

Damiano/ROSA'S STORY

Rosa's Story

**A NOVEL BY
Jim Damiano**

Based on a true story.

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This is a true story about my grandmother as told through my mother's eyes. I chose to write the tale, as a novel because I feel the reader needs to live the experience through its dialogue to appreciate its impact. It is about Rosa's struggles starting as a fifteen year old Italian immigrant coming to a strange, new land of freedom, hope, tragedy and disappointment.

For Rosa, the American dream came with an expensive price tag. Her struggles were interlaced with tragedy, love, perseverance and above all faith. Only some of the story has been changed with personal speculation applied where specific details were unknown or best left forgotten. This is done to help make the story flow naturally. The speculation though is based on what I know of the true story and is not intended to subtract or add to its impact on the reader, for Rosa's story is all too real and also all too familiar for the many unwary immigrants who came then and now to this country.

THE ROSE

**Aspiring beautiful flower,
An Italian Rose,
Full bud, awaiting destiny,
Gentle, strong,
Naive, rich, colorful-
Promising.
Reaching, unafraid, exploring,
Impervious to life's challenge,
Feminine, yet thorny,
Fragrant, enticing,
Hardly adult,
Wishing otherwise,
Independent-resolute,
Stubborn-prickly,
Nothing to prove,
Multicolored life—waiting,
Impatient,
For its time,
In the sun.
Adjusting!
Fearless until,
Cut deeply, while still pulsing,
Ripped from all awareness,
Challenged to bloom,
Losing,
All familiarity-all feeling,
Change!**

By V. R. (Jim) Damiano

“Growth, in some curious way, I suspect, depends on being always in motion, just a bit, one way or another.”

–Norman Mailer, b. 1932 American Writer

CHAPTER ONE

My name is Jane. In my youth, Mother called me Jennie. Now the window of my life is closing, though I try desperately to stop it. Slowly it descends, erasing my precious memory, stealing my senses, tempting me to remain forever silent. It would be so easy to be still and let these secrets die with me.

But I must tell someone. Mother's story should be told before these scattering clouds make the telling impossible. I'm certain Mother would not want me to reveal all, definitely not her beginning quest for the American dream, and certainly not the ending. It was for her too gruesome and so very embarrassing.

Yet, I owe this to her, to my children, and to theirs too. I must tell her story before I drift slowly away, forever, into those terrible foreboding clouds. I can see them waiting for me—yes, waiting, like messengers of death itself, dark and beckoning.

* * *

Rain played a grand tribute to the parched soil, a welcome cleansing that pounded, staccato-like, upon the ancient hillside village, slaking the thirsty land. Rosa, mesmerized, stood marveling in the rain. *Today, I must stay inside*, she thought, *but not now. Now I will collect enough rainwater to wash.* Her red hair was already soaked, glistened from the storm, and the rainwater made it feel silken.

Antoinette stood in the weathered doorway of their ancient home. Hands on hips, chin out, she called, “Rosa, what're you doing, standing out there in the rain? You'll catch your death, and then what?”

“Mama, it feels so good. Come here and stand with me.”

“Foolishness! We’ve too much work to do before Papa returns. It’s a long walk from Naples, and knowing him, he’ll be hungry as a lion. So come quickly. Help me prepare dinner.” *She is so much like her father, a dreamer.* Smiling now, she said, “You know, a little bird told me Papa will have a surprise to share with you.”

Rosa stopped, “What surprise—a new dress? Or that wonderful comb I liked?” Water hit the old tiled floor as she followed her mother into the house, dripping wet.

“Patience, you’ll know soon enough.” *Soon enough the cat will be out of the bag, and then what.*

“Oh Mama, anything Papa brings will be wonderful. Compared to this old place anything is better. It’s so boring here!”

Antoinette’s stern impatient voice faltered and she seemed to separate each word as it was uttered. “And what do you know of boring? This village has been our family’s home for centuries.” Making the sign of the cross, she mumbled, “Faa, I swear, today’s children will be the death of us.”

“Mama, really! It’s 1924, not the dark ages! It is different from when you were a bambino. Much change has happened since the war - except in this place.”

“Daughter, that war, that terrible war.” Strong, painful memories crept into her voice; her face strained, forcing a mournful sound from her throat. “My brother, poor Vincenzo, killed. Your father gone away with the king’s army, and for what? I’ll tell you - four, long, painful years, forever lost to my love and me.”

She hesitated, thinking despairingly, *Now, how many more years must I bear his absence?*

“Barely did we hear from my Rocco for four years, and me here with two children, fearing all the time that I’d never see him again! Yes, Rosa, things are different now, especially with your papa. Such grand ideas he has. I pray constantly to all the saints to set him right. So, my Rose Bud, don’t tell me about change. You’re too young to understand change.”

Rosa stood quietly, wishing she had thought before she spoke. *Me and my big mouth.*

With sad eyes that were beginning to tear she said, “Sorry, Mama, I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“No, you didn’t upset me. Don’t worry. Come give me a hug.”

Rosa happily reached for her mother and together they basked in the warmth of each others arms.

Antoinette’s usual unyielding look turned a complete circle, changing to one that seemed almost pleading, yet perplexed. She brushed back her jet-black hair then tied it into a neat bun, her eyes reflecting a familiar special warmth. “Rosa, at least then, we had each other, now, didn’t we?”

Confused, Rosa looked into her mother's saddened face; anxious, both began to cry. She raced across the tiled floor to her mother's arms and embraced her, clinging tightly. Softly she answered, "Mama, please forgive me, if I've caused you any pain."

Rosa's trembling moved Antoinette to hold her daughter closer. Rosa's wet clothing was clinging to them both. She took in Rosa's innocent blue-green eyes. *My angel is no longer a child. When did my baby grow into this beautiful young woman?* Antoinette felt warmth and also a little jealousy for her own youth that was now a fading memory, her own swiftly passing years: she had been so roughened by her hard life.

She moved her daughter to arm's length. "Rosa, you are almost fifteen and it's time we had a serious talk."

"About what?"

"Nothing that can't wait for the right time. But I promise, we will talk, in good time. Now, we have much work to do. So, my wet angel, you get dry, and then let's get going. Tomorrow is Sunday, and I promised Father Mario I'd bake him my special sausage bread. We have only enough ingredients for one loaf, so we'll have to hide it from your papa."

Rosa smiled as she quickly changed into dry clothes and combed her hair back. Grabbing a worn apron, she reached for a pan. Her face puckered up in a smirk as she playfully scolded, "Mama, what are you standing around for, don't we have work to do?"

Antoinette stopped stirring the sauce and gently kissed Rosa's cheek. "Rosa, you have a quick way to everyone's heart, and you are the light of my life. Don't ever change. Now, I wonder where that daydreamer brother of yours is. He was supposed to clean out the chicken coop and bring me some eggs."

"Do you want me to go look for him?"

"No, you've already been soaked once and you will run out of clothes. He'll be here soon enough and then he will have some explaining to do."

* * *

The incessant rain slowed to a steady mist. Rocco Attolini trudged slowly up the muddy road, carefully watching his footing. The three-day trek from Naples seemed endless; each footstep was like a journey. He had fallen clumsily several times, trying to keep his baggage from spilling off his back. The red clay mud of the road covered his well-worn traveling shoes, adding to his load and testing weary legs. It didn't matter. Rocco was excited. His mind was made up and an adventure lay ahead.

Unafraid, or so he fooled himself, he thought about his plan. It was difficult. What faced him was an adventure, yes, but a change so big it was difficult to contemplate. Though he tried to tell himself he wasn't afraid, it was difficult not to feel anxious. He tried valiantly to reason with himself. *After all, I've lived through four years of*

war. Surely nothing could be worse than that. I cannot let my foolish fear get in the way of improving my family's future.

Life in Southern Italy had taken a turn for the worse. Years of privation and war had taken its toll. Antiquity and family heritage no longer seemed to matter. Italy's poor and desperate were leaving daily in a great exodus to the Americas for the hope of a better life. Many of Rocco's friends and family had already left for greener pastures to faraway places like the United States, Brazil, Mexico and Argentina. Over one-third of Italians had left its shores in the past thirty years. And now with Mussolini's reign of fear beginning to overtake the land, more were taking the necessary steps to leave all that they knew for the hope that a new land would bring. After all, the streets in America were said to be lined in gold and there was work for anyone willing to work. And Rocco was more than willing, for he was tired of the constant struggle. He and Antoinette had spent hours and hours discussing every practical option. His good wife was still a bit anxious, but had told him that she would do whatever he decided. And when the letter came from America asking for Rosa's hand in marriage, the doors were suddenly opened to what must be done.

In the dimming light of early evening, he could see faint signs of life as he approached the ancient village. Some people were still out despite the inclement weather, walking amongst the cobbled walkways in between centuries-old rock homes that were glistening, slick with rain, the people appearing ghost-like.

Rocco felt a surge of relief with Missanello in sight. Soggy, tired, and anxious for the warmth of hearth and home, he envisioned familiar comforts and the succulent aroma of sweet Antoinette's cooking.

He was not disappointed. When he was less than a Bocce ball's roll to his home's entrance, the wooden door burst open, swinging precariously on ancient hinges. A slight gangly boy, wearing ragged clothes, raced out the door. All arms and legs, the slight boy rushed like a whirlwind to Rocco who waited with extended arms. Once there he jumped into his father's rain-drenched, outstretched arms, almost tumbling him into the mud. The boy's coarse homespun shirt, now wet, felt rough, though happily familiar to Rocco's cheek. Rocco hugged his son tightly, caressing his matted hair.

"Papa, you're home. I've missed you. And there's a lot I need to tell you." Domenico, small for eleven years old, looked like his mother. His large brown eyes glistened with excitement as he grasped Rocco's muddied hand and joyfully shouted, "Papa, come! Let's get out of the rain before Mama sees me."

Rocco, bent from his load, had seemed even smaller than his already slight stature. But in the presence of Domenico, he stood tall. He whispered in Domenico's ear, "Somehow, I think your mama already knows." Domenico cast a false downward look.

Laughing, he savored his son's enthusiasm. Opening his arms wide, he happily embraced both his children when Rosa ran out to join the wet tangle of his arms.

Rocco cast a roguish wink toward the dim light in the doorway, where his wife stood grinning, wearing a simple peasant dress that she had made years earlier during the war.

"What's all this fuss? I've been gone only a week. Could it be this?" Rocco, curtly smiling, pulled a small bag from his large traveling coat, laughing as he passed it to his son. "Here, Nico, savor the riches of Naples."

With a vengeance, Domenico tore the bag open, tearing at the protective wax paper. He pulled out a peppermint stick, took a lingering taste, smiling broadly. "Papa, oh Papa, thank you."

"And Rosa, I'm sorry. I couldn't find a dress worthy for an Italian Princess. But, I did find something." Rocco pulled a tissue wrapped parcel from his bulging pocket, handing it to his excited daughter.

"Papa, I knew it; I just knew you'd buy it for me."

"Stop talking Rosa." Rocco said warmly, "Open it."

Rosa folded back the tissue, now wet, to reveal the beautiful ivory comb she had desired months earlier. "It's beautiful, Papa! I love you so much. Mama hinted you'd have a surprise."

Rocco cast an anxious glance at his wife. His mood sobered but the children did not notice.

Antoinette, who did not miss her spouse's consternation, broke the silence. She playfully waved a large wooden spoon and demanded, "What are you all going to do, stay out there all night in the damp cold? Or do you want to eat the supper that Rosa and I slaved over before it gets cold? Now, get in the house before you cause the death of me!"

Catching his wife's playful glare, Rocco winked in her direction and earnestly picked up his travel case, shaking a contrite head. "Ah, yes, *cara mia*," he smirked, "I'm for supper; I could smell the sausage bread from down the road. Such a smell can stir the blood of a happy, though famished man."

"Sorry dear," she teased, then snickered. "The sausage bread isn't for you. It's for God's servant. Come and see what's for you before I toss it out the window."

Grinning, he turned to the children, "Come, Mama's right, we have amused the neighbors enough. It's time for privacy and most important supper."

With water cascading like a waterfall from his soggy fedora, Rocco grasped his load with stout arms. Trailed by his children, they walked together into the familiarity of their warm, inviting home.

Once inside the doorway, Rocco embraced his Antoinette, giving her a lingering kiss as the children smiled at seeing their love.

* * *

After a hearty meal of pasta and vegetables picked fresh earlier from their small garden, Rocco pulled an old wooden pipe from his vest pocket, his only inheritance from his father who had died of one of the many diseases that hit the poor, when he was off to war. Packing it expertly with aromatic tobacco, and lighting it, he savored its aroma. The small room's soft glow came from one of their two kerosene lamps. It cast protective shadows upon the shelter's rough walls, hiding the night's gloom. The room served as the kitchen and the living area. The large, now cluttered table was its focal point.

Speaking softly, as was his way, he announced, "Antoinette, it's time we discuss our surprise. Do you agree?"

"Yes husband. Children, gather around the table. Papa has something important to say."

Rosa sat, confused. *Didn't Papa already bring my surprise?*

Domenico, in the middle of a large lick from his peppermint stick, reluctantly pushed his body to the table, contemplating only the next lick on the candy.

Rocco hesitated, looking at his wife for encouragement. None came for she was as perplexed as he was committed in what they were about to discuss. Taking a deep breath, he stood. His five-foot, seven-inch frame appeared to tower over the rustic, hand carved table.

"Children, what I tell you will affect your future, probably more than ours. Your mother and I have spent countless hours seeking a way to survive here. Times in Southern Italy are difficult, particularly for our village. It is worse now with Mussolini's *Fascisti* and all the terrible fear they're now spreading with a joy only they can understand. Many friends and even family have left for other parts of the world, seeking greener pastures. In America there is much work, and more important, there is hope. I have been promised a job there. So soon we will leave, hopefully, sometime early next year. There is more." His eyes focused on Rosa.

"Rosa, this concerns you. Do you remember the Spagnuolo family? They left here when you were very young.

"No Papa, I do remember you talking of them. They seemed nice by your descriptions. Why?"

"They moved to America several years ago, to a city called Utica in a place called New York State. They have an unmarried son. His name is Antonio Rocco. I have agreed to their overtures to an arrangement of marriage between you and him. He is very handsome from his picture. He also served in the American Navy during the Great War. He has a good job. In fact, it has been with him that I corresponded and not his father Nicola, with whom I go back many years, long before you were born."

"Oh Papa, this Antonio Spagnuolo, is he old?" Trying to hide her panic, she thought, *No, I don't want to marry. Not yet. Not someone I don't even know! I don't even know what to do!*

"No Rosa, not everyone who served in the war was ancient like me. He's twenty-three. Is that so old?"

"Papa, you're not that old. Forty-two is not old. Is it?" Rosa's smile lifted her father's somber mood.

Laughing, Rocco continued, "So there you have it. In a few weeks after Christmas, we'll seriously begin to plan our move. There is one problem, though. Mama must stay here for a while. I'm sorry to say we don't have the funds to take us all. Antonio Spagnuolo is paying for Rosa's voyage. We only have enough spare money to cover my voyage and a child's passage for Nico. Good friends now living in Utica, from Missanello, have arranged the paperwork necessary. Most important, I have proof of a sponsor required by the American authorities. These friends have also promised a loan, which I'll have to repay once I start work there. Mama will come as soon as we have saved enough money from our earnings. I promise it will not be long."

Involuntary tears filled Rosa's eyes. "But Papa, must we leave Mama?" *And why must I marry someone I don't know?*

Feeling her daughter's consternation, Antoinette reached for Rosa. "Dear one, I'll be fine. In these difficult times, this is not uncommon." Antoinette held Rosa's hands gently in hers, and smiling. "And remember, my marriage was arranged too. Look how well it turned out."

"Mama, how will you live with no money?"

"Remember the Ruggeri family? They did the same thing we're doing. My friend, Theresa, left for America to join her family after only two years. We have a little money and what extra we can spare, Papa will leave so I can live. With God's grace, I'll sell off our property at a good price. If we leave together, people will know our desperation and take advantage. This home has been in my family for generations and we can't sell it for a pittance. If we do, my ancestors will come back and haunt me." She made the sign of the cross as an afterthought, for Antoinette, like so many other Italians, was a very superstitious woman.

Antoinette noticed Domenico, who had been almost forgotten in the discussion. She patted his curly hair, and kissed his forehead, wiping an errant tear from his cheek. "Don't cry Nico," she soothed. "You must be brave. I'll join you in America before you can shake a stick. I have great faith in Papa and you must too. After all, he is one of the best cobblers in Missanello. And that's a fact!"

"God, woman, what is this? One of the best!" Beating his chest, chin extended, with mustache quivering, "I am the best, and don't any of you ever forget it."

The children jumped from their chairs to hug Rocco. For the moment, their still-growing determination was firm. Rocco, somewhat relieved, was happy to spare them the details of their pending ordeal. Though he tried to hold back troubled thoughts, he could not shake them from his mind. *Third class passage from Naples to New York is not known for its luxury and the journey to Naples will be a long walk for young legs. At least we'll*

have time to prepare. Maybe I can ask Cousin Angelo to take us in his donkey cart. But after all, this is a problem to be solved tomorrow.

Looking fondly at his wife and filled with longing, he took a deep breath, then exhaled pipe smoke, slowly, buying time to gather his wits. *Right now, today is all I have and tonight, well tonight, I must make the most of it.* He unconsciously touched the broad, jagged scar on his left cheek, his war trophy, an unrelenting memento of what is important. Receiving that wound made him see for the first time how essential it is to appreciate the moment.

Rocco naughtily winked at Antoinette. *I hope to the Heavens that she'll be fine. Who am I fooling? After we leave, it may be months before I can hold her in my arms again.* He quickly forced the disturbing thought from his mind. Rocco was usually a positive man, not bent on serving the demands of unhappy thoughts.

Not missing her husband's sudden silence and shifting moods, Antoinette said, "Children, it's time to clean the table and wash the dishes. Be quick for we need to ready ourselves for tomorrow and church. It is late, so when you're through, it's off to bed."

With Antoinette and the children busy, Rocco grabbed a knife, intent on having a slice of the sausage bread. But before the knife could touch the fragrant loaf, Antoinette hit his hand with her large, seemingly ever present, wooden spoon. "Rocco, I told you this was for Father Mario."

"*Cara mia*, one little piece will not be missed by the good priest?"

The dour look on her face was sufficient to dissuade further argument.

Returning her attention to the children, she noticed them smiling instead of doing chores. Scolding playfully, she forced a stern look. "Now to the chores, and then to bed! The amusement is over!"

Rosa groaned, "Oh Mama, after chores, can I stay up a bit and read some of the papers Papa brought from Naples? I saw something in one of them about America, and I want to read it tonight. Please?"

"Sure, but only for a few minutes. Kerosene is expensive and we need to save it for important things, not silly news. Most of what's in the paper is lies anyway."

* * *

Rosa read the article and was unsatisfied. It unnerved her young mind with talk of America and its wealth, along with its speculation on why so many countrymen were crossing the ocean to an unknown fate. The disturbing reports stated that many were returning after disappointing experiences, or having difficulty adapting. Others had returned to Italy feeling abused and worse for wear. Even the well educated could not find work other than menial jobs that no one else wanted. *Once I'm there, I'll not return. No, darn it, I'll never give up! How can it be worse than here? Here all we have is our past. There we have hope.*

“Nevertheless, I sure wish Papa knows what he’s doing,” she murmured softly, not wanting to wake anyone. She folded the paper, put out the light, and retreated to the small closet-like bedroom she shared with her brother. Domenico was sound asleep, a pleasant smile upon his face. She wondered if he were dreaming of voyages and adventure.

* * *

Antoinette, holding back sobs, tried not to disturb Rocco’s gentle snoring. Tenderly, she touched his reddish-grey hair, caressing, savoring its familiar feel. She stared blankly at the blackened bedroom ceiling, hearing an errant fly beating its wings, desperately trying to find an exit through the open, narrow window. For a fleeting moment, she felt like that frustrated fly, alone, unsure. It weakened the stoic reserve she usually fostered as her veneer.

She prayed: Please, Lord Jesus, give me strength. I cannot show Rocco my fear, not when he is so excited. However, at the risk of being impertinent, is this really the right thing? And Lord, is it wrong of me to ask why, especially now? I need Your help to survive this terrible change my Rocco desires. Please, grant me strength. You alone know I’m not as strong as my Rocco thinks. Lord, I mustn’t let him down. So please help me to hide my fear.

Antoinette pushed her head into a feathered pillow already wet with her tears, trying to hide her sobbing.

Rocco, awake, heard Antoinette’s weeping, keeping council to himself, unsure. Then reluctantly, he placed his arm around her, holding her tightly and gently kissing her.

Clinging to Rocco and shaking in uncontrollable sobs, she fell asleep. With his resolve unbent, yet his fears very real, he lay quietly in the warmth and safety of the bed, giving up on any thought of slumber for the night.