

Introduction

Giovanni Agnello, my father, was a wonderful story teller. My mother knew him like a book. His only enjoyment outside of family was going to see western movies. He had a little grocery store in the 3rd ward in Houston, Texas and once a week he would go downtown for supplies. Every so often Momma would be able to squeeze out a few cents for him to go to the Iris Theater to see his beloved westerns before stopping to pick up his supplies. After supper we gathered around, waiting for him to start telling us about the movie. We were mesmerized by his story telling. When he finished with the story it felt as though we had all been sitting in the theater with him.

I tell you this because the following story is about some of the experiences he had before leaving Sicily. Most is fact with some fiction. Which is which? I'll leave it to your imagination.

Momma's String Ball.

Papa left almost two years ago for America. Like so many others in our village, this little man traveled thousands of miles away for work to keep us alive. He was to return soon and would prepare us for the trip back to America with him.

Since I was the oldest, at fourteen, Papa left me in charge of the family. I was trying so hard to make him proud. As Contadinos, my brothers and I worked every day in the fields. But tomorrow was going to be spent with my cousins, a day we would never forget. We were going in the cave on the back side of Mount Bonafato. To do this, we had to prepare for our early morning departure. 'Bastiano and Leo would bring cheese and torches and I would provide the bread and string. I knew I could easily get the string from Momma's secret hiding place.

Over the years, going to and from work, we had collected flat stones along the road for Momma to cover her dirt floors. Now shiny from wear, they all looked alike but she had a special rock under which she hid her treasures. That evening I watched as Momma took her precious ball of string from beneath the rock to add new string. She had received a box from Papa today.

When packages arrived, Momma pressed the wrapping paper, with her hands, placing it inside the box and would add the string to her string ball. She saved everything.

I was up early the next morning, slipped into the kitchen taking the string ball from its hiding place and was on my way before Momma got up. ‘Bastiano, Leo and I met at the square and we were off, running as fast as we could up Mount Bonifato. As we passed the little church, “The Virgin of The Mountain”, we made the sign of the cross and kept running.

We carefully made our way down the jagged drop off behind the church to the cave entrance. Not knowing what was ahead of us, we sat to eat our bread and cheese before entering the black pit. When we finished, I tied the string to a big tree, and Leo lit his torch. He and ‘Bastiano slowly lead the way into the dark hole. I brought up the rear unrolling Momma’s string ball. Since no one knew where we were the string would be our only way out. Slowly we moved into the cave. The three of us were soon wishing we had worn our work coats, since it was getting colder the farther we went. All at once Leo and ‘Bastiano rounded a corner leaving me in the dark. I heard them say in unison, “Bedra Matri”. Unrolling the string I slowly moved in behind them and saw it.

We had no idea how deep we were in the cave but we had stumbled into a huge cavernous room. ‘Bastiano now lit his torch and as our eyes adjusted to the additional light we saw them. Rusty rings and chains hanging from the walls, bones and tattered rags were on the floor. Fright took over three young men and we were now three little boys with wet pants. Our minds were whirring....what could have happened here? Had we found a dungeon from the Roman days? Trembling, the three of us walked around the huge room checking the chains and rings. It appeared the metal was too new to be from the time of Roman soldiers. The only explanation, this was being used by “The Mafioso”. What horrible things could have happened in this cold damp room? As we painted pictures in our minds eye, we thought we heard a scream. We stopped moving and we heard it again. I whispered to my cousins that we had to get out of here. This time I was leading the way with Leo holding on to my shirt with one hand and the torch with his other. I was rolling my string as fast as I could. Then I saw it, a little alcove off to the side. As we stumbled in ‘Bastiano and Leo’s torches went out. I told them we had to hide here because the voices were getting closer. They were to keep quiet, but keep their torches and matches where they could find them. Pressing our backs against the alcove wall we waited. It was, I’m sure, only a few minutes but seemed like hours before we saw the light moving along the wall.

I thought I recognized some of the loud voices. As they passed the alcove, with their torches, I could hardly keep from screaming because they were some of the men we worked with from a nearby village. By the time they passed us the screaming had stopped and they were dragging a lifeless body. Who was he and what had he done to make them so angry?

When we could no longer hear the voices Leo lit his torch and I started rolling the string ball as fast as I could. As they passed through, the men had kicked rocks on top of my string. We knew we had to be careful in removing them or we could break our life line. Finally we saw a little glimmer of light. We were almost there, but we were running too fast. 'Bastiano stumbled hitting his head on the cave wall. Leo held the torch by him and we could see he had a big bloody cut on his cheek. We told him he had to get up because the men would be coming back soon. With Leo on one side and me on the other he put his arms around our necks. Holding the torches and rolling the string ball we were dragging him out. When we finally reached the entrance our hearts were pounding and our bodies shaking. Funny all three of us were dripping wet with sweat when a short while ago we were wishing for our work coats. We made our way up the craggy cliff. Knowing we had little time before the men came out of the cave we still stopped at the little church to say a prayer of thanks.

As we came down the mountain we ran for the olive grove. Sitting under the old olive trees, we talked about our adventure and said we would never tell anyone about what we had seen. After awhile we were soon calm enough to go home.

As I walked in the door Momma was sobbing and her special rock was on the table by another package. How could Papa have sent two packages in two days? But the rock and package were not the cause of Momma's tears. My baby brother, Gino, was in her arms, screaming. I could see his arm and back were in a very strange position. Momma said he had fallen out of the old olive tree in the yard. Why had I been so selfish and gone to the cave today instead of staying home to watch over our family? I will always believe it was Papa letting me know, from thousands of miles away, that he had left me in charge and I let him down".

We had no doctor or hospital in our village back then, so I sent my brother, Liborio, to get Aunt Lula and Uncle Tony. When they got there we could do little for his back and the only thing we could do for his little arm was wrap it in a clean cloth put sticks on either side and tie them on with Momma's string. Every time he moved his arm he would cry so loud.

Finally Aunt Lula mixed some herbs and wine dipped a piece of clean clothe in the mixture and placed it in Gino's mouth. Sucking on it he finally fell asleep.

Over the weeks and months Gino's arm and back healed. His arm was crooked and his back was stooped, but it didn't stop him from playing with the rest of the children.

Uncle Tony had made him a little crutch, from an old olive branch, so he could move around a little easier. Every time I looked at him my heart broke and I blamed myself.

Papa would be home tomorrow. He had left for America soon after Gino's birth. Since Gino had never seen Papa he could hardly wait for his arrival. The excitement was two fold, Papa was coming home and he was taking all of us back to America.

For days Momma had been preparing for our trip. She had packed our clothes in the boxes Papa had sent, wrapped them with the paper, and tied them with the string. Sigunri Loria had helped her prepare the papers for our family of 10 to leave.

Papa arrived! It was a joyous occasion except when he saw little Gino. I could tell his heart was broken.

When he looked at me his eyes said it all. “I left you in charge and this happened”. But he never said a word to me about the accident, he didn’t have to.

After all of the hugs and kisses, the aunts, uncles and cousins started arriving with food for our celebration. I had made wine from our little vineyard a few months ago, for Papa’s arrival. After tasting it he and my uncles told me I had done a good job. Of course, I could’ve told him it was good since ‘Bastiano, Leo and I had sampled it yesterday...just to make sure it was right. It was late when all of the relatives left but we had such a good time. Food, family, and fun, what more can you ask for?

Within days we were off to Palermo for our departure to America. Uncle Tony had come with us to take the cart back home. Even though Papa had told us how bad the trip would be, we were still so excited about a ship ride taking us to our new home.

It was early when we arrived in Palermo. We went to the departure office to wait our turn, to be checked in and board the ship. Papa was first in line and as each of us were approved we stepped behind him. It was almost over. Momma and little Gino were next. She gave their papers to the agent for approval.

What happened next was unbelievable. The man pulled Papa aside. Standing next to him I heard him say “Gino wasn’t free to go”. Momma had heard him too.

With that, questions started and tears couldn't be held back. He told us those with a physical or mental malady had to be declined. The officials were concerned that anyone with those types of problems could possibly become a ward of the state and this was not going to happen. The agent told us we were all free to go to America but Gino would have to stay in Sicily. Momma wouldn't hear of it. After much pleading, Papa told Momma it would do no good. We either all went back home or send little Gino back with Uncle Tony and the rest of us go to America.

On our long trip back home all I could think of was why did leave the house that day with Momma's string ball for our cave adventure.

Now at 90 years old and living in America, never having returned to my homeland, I am telling my youngest son, Francesco, the story of the mountain cave. He is my messenger into the future. I know he will tell his children, grandchildren and their children the stories about my beautiful Sicily and they will live on forever.

As I sit here I am reminded of an old Sicilian proverb.

“Na cuttura anticu ittari lu umira luntanu dintra la futuru”...

“An ancient culture throws its shadow far into the future”...

