Danny Scalise
514 Golfview Ct.
Lenoir
NC
28645
(304) 767-5434
dscalise@gmail.com

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# Dignità: An Immigrant's Journey

by Danny Scalise

Risorgimento only happened 15 years before Guiseppe Mancini was born. That was when the city states of the Italian peninsula became what is now known as the Republic of Italy. His parents were technically citizens of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies at birth, but they didn't care or truly know what being a citizen meant. The Ndrangheta was forming to be the real government, without regard to what happened in Rome. Twenty five year old Guiseppe was newly married with a young son. His choices were organized crime or another generation of southern Italian poverty.

Almost two decades before John L. Lewis would be elected President of the United Mine Workers of America and the Matewan Massacre would happen, Guiseppe began his new career. Civility is not part of this job today, much less 125 years ago. Yet, immigrants from all over

Europe came to the Appalachian Mountains to “dig coal”. They wouldn’t be accepted as anything but scabs for a while.

Guiseppe is one of those immigrants. He traveled to Naples, Italy, boarded a ship and left his wife and son back in San Giovanni in Fiore as he only could scrape up enough money for one to travel to the new world. It was the only life he’d ever known. Other than this trip to Naples, he had barely left Calabria. He spoke very little English which barely got him by.

Being in steerage on a large ship in 1901 was no luxury cruise. The smells of body odor mixed with the scent of foods was often accompanied by vomit from those not use to living at sea, especially in close quarters. There was little to do. There wasn’t much to say. Weeks at sea living among strangers made many of those who were raised on the waters wish to never see another boat. Many Italian immigrants never saw their homeland again.

Italian immigrants in southern West Virginia and most of Appalachia took care of each other. There was a sense of community. They all came from the same place, were baptized and married in the same parish in Italy and continued to stay together upon arrival in the new world. Guiseppe found his way to a small Appalachian coal town on Smithers Creek, Cannelton, West Virginia.

The creekside community was filled with substandard housing provided by the mine. Cannelton Coal and Coke was nearby. The community was poor, but the mines were rich with valuable coal.

The company needed strong backs and immigrants worked hard for low wage, a perfect pair in the eyes of the Coal Bosses of Southern West Virginia. When miners first began to strike, the companies offered black, Italian, Polish, and Irish a chance at working in their mines.

Guiseppe quickly signed up. He would have a bunk to lay his head on at night and a job in the day.

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The first day of any job is challenging. In early 20th century coal mining, the orientation isn't with a Human Resources professional. Before dawn, groups of young men would get together, dressed in blue work clothes and hard hats with "dinner buckets" where they would take what would eventually be known as the Man Trip. It is a descent perhaps Virgil and Dante would recognize.

Guiseppe, or Guinea Gus as his white colleagues called him, wasn't accustomed to the rough crowd that is coal miners. Everyone in San Giovanni in Fiore is the same nationality, religion, and were all either criminals or in poverty. He thought it best to keep to himself, but the more experienced miners could see a rookie a mile away. He quickly found a few familiar faces and stayed near them.

As they took their trip deep into the earth, Guiseppe saw trusses made of rough hewn logs that framed the tunnel. There was a crude train track that cars would travel on. The sounds of coal cars on rails screeched in the ear while the scent of stinkdamp had a rotten egg odor that burned the nose. When enough light was near, you could see the rough hew marks on the logs and the shine of the coal. It wasn't much light, but there was enough to see something. On one of the roughly made trusses was an old faded written message in a crude paint. "Dagos, Micks, and Polacks Not Welcome."

Guiseppe asked what that meant and was informed that it was he that was not welcome. He and his friends from the Italian peninsula and anywhere else. He was too far in to go home, and even if he'd wanted to, he couldn't afford to leave. Guiseppe is now a coal miner.

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Six days a week, he passes down into the hell that is his job. He cares less about the smell, learns to ignore the sounds, and becomes more confident. His work ethic and silence makes him a favorite among his fellow Italians. The West Virginia born coal miners were not as impressed. The Guinea Gus nickname had stuck. He didn't like it, but he knew better than to say anything. His English improved over time, but he didn't let that be known.

He wrote home weekly and lived frugally. Paid in company scrip, a currency controlled by the company, he only spent that which was entirely necessary and always at the Company Store. Once he had enough, he plans to trade it in for dollars to send for his wife and son. With the sixty cents in scrip to one US dollar, that was going to take a year or two.

After a rough day, 18 months into the job, he arrived at the bunk house he shared to find that his things were not in order and his scrip was gone. All that was left was the clothes in his locker with brown trails of obvious tobacco juice spat all down them. Guiseppe wondered why he even came. Was this the American Dream?

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News could make it to Cannelton, but for the Italians it was a little slow. Usually after mass on Sundays, the men would trade stories from letters their loved ones would send from Calabria. Guiseppe had now been working for six years in the mines. He had many of those

letters. To him, they were worth more than all of the scrip Cannelton Coal and Coke had ever minted.

It was January 1908 when a letter arrived to one of his coworkers who shared the bad news with this gathering of coal miners in the parish hall. Just a few weeks earlier, roughly 100 miles north of them, on December 6, 1907 was an explosion at Fairmont Coal Company's Number 6 & 8 mines. 362 miners were dead. Many were from San Giovanni in Fiore. It was known as the Monongah Mine Disaster and would eventually be described as the worst mining disaster in American History, if not world history.

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The trip into hell felt different the next Monday morning. Guiseppe and all of this fellow paisan had Monogah on their minds. They knew people who died doing exactly what they were about to do. A somber silent mood in Italian sounds just like it does in English. The faces told each other no one was into this today.

Guiseppe was eventually asked by one of the native born West Virginia's about their melancholy. It was lunch time and the men sat around underground eating from their dinner buckets. "Hey, Guinea Gus, whats the problem with all you dagos? Somebody outlaw pasta or something?" Laughter all around.

Giuseppe felt a rage like nothing he ever experienced. His heart was beating so fast, he could feel it. The band in his hard hat couldn't control the sweat. His eyes, once locked, could not move away from the offensive coworker. He heard echoes of people talking, but couldn't focus, until he was hit from the side.

"*Guiseppe, sta bene*?"

Looking around at everyone staring at him, he replied softly, "*si*."

As everyone began to go back to lunch, Guiseppe looked down in his dinner bucket. He had found an old ice pick some time ago and kept it in his bucket to chip away a little coal. He would fill his dinner bucket with the coal to stock up for he and his bunk mates to heat the bunkhouse in the winter. The company's allowance never lasted and many of the men who lived together subsidized the allowance with a little of their find.

Time stopped. No noise. Guiseppe looked at the ice pick. The feeling was as if he was staring for minutes, but truly, he decided quickly. In a very matter of fact and controlled pace, Guiseppe picked up the ice pick and held it firmly in his hand staring for a moment. He walked the very short distance to his oppressor who had moved on laughing with the other miners about another cruel joke he had made.

Before his oppressor stopped his guttural belly laugh, he felt a small sharp sensation against his throat and stared directly into the dark brown eyes outlined in coal dust. It was the same person he had teased for years, but the expression was different. Guiseppe had learned English over the last few years, but rarely spoke it. Most of the miners talked over him, or they thought they did.

In thick Calabrian accented English: "If you ever call me guinea, dago, wop, or anything but Mister Mancini again, I will stab your throat and leave your dead body in this mine. *Capisci*?"

His victim didn't speak Italian, but he understood the context of the Italian and and nodded his head that he understood. Guiseppe calmly walked back to the empty explosives crate that was his dining chair, sat down and ate the remaining bites of his pepperoni roll.

Everyone fell silent and finished lunch. When the shift was over, every miner that witnessed that transformation looked at Mr. Mancini different. No one would steal from him or mock him again, yet he knew at that moment, he had to find a way out of the coal mine.

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He traded all of the scrip he had saved for dollars. It would be just enough, but his wife and son would have to travel lightly, and would probably leave behind most everything they owned, not that it was much. He gave the cash to a friend's wife who could go to the post office. He would never be able to leave the mines during the day. She was given specific instructions and almost $200. She sent the money order with specific instructions on what to do. A month later, Guiseppe saw his wife and son for the first time in more than 8 years.

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Eight years into being a coal miner was enough. He needed a living that would keep him alive. One that gives him control over his destiny. Now that his family was here, he needs different living arrangements. They all stay in a one room house with another couple, other Calabrians from the parish. They are sleeping on a floor, but they were together.

Guiseppe had the $31 his wife and had left from his savings. She spent the rest getting her and their son there. He bid her to guard it with her life. He would earn some more, but they needed another way to make a living.

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"My name is Philomena Mancini." Repeated over and over in her best English. Philomena is learning just enough to get by. Her ability to sew quickly became known in the small coal camp and surrounding area, only eclipsed by her Sunday supper, served at the one

room house of her friend at 2pm. Just enough time for everyone to go to Mass, gossip in the parish hall and get home. Even the “whites, blacks, and polacks” came to try some of Mrs. Mancini’s food.

Guiseppe and Philomena scraped by and saved everything they could. On a Sunday after church, Guiseppe instructed Philomena to go into town and find a suitable location for a restaurant. She took a friend who spoke passable English and found a small storefront in the bigger town of Montgomery, just a few miles away.

It was a restaurant that had gone out of business. There was also a small apartment above which was included in the rent. The building’s owner took possession after financing it with a person who left in the middle of the night. The man dressed in a three piece suit and hat didn’t like the idea of renting to an Italian, but needed the money. It had been three months since anyone had paid him for this property.

Philomena negotiated through her interpreter. Upon agreeing to terms, she pulled two $10 bills, one for a deposit and one for the first month’s rent, out of a small pocket she sewed in the breast area of her dress. She knew it would be harder for pickpockets to take from her without being noticed. Her new landlord, red from embarrassment, took the cash and handed the ladies the keys.

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For three weeks, Philomena cleaned and prepared the new home & business after doing her household chores. Guiseppe came and put in an hour or two after his shift. Husband, wife, and son ate supper every night together in their new business venture. Every night but Sunday. That was for going to Mass and resting.

After three weeks, Guiseppe felt it was time. The restaurant would open on a Monday. His final shift in the mine was a Friday. Like Dante emerging from hell, 'Thence we came forth to rebehold the stars.' Guiseppe walked to the company office and asked for his final pay, telling the foreman this was his last shift. As the company boss hands him his final pay, Guiseppe smiles as he says "*Vaffangulo*."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Calabrian blessing of thanks!"

"Oh, you're welcome." The bossman not understanding he was just told to fuck himself in Italian.

Guiseppe traded his scrip in for cash, still at the terrible exchange rate, but he was finished with coal mining. Now he was on to find the American Dream he had been searching almost a decade for.

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Four years later and Guiseppe's is a well respected restaurant in the community. The crowd after Mass now comes there and all are welcome. The Italian and Polish dine along side one another and even the Irish immigrants find a haven with comfort food. People come for miles daily. All of the Mancini's work there together. They raise their family, now with multiple children above the restaurant. Two bedrooms, one for them, one for the children.

1912 was a milestone year for coal mining and labor relations. Guiseppe proudly told Mother Jones he was a coal miner before being a restaurant owner when she dined at his establishment. But Mother Jones didn't come to the area for the culinary delights. The Paint

Creek-Cabin Creek strike was happening just a few miles away and she let everyone within ear shot know it..

The new brand of Coal Boss was harder and trying to break the will of labor “agitators” and “socialists”. They just wanted to keep pushing hard and making money. The strike was met with violence and intimidation, eventually putting many families out of their homes to live in tents in the woods close by. Taking what they could carry to a place off company property, families would create a community of families in tents, working together to survive during the strike.

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No one understood what the miners were going through more than Guiseppe. He knew these proud men were being beaten and thrown away. He knew their life was a barely an existence, but a proud one. He and Philomena made extra pastas and soups. Word quickly spread through the camp, If you’re hungry, go see the Mancini’s.

The first striker he met, perhaps 10 years Guiseppe’s junior shows up out back and is looking through the garbage. A bus boy catches him. “Hey boss, some guy is going through the trash.”

Guiseppe walks outside and looks at the man, not with contempt or pity. He understands. “*Andiamo*.” As he gestures the man to follow him.

The man follows Giuseppe in through the kitchen and out to the dining room. He sits at the counter, obviously hungry. He hasn’t showered in some time and can’t bring himself to ask for help. It was beneath him. He was a proud man and wanted to earn his way, even if that meant finding scraps in the garbage. Guiseppe saw it in his eyes, he walked back to the kitchen,

made him a plate of pasta with a couple slices of his homemade bread. Without a word, he handed the man a meal and nodded. No words necessary. The two were from opposite sides of the world, born of different parents, yet they were brothers.

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Weeks of the strike go by and word is out. The aroma of garlic wafted through the small dining room. Sounds from a busy kitchen made their way to the front of the house too. On a sunny Sunday afternoon half of the restaurant came from their tent. Guiseppe and Philomena had found a way to serve these proud men and their families. It wasn't charity, it's what a man does for his neighbor. They all come together and eat, without regard to who they were.

The lunch crowd was at its peak when two large men who's look let everyone know they didn't belong stepped in. Everyone there knew who they were and that they were trouble. They aren't looking for a seat. They were Baldwin-Felts Detectives, hired by the companies in Paint Creek & Cabin Creek to end the strike. Miners knew them as Baldwin-Felts thugs. As they approach the counter, Guiseppe wipes his hands on a towel and sets it on behind the window as he walks to the cash register. He places both hands on the counter as if to say this was his place. He breaks the silence, "How may I help you gentlemen?"

In quick reply, the thug on Guiseppe's right asks "You let niggers and polacks eat here? You fuckin wops'll do anything for a buck, even mix races."

"Maybe I can get you something to take with you."

"We don't want any of your fuckin dago food. I'm here to deliver a message. Keep fuckin around with business that aint your own and you'll pay for it."

Guiseppe no longer hears sound. His eyes fixated on the thug who spoke. He hadn't felt this way since the day in the mine with the ice pick. He finally breaks the silence as everyone in the dining room is listening. "Don't have no more company scrip to pay you *stronzo*. You go back now and tell your boss to come himself to threaten me. I am no scared of thugs."

The two men almost shrug as they walk out. They had carried out their assignment.

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Later that night, the family is awakened by glass breaking. The apartment is directly above the restaurant, so Guiseppe quickly runs to the window. A shout from down in front of the building, "Go back to dago land you guinea". Laughter followed as a sounds of a vehicle pulling away faded into the night.

Philomena was dealing with a crying child and asking Guiseppe what happened. All of the family is awake now and unsettled. Then he smells smoke and can see it rising from the front window with a faint glow. He yells at her, "*Prendi I bambini e van via*!"

Guiseppe runs to the bedroom and finds the lock box where he keeps their life savings, all in cash. There is no trust in banks, especially by immigrants. They run out in time to watch the flames overtake the entire building. "Thugs".

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The family walks the few in town to the Catholic Church in Montgomery. This church normally serves the Irish and Polish families in the area. They Italians in the area we to a different parish that is miles away in Boomer. Yet, the factions of the area all melted together in times of trouble. It was 4am and the family knocked on the door of the Priest. He was already awake, as he observed the liturgy of the hours, waking early each morning to pray.

"*Padre,* they burned it down. We have no home."

"Come in Mr. Mancini. Let's get you out of the night air. Would you like some coffee?"

"*Mille Grazie, Padre*."

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After hearing their story, the Priest let the family stay in quarters normally reserved for traveling religious. It wasn't much. A very basic room with an uncomfortable bed and chair. The walls were bare wood, with only a single crucifix hanging on the wall. Philomena grabbed her children then Guiseppe's hand and began to pray.

After the prayers, the adrenaline wore off. The entire family all slept well into the morning. The Priest began to call parishioners after 7am telling them what happened. He also called other religious in the area. Mr. Mancini, who fed the hungry, now needed their help.

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It was 9am and Guiseppe realized he had slept later than he ever had. The sun was shining. He left Philomena and the children at the parish and walked back to assess the damage. As he got crossed the railroad tracks and turned the corner he could see the blackened shell that was his home and his life. He could still smell the smoldering.

Someone was walking out with things in their hands. Guiseppe ran. Once close enough, he realized there are many people inside. They are cleaning up. Striking coal miners and their families all came as soon as they heard. He stopped a man he didn't recognize and asked, "What are you doing?"

"Mr. Mancini, when those thugs kicked me and my wife out, you fed us. You fed all of us." He points to the people who've all stopped working and noticed their patron saint was standing in front of them. "We owe you our lives. This is the least we can do."

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Around lunchtime, in the parish hall where the family was still in shock a knock on the door. The Priest opened the door and looked at Guiseppe, "Mr. Mancini, this is Montgomery Police Chief Seamus Murphy. He'd like to hear what happened to you last night."

Chief Murphy was a large man, tall and barrel chested. He had hands that let a person know, he wasn't above doing what needed to. He had red hair and a beard, which set off his dark police uniform. His badge shined with pride, like he had just polished it for this occasion. Even his black shoes had a shine that told you Chief Murphy was a man to be respected.

With a hint of an Irish accent, "Thank you Father, I'll take it from here. I'll see you Sunday morning." Then turns Guiseppe, "Mr. Mancini, tell me what happened."

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Three days later, Chief Murphy returns. He and the Priest meet Guiseppe in the Priest's small office. "Mr. Mancini, the two Baldwin-Felts Detectives have been arrested and more than a few people have agreed that they were the men that attacked your family. After hearing how many people were willing to point at them for the crime, they sung like little birdies. They'll not be botherin ya any further."

"*Grazie mille* Chief. My family is indebted to you."

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Six days a week for a month, volunteers showed up. Some were immigrants, some weren't. Some lived in the tents, some didn't. Some were Catholic, some weren't. They all were indebted to Giuseppe Mancini and were prepared to repay their debt with interest. They cleaned, and rebuilt the kitchen first.

Philomena began cooking three meals a day for the volunteers. She didn't know how they would make it, but somehow, the food just kept coming in. Other women helped her while the men cleaned up the debris and repaired the burned out shell of a building.

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The white banner hanging on the outside of the small brick building says "Grand Reopening - *Benevenuto e tutti*." The community has all come out to celebrate Guiseppe's Restaurant opening their doors again.

The Paint Creek-Cabin Creek strike went on for some time after, but everyone for miles around still came to eat. Some were there to be fed until they could get back to work. Others, to pay their respects to the one man who gave them all dignity.