Chronicles of Brunonia

Little Caesar
(Historical Narrative)

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The Diary of Giuseppe Zambarano offers a glimpse into the life of a young immigrant from Italy in the late 1800s, who builds a business and family on Federal Hill in Providence.

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Written in partial fulfillment of requirements for E. Taylor's EL18 or 118:
"Tales of the Real World" in the Nonfiction Writing Program, Department of English, Brown University.

Shortly before noon on a Wednesday in October, 1894, the clients of a small-town Italian barbershop leisurely undergo the ritual of shaving. A group sit along the side wall and trade observations in phlegmatic, Neapolitan dialect, while the patron in the barber's chair listens. Occasionally, between strokes of the razor through thick stubble, the barber adds his opinion to the conversation. A pair of young children regularly chase each other through the shop and are peremptorily ordered back out.

A young man rushes in off the street and declares himself, somewhat unnecessarily, to be in a hurry. The older men are silent for a moment and share disapproving and curious glances while he climbs into the chair and the barber begins to lather his face. With hazel eyes and sharp features, 22-year-old Giuseppe Zambarano stands out in a gathering of swarthy peasant stock. His closely trimmed moustache and neat hair already appear well-groomed, his overall appearance verges on fastidious. He announces to the barbershop audience that he is getting engaged today. He will receive his betrothed and her family at two o'clock in his father's house.

The men offer formal compliments to young Giuseppe on his engagement, and perhaps some patronizing words of wisdom: *Moglie e buoi dei paesi tuoi*; Take wife and cattle from your own village.

The men in the barbershop know that Giuseppe's future in-laws, like most of them, come from the same triangle of villages in the back-country of Campania. Fontegreca, Ciorlano, and Prata Sannita lie two hilly miles. walk from the last station on the Naples line. Now many of the squat cottages there stand empty. Most of the one thousand or so natives of these villages make their homes

a short way from the terminal of the Cranston St. trolley car, in Thornton, Rhode Island, on farm land that resembles the fertile hills of the old country, with island-dotted Narragansett Bay like a reflection of Naples in the background.

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As a yet unmarried youngest son, Giuseppe Zambarano lives in the home of his father Gioacchino and his uncle Lorenzo, a modest wooden affair in the heart of this growing neighborhood. The Zambarano brothers of the older generation disembarked in 1882 to join the so-called "pick and shovel brigade" of new immigrants, who tilled the land in Thornton and Simmonsville, as they had in Italy.

Now many of the early arrivals have become disenchanted with the hard conditions and meager returns of family farming that drove them from the Italian countryside in the first place. Only the *padrones*, who own large plots and hire boatloads of new immigrants on the cheap, have gotten rich. Every ambitious Italian dreams of owning his own shop, of working on his own schedule. While his father and uncle have settled into the rural life, sharing a house to save costs, Giuseppe's older brother Luigi runs a grocery store catering to the other Italians of Thornton.

At age 22, Giuseppe has spent several years working machinery in a local mill and bringing his wages home to the family. The possibilities around him and his brother's success have aroused a competitive nature; his upcoming wedding seems to him the first step in a bright and independent future.

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Giuseppe's engagement to Caterina Martellucci has been arranged in

advance by their families, in accordance with southern Italian tradition. With his parents and hers facing each other across the parlor, Giuseppe nevertheless makes a declaration of love.

"She was fair to my eyes and dear to my heart," he writes that evening in an accounting book. "I was compelled to declare my love, which she accepted as was befitting."

This first improvised journal entry hints at the importance of the day in Giuseppe's mind. He enters it as the first profit in the account of his successful life. After tearing out the used pages, he inscribes with flourishing letters the title: "The Affairs of Giuseppe Zambarano and his Family: this journal should be treated with utmost respect and should not ever be damaged."

Having left his Italian village at age seven, it is not likely that he received much formal training in reading or writing of his native language. His family, their acquaintances, and their coworkers speak the dialect of their native village — some of the first generation of immigrants get by without ever learning a word of English, although as a young arrival Giuseppe has picked it up quickly. Still, he chooses to write in neither, but in Dante's Florentine dialect, the language of the newly united Italian nation. This choice marks the text with literary aspirations; his style hints that, more than a "dear diary" for personal observations, the text is already looking toward the history books.

His spelling is inflected with the soft consonants and open vowels of southern dialect and self-consciously overloaded with pronouns and prepositions, but his prose makes up for what it lacks in erudition with enthusiasm. Like Caesar, when describing an honor he refers to himself in the

third person, then belies this false modesty with great arabesque signatures at the end of the entries.

The engagement lasts a year, upon which Giuseppe doesn.t comment at any great length. On the day of the wedding, however, he meticulously records the procession of guests and presents, the most impressive of each category (local musical celebrity G. E. Pettine and a sofa) inscribed in his version of a gothic script. "I was honored with a plethora of good wishes," he writes. "My family and hers began the celebration two weeks before the wedding."

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Giuseppe had fallen ill repeatedly in the weeks leading up to his wedding. On his first day of married life, he suffers a relapse and is confined to bed. His recovery drags on for another two weeks, and when he is finally able to walk again, it is only just in time to go to his mother's deathbed. "Weeks after having celebrated my wedding, I attended my mother's funeral," he writes soberly.

In the next months, Giuseppe stays in his parents' house. Caterina moves in, and both go back to work at the mill. Living in chafing proximity to his father and older brother aggravates Giuseppe's despondency over his dragging illness and his mother's death. He feels stifled in his subordinate position of lodger and secondary breadwinner. The newlyweds spend Christmas with the Martellucci family, but in the first days of 1896, Giuseppe complains that he was "forced to visit Luigi on New Year's Eve, which did not appeal to me at all."

His fortunes soon take a turn for the better, however, at the annual election of the Thornton chapter of the Royals of Umberto I Society. One of many so-called *societa mutuo soccorso*, or mutual benefit societies, the Royals of

Umberto I doubles as a financial safety net for members in need and a men's social club, complete with banquets and balls. "On January 5 Giuseppe Zambarano was elected president and he immediately accepted this honor," reads a diary entry in his best handwriting, punctuated by a flourishing signature.

The membership photographs for that year show Giuseppe looking confident and proud in his Napoleonic-style ceremonial uniform with his saber and presidential ribbon. Beyond the ego boost of superceding Luigi, who is only secretary, the position ensures that Giuseppe will have access to the loans he needs to strike out on his own. He is on top of his corner of the world. He has a twelve by sixteen reproduction of his picture mounted on a canvas for the home he plans to buy.

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The following months pass in an exhilarating string of partying and planning. On May 3, Giuseppe records that he met with the president of another society: "we took a great fall from the wagon and there was much damage." On June 15, he spends the considerable sum of $20 on a new velocipede — the next weeks will see him speeding about his business on this oversized tricycle. On the 16th, after counting the revenues from the annual ball, Giuseppe and the planning committee get drunk again. "My wife waited for me until 1 a.m. and was very upset about my binge," he observes in a gleeful scrawl.

The tiff over Giuseppe's late hours is the first symptom of deepening domestic discord. Giuseppe and Caterina never had a honeymoon, and any aura of newlywed bliss has dissipated even while Giuseppe's career is taking off. In early June, Caterina begins to complain that Giuseppe spends too much time at

social functions. Then, on the forth of July, Giuseppe peevishly reports that he stayed home over the holiday: "I was angry with my wife and beat her for the first time for having talked backed to me on a family matter." This episode definitively draws the lines of domestic authority; the diary never mentions another such challenge to Giuseppe's rule.

During this spring Giuseppe also writes that Luigi resigns his office of secretary at the Royals of Umberto I and that he and his family behave rudely toward Caterina. A permanent chill settles over Giuseppe's relationship with his older brother.

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In addition to their more lively functions, Italian mutual benefit societies serve as surrogates for the American banks and insurance companies, which the immigrants do not trust. Strangely, even as the president of the Royals of Umberto I, Giuseppe decides in July to deposit all $300 of his life savings at the Olneyville Branch of the Union Trust Company. Five days later, he withdraws the entire sum, eager to launch his long dreamed-of business plan.

His entrepreneurial options are limited by his lack of a trade or specialized skill, but with a large network of potential customers in relatives, acquaintances, and club members, he has an inkling that if he builds the right sort of place, they will come. Thornton by this date is solidly Italian, with many groceries and saloons already catering to the immigrants. A new market is emerging, however, at the Providence end of the trolley line, in the neighborhood of Federal Hill.

Around 1888, the more successful Italian tradesmen had begun moving their businesses into the Irish area around Cedar, Spruce, and Acorn streets. The

under-built residential blocks soon sprouted rows of triple-decker tenements overlooking downtown Providence, and the Irish who could afford it moved to the middle-class bastions of the East Side. In 1889, Bishop Harkins consecrated the first Italian chapel, and three years later the electric trolley was bringing cars full of Italians from the outlying villages to their new parish in the recently erected Church of the Holy Spirit on Knight St.

Giuseppe convinces one of his covillagers to invest in a bar room at the corner of Acorn and Cedar streets, just off of Atwells Avenue. A *birraria* seems the ideal extension of both Giuseppe's business ambitions and his social nature, since men will inevitably gather there for leisure and for meetings. Such a business is not without its drawbacks, even dangers: as many an unwary Italian grocer has found out, while serving one's fellow immigrants ensures a loyal clientele, a price rise of a single cent on pasta can cause a riot of indignation.

Giuseppe's streak of good luck nearly comes to an abrupt end days before the opening of the bar room when, speeding across Broadway on his velocipede, he is hit by the streetcar. "I managed to jump off, saving my life," he writes. "My hand was broken in two places and my left leg was wounded. I was carried to Dr. Charon, who put 7 1/2 stitches in me, and then taken home in a carriage, where I was attended by my family and the members of the society of which I am president."

He is soon on his feet again, albeit minus his means of transportation. With little regret, he packs up his possessions and his now visibly pregnant wife for the second great move of his life. "On the 14th of September I left the village of Thornton, RI, where I grew up and became a man. I moved to a house on 33

Vinton St., Providence, on the second floor."

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The diary of Giuseppe Zambarano will record in the following years many business successes, brand new houses and personal honors. Giuseppe develops a fascination for the great statesmen and royals of the world. In between accounts of his own election victories, he inserts news about the likes of President McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, and Vittorio Emmanuele III, their names penned at the same scale as his signature.

Later, there are gaps of months and even years, however, after which Giuseppe will note simply "business has been bad" or rant about how a partner cheated him out of his investment. In late 1903, after a silence of nearly a year, he writes with uncharacteristic soberness "It has been a struggle to keep my head above the tide of debts and misfortunes that have pursued us." The city revokes his liquor license three times, forcing him to sell everything and start again from scratch. He maintains a long-standing rivalry with the successful Colaluca family, who run a number of competing ventures on Federal Hill; in 1907 he swears that neither he nor his family will ever do business with them again. Slowly, humbling realizations begin to creep into Giuseppe Zambarano's grand account: that every other ambitious immigrant shares the same dreams; that for all the imperial trappings of the Royals of Umberto I, it is only one among dozens of identical clubs; he isn't the only fish in the pond, and he's not even the biggest.

Gradually, Giuseppe's reflections turn inward. After their first child was stillborn, Giuseppe stopped mentioning Caterina's pregnancies — perhaps out of superstition, or perhaps out of unwillingness to confront a force that was out of

his control — but finally in 1899, at age 27, Giuseppe becomes a father. Little Ubaldo — who will grow up to be a nationally known physician and have a clinic named after him — becomes the center of his father's attention as he struggles through infancy illnesses and accidents. On July 7, 1901, Giuseppe writes with touching paternal concern: "Dr. Coughlin came over today. We were talking in the sitting room, and Ubaldo was out of sight, when suddenly he ran up to Caterina crying and throwing up. We discovered that he had opened the doctor's case and had eaten some pills, thinking they were candies. Thank God we had good luck and he was alright."

Through this time, Giuseppe makes less mention of social honors and occasionally signs his name "Joseph," a hint that his grand ambitions have melted into middle-class American assimilation. In 1905 a single, innocuous line of English slips onto the page: "Changed the telephone from house to bar room."

The final pages of the journal, from November 11, 1909, like the first, record a momentous day in Giuseppe Zambarano's life, but his tone could hardly be more different: like a doting parent today sticking snapshots into a photo album, Giuseppe writes down the impressions of his three sons as they stand over their newborn sister's cradle. They are the only quotes in all of his diary:

"She's so pretty," says 10-year-old Ubaldo. "Just look out if I find any boys talking to her."

"Tell the doctor to take her back; she's stolen my place," says Giuseppe Jr., the youngest.

The middle son, Enrico, after pondering the baby for a few minutes, asks simply: "Is this little girl an Italian or an American?"

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