle/aunt. In Neapolitan American households, we addressed Grandpa and Grandma as *'o nonn* (ooh-NŌNo) and *a nonn* (ah-NŌNa). Uncle/aunt were *'o zi* (ooh-TSEE)/*a zi* (ahh-TSEE). Pronouncing them stimulates my Neapolitan taste buds.

In any language, Giovanni dealt with racism, foreign wars, a flu pandemic, the Great Depression, Mussolini's long arm, internment, a polio epidemic, civil rights/anti-war movements, the American justice system, and the American mob. The accent is Neapolitan, the story American.

May you find your own interwoven immigrant thread.

Family Tree of Giovanni and Filomena Ragnuno



\* Blood descendants of Giovanni and Filomena who played a major role in the family story



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VILLA VALERIA (1898-1899)

*At the end of a long, tortuous flight  
Scruffy fledgling on a bough did alight  
He perched next to an untested young bird  
Whose touch the traveler's heart bestirred*

“**G**ood afternoon, young man!” In my urchin’s rags and best Tuscan dialect, I greeted the rich boy silently enclosed in his villa. Looking down to show respect, I fixed my eyes on his polished brown fine leather shoes contrasting with my bare feet. The villa was a green, glowing gem of abundance and order. But its real lure was this mute boy of about ten within the villa’s stone and cast-iron enclosure. Immaculately dressed—crispily ironed linen shirt tucked into woolen pants held up by blue suspenders—he was oblivious to the activities of the young people playing in his midst. He was much more aware of me, on the other side of the cast-iron barrier.

On my first visit we had made fleeting eye contact. On later visits his penetrating hazel eyes locked my gaze, even at the distance separating us across the fence. That distance decreased as he furtively approached closer over time, with the alert guards always



close at hand. He ignored those steely-eyed sentries in black berets and shirts, brown Cossack pants, and tall black boots. The guards, each bearing a shoulder-holstered carbine, contrasted with the bucolic charm of the villa's vineyards, orchards, vegetable gardens, and the more distant wheat fields. Blue tiles over the heavy wooden door of the main house read "Villa Valeria."

One day the boy put his hand through the grating. He wordlessly touched my shoulder, then immediately retreated.

"Calogero!" yelled a guard, running to the fence. "Scugnizzo, we will bar you from the barrier if you try to harm Calogero," the guard shouted at me as he slowly drew back while facing me. I did not so much fear the guards. I was more deeply touched by the boy's silently reaching out. From that encounter I tried to make daily visits to the villa. I needed to win the confidence of the guards, but my real goal was to pull back the layers that hid the boy's inner being. Was it calling for help? To be discovered?

Still, silence followed my daily question, "What's your name? *Come si chiama?*" I started to doubt the boy's ability to speak or understand any language. "*Come si chiama?*" Several weeks after the touch, he answered with a whispered "Calogero."

Ahh, a nibble, but not yet time to set the hook; time rather to play my lure. "*Io mi chiamo Giovanni*" was my immediate answer, but spoken softly and without haste. Of course, he had to know my name was Giovanni. With time, Calogero greeted me without prodding, at first in a whisper, but then with an increasingly spirited "*Ciao, Giovanni.*" Was I the fisherman or the fish?

We chatted clumsily at first, then in increasingly long conversations. We had very little in common. I was a thirteen-year-old refugee from the streets of Naples. So, conversation with this indulged villa boy of about ten would have been difficult even under the best circumstances.

"*Buongiorno, Calogero.*" I started using the familiar form and even lapsed into dialect at times. "*Comme staje oggi?*"

"I am fine, thanks."



Young Calogero showed some fine manners. When he finally spoke, he spoke very well, intimidating me, really. For he showed he was educated, well-educated in manners but also educated, *istruito*, in much of modern Italian history. That history was painful to me because my family had suffered under the central government in Rome.

"Giovanni, the tutors said Italy was unified in 1861 after many years of struggle."

"I don't know much history, but I know the streets of Naples of our modern Italy. I hope that we all can live as well as you in this villa." It was almost as if I were hearing someone else talking. I was thankful that my irony did not seem to register with Calogero. Or was he withdrawing defensively?

"And our history will get better," Calogero said. "We were founded by heroes. I can name the eleven prime ministers since unification!" Eyes wide, he proudly named them—in the proper sequence, I guessed. Yet his feat of memory did little to whet my appetite for the history of our modern Italy. Calogero, in turn, was very curious about the history of my own life. "Tell me, Giovanni, about your family. Where do you live?"

I was not ready to reveal details of my vagabond life in the country, and certainly not the current life of my family, my mother and two sisters, still in Naples. I contrived a temporary escape.

"I must return to Naples to visit my family, but I promise to return to this spot when I am back in Campania."

I turned to leave as Calogero dropped his head and slowly returned to the villa house, looking back at me a few times. But I did not go to Naples. I stayed in the vicinity of the villa, planning to reappear at the fence after a few days.

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Setting out to perform chores for farmers in the area—cleaning out stables, weeding, and looking after sheep—my goal was to call upon

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nearby and goodly Don Giovanni Santa Croce. He was getting on in years. His children had escaped the farm for the city and America, but he held on stubbornly. I was happy to help him for any kind of payment in lodging and food. He probably appreciated my company more than my labor.

I treaded a weed-infested stone path off a side road to reach Don Giovanni's house. The dilapidated yellow brick farmhouse and its wooden door showed their age, as did farmer Don Giovanni himself. I made a few gentle knocks on the fragile door. "*Chi è?*" came from inside, "Who is it?"

As the rustling got closer, I shouted an answer, "Giovanni from Naples!" The door slowly swung open as squeaky hinges sang a greeting of annoyance. But Don Giovanni's face lit up upon seeing me. "Ahh, *mio onomino!*" He loved that we both had the same first name—we were each other's onomino. We were namesakes.

"Come in, youngster! What brings such a beautiful *guagliò* to the humble, degraded home of this forgotten old man?" He asked that question every time he saw me, and he knew the answer: *la miseria*, the hunger that was too well-known in Naples and all of the surrounding region of Campania.

"I have come asking if I may help on the farm with the animals, with any chore you might need."

He scratched his huge nose with its very prominent brown mole halfway up the left side. "*Bene*, but you know I cannot pay you much except for a place to sleep in the stalls, a few pieces of bread and cheese, maybe an egg and some olives that have fallen off my trees."

"Whatever you can provide, Don Giovanni," I said with both open hands in front of me, palms pointing to the heavens, my eyes on his.

He touched the side of that huge nose with his right index finger and winked.

So, the agreement was reached. I fed the chickens, collected eggs, cleaned out the stalls of the donkey and Don Giovanni's sole cow. In

Naples I was one of many *scugnizzi* of the streets—one of many street urchins. And there was one scugnizzo of the stalls that I had trouble casting off—the diligent dung beetle. I relocated them and much of their quarry to the roadsides, out of sight. The holy scarabs were more sanitary and industrious than many of the wretched, luckless *disgraziati* of the maze of fetid alleys and dead ends that was my Naples. The beetles rolled balls of dung to secluded spots and laid eggs in them, providing nourishment for their young grubs.

Don Giovanni caught me providing succor to the dung beetles. He understood. “The industrious among us, especially the most wretched and insignificant, receive God’s blessing. You are a good *guagliò*, Giovanni.” He mentioned the Greek fable in which a beetle wreaked revenge on Zeus’s exalted eagle by pushing eggs out of her nest, set ever higher.

That evening, when I was half asleep, Don Giovanni came into the stall and put an old blanket over me. And on the day of my departure, he had collected, in a threadbare towel on his wobbly old table, hard savory *taralli* twists, eggs, olives, bread crusts, dried figs, and a wonderful surprise: *scamorza*, cheese from the faithful cow. Overcome by his kindness and generosity, I gave him a tearful kiss on each leathery cheek, negotiating around his nose. Words did not seem sufficient.

“I don’t know when I will see you again, *Giovannuzzo*, *mio onomino*, but you are always welcome here,” Don Giovanni said haltingly, retreating from the table to the back of his home. I knotted the towel around a stick and made my way back to Calogero’s villa.

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Calogero must have seen me approach. He ran to our spot along the fence, jumping up and down before I got there. My ploy seemed to have worked, because he was not so intent on learning of my fami-



ly's living situation in urban Naples. I did my best to occupy him with other topics.

"Calogero, tell me what the tutors are teaching you."

Calogero's happiness erupted into speech. "We learned of the destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum by Vesuvius in AD 79."

I didn't think he appreciated irony, so I didn't playfully deride him for rejoicing in the destruction of two beautiful towns. "Bravo, Calogero!" was all I could muster in the face of Calogero's overflowing spirit.

"Ash and poisonous air covered the city. Many people died, and the ash that buried them hardened over the centuries. Today archeologists pour plaster into the empty spaces that were the bodies of the buried victims."

"Bravo, Calogero!"

"They said something like the plaster replicates the bodies that had, er, putrefied, inside the hardened ash." His explanation momentarily put him back in his own shell.

"Bravo, so well explained!" I took advantage of my opening. "Do you know that in Naples I go to the garbage pile behind the Archaeological Museum to retrieve incomplete casts of the Pompeii victims?"

I got the same intense stare of the first day of our encounter across the same villa fence. I went on. "But you know, I am able to pick up only the failures that the archeologists threw out. Yet even those incomplete casts can have value. You just have to convince the buyer of the value. There are many reasons why people buy, sometimes just out of pity."

I got the stare, his hazel eyes beacons of curiosity.

"Here in Campania, I try to be honest and not make enemies. I bring items from Naples to sell, like those partial casts I picked up from the museum garbage piles."

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