

# Giovanni's Tree

NEW ITALIAN FOLKTALES

Nicholas A. DiChario



BORDIGHERA PRESS

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*To Family*



# Foreword

by Bruce McAllister

What is a “folktale”? I thought I knew. I certainly thought so as I began reading the stories in this remarkable collection by one of our finest folktale writers, Nicholas DiChario. Storytelling is not a simple matter, even though it’s wired in powerful, alchemical, driving ways within us as readers and writers both, and has been for an eon. We are born to tell stories and to listen to them. As DiChario’s stories prove, a folktale that can transport us with such magic is more than just writer’s craft. It must have a spirit and ambition and playfulness and faith that make it more than the simple, serious, “realistic” reporting of the human condition that has defined so much “literary fiction” in modern times. It must, as a cultural anthropologist might put it, “tell us—just as myth and legend do—who we are as a people, where we are going in the universe, and what our meaning is.” DiChario’s tales do this from the charming, intimate Italy of his imagination . . . making it ours.

Folktales are, I’m now convinced, living things that defy definition, that make us feel “I know it when I see it, but don’t ask me to define it because trying to can only lead to folly...and much less magic.” That is certainly how I felt reading *Giovanni’s Tree: New Italian Folktales*. I know they are folktales because they remind me so much, so deftly and beautifully, of the two years I spent as a boy in a northern Italian fishing village where magic and the ordinary coexisted, where the marriage of fantasy and “realism” made life the miracle, the living folktale, it was for everyone there,

even if modernization and too many tourists have, over the decades since, cost it much of its magic. DiChario's stories bring that magic back, showing me that the folktale as storytelling, in new and expert hands, can prevail in a world that needs it so.

*Bruce McAllister is a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts creative writing fellowship, a Shirley Jackson Award finalist, and the author of The Village Sang to the Sea: A Memoir of Magic, a semi-autobiographical collection of Italian fantasy stories.*

# Giovanni's Tree

## *L'albero di Giovanni*

Our tale has humble beginnings. And so, humbly, I shall begin.

When the stranger wandered into our village that day so long ago, he was a poor man dressed in a robe made not of silk but of yarn from a pauper's handloom. He held a walking staff made not of fine, finished wood, but the branch of a coarse and gnarled olive tree. At a glance, he looked weary, hot, and in desperate need of a meal. I thought him nothing special then, but first impressions could be deceiving, even in ancient times, when people were still new to the world.

I was the village magistrate, a dubious honor that, like it or not, fell to the oldest man in town. I'd already lived almost fifty years and had no right to ask God for more, but many magistrates before me had fallen to the sword (Piero to the Greeks, Luca to the Phoenicians, Salvi to the Carthaginians, just to name a few) and I was in no great rush to join them.

To my relief, the stranger carried no weapons and seemed interested only in conversation, so we settled down to talk in the village square among the sitting stones and trellises. The villagers gathered around, curious as I to know who he was and where he'd come from.

He spoke in Latin and said his name was Giovanni Cristo, and he'd traveled far and wide. He asked me for news of the south, and I told him what little I knew such as I'd heard it. And then he asked me the name of our village.

"Umbra Maris," I answered in Latin. Shadow on the Sea. Our village was situated on a tiny island off the Sicilian coast. In those

days, during certain times of the year, at low tide, one could walk here all the way from Sicily without wetting one's knees, which was what Giovanni had done on that afternoon so long ago.

He nodded. "I've heard of it."

"Not many have," I replied.

"You're too modest. I've visited many cities, and your wine is often spoken of as the best."

"Yes," I said, "I suppose it is." There was no point in denying it.

He pushed his long, tangled hair off his shoulders and held me in his gaze. He had skin the color of a swamp hen, thick and intimidating eyebrows, but soft eyes that captured the sunlight. He pulled a tatty rag out of his pocket and mopped his forehead with it. "I've come to warn you of an advancing storm," he said.

The sun was beating down so harshly upon me that I thought my chest hairs might catch fire under my tunic. I called to my wife, who'd been watching and listening nervously, and asked her to bring us refreshments—a pitcher of wine, some bread and grapes, diced olives and mushrooms. I turned to the others and told them to leave us alone, and then I lowered my voice and said to Giovanni, "We've seen many storms. We'll survive another."

"You've not seen a storm like this one. This storm is the Roman storm. You can't stop it."

"We haven't stopped any of them. Why do we need to worry about this one?"

He smiled a knowing smile. "So that you may hide your wine, of course."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Dearest Giovanni, we have too much wine to hide. It fills every home and every storeroom in the village. We bury it along the shores of the sea to keep it cool during the summers. Huge casks line the walls of every cave on the hillside. When visitors come, friend or enemy, we serve it freely and invite them to take as much as they want. Our wine has outlasted all the conquerors before the Romans. What makes you think Rome will be different?"

My wife returned with the food, a pitcher of wine, and two cups. She knelt before us, filled the cups, and placed them at our

feet, then she backed away, lingering, hoping to hear more of the conversation. A nosy cat, that one. I wish I could remember her name. I've forgotten so many things that were once dear to me.

Giovanni and I broke bread, and I handed him a cup of wine and took one for myself. He had strong hands, I noticed, knuckles like chestnuts, and the dirty fingernails of a long-traveled man. He smelled of soil and sweat.

"The Romans will be worse than all the others combined," he said. "They'll strangle you with taxes, divide your property among their aristocracy, steal every grape you grow, pillage your land, and whip you like dogs while they do it. Everything you know of your peaceful ways will wither and die. They'll make you slaves in your own land. You will suffer for three hundred years."

I thought Giovanni was crazy. How could anyone know such things? And yet he spoke with such calm certainty, and his voice held so much compassion and melancholy, I felt a maggot of fear squirm inside me. We drank the wine in silence. Giovanni relished every sip. When he finished, he licked his lips and proclaimed his delight in having at last tried the wine he'd heard so much about, and it was indeed the finest he'd ever tasted.

"Is there really a way to hide it?" I asked, on the off chance he knew what he was talking about.

"Bring me a twig," Giovanni said.

I found a short stick and handed it to him. He carried it to the center of the village and stuck it in the dirt. He took what remained of the pitcher of wine and poured it in a circle around the stick. Much to my surprise, I saw the twig grow a finger taller and a finger wider.

"An illusion," I said, and asked my wife to fetch another pitcher.

Giovanni poured the next carafe around the twig, and as the wine disappeared into the ground, the stick grew yet again. My wife gasped and poked her beaky nose into my shoulder.

More people came to look, and they brought more wine, and soon all the villagers had gathered around the stranger and his stick to see what they were already calling a miracle. As Giovanni took each gourd of wine and poured it in his circle, the stick continued to grow until it was as tall and wide as a young, healthy sapling.

“The tree will grow as vast as you have wine to fill it,” he said.

“How do we get the wine back out of the tree?” I asked.

“Bring me a mallet and spout.”

We brought Giovanni the wooden tools. He pounded the spout into the tree trunk, and wine came spilling forth. He filled his cup, removed the tap, and the bark closed around the hole as if it had never been there. Giovanni handed me the cup and grinned. When I drank of it, the wine tasted even better than it had before it went in the ground, and then I, too, was convinced of a miracle, as no one made wine as good as our wine, let alone better.

I took a moment to consider what I should do next—and but another to decide. I turned to my people, held the cup over my head, and shouted, “Giovanni says the Romans are coming to conquer us! Go, all of you, and take every vessel of wine from your homes, dig up the bottles from along the shore, retrieve all the casks from the caves and hills and valleys, and bring them here. Let’s not give the Romans a drop of our wine to call their own!”

By then my gabby wife had spread what little she’d overheard of the conversation concerning three hundred years of Roman servitude, and no one was much pleased about it, so everyone went to their homes. Houses were little more than stone huts back then, with a single interior chamber, a fireplace, stove, bedding enough for the entire family, and a dugout that served as a wine cellar.

The wine came forth bottle by bottle, flagon by flagon, jug by jug, cask and barrel by cask and barrel. When our homes were empty, we went to the sea and the hills and the caves. Each man, woman, and child worked for three days and three nights until there was not a single whiff of wine left in the village, and the tree had grown ten thousand lengths and ten thousand widths.

When we’d completed the work, Giovanni tapped the spout into the tree again, and wine erupted in a gusher. We cheered, and the wine flowed all night long. We slayed a lamb or a fatted calf or a black boar—I can’t remember now what it was—and roasted it over a bonfire. We prepared smoked fish and olives and apricots atop the smoldering peat, and we played music and sang and danced and drank until dawn as if it were our last night on earth.

\*

I woke the next morning with the worst hangover of my life. I sat on a stone bench next to Giovanni, who could apparently hold his wine tenfold better than the rest of us as he seemed none the worse for his carousing. I draped my arm around him and surprised us both, I think, by sobbing quietly into his shoulder.

He patted my back, kissed my cheek, and told me not to despair. "*Pulvis et umbra sumus,*" he said. We are but dust and shadow.

He helped me to my feet and led me to the tree where he asked everyone to gather. All those who could stand, and many who couldn't, made a wide circle around Giovanni and the tree. Then he spoke these words:

"Those who drink of the tree will have good health and live one hundred years. If you wish to live one hundred years more, then drink of the tree in another hundred years. For as long as you continue to drink of the tree each hundred years on the anniversary of the first drinking, you'll enjoy good health for another century. This is my gift to you for sharing your food, wine, music, and laughter with me."

We asked him a few questions to make sure we understood what he meant. Were we to drink again from the tree one hundred years from now, or when we turned one hundred years old? My wife asked something about which calendar we should use, Hebrew, Roman, or Egyptian. Someone else was curious to know if the exact time of day or night mattered. A girl said she hated the taste of wine and begged to be allowed to drink the milk of a goat instead. Etcetera, etcetera.

Giovanni seemed amused by our questions and answered each one with a patient smile, explaining all the details until we were sure we understood. Then he wandered off and left us to our ineffectual hangover remedies and to ponder whatever godawful historical events awaited us.

\*

As Giovanni had forewarned, the Romans were an engine of destruction. Under their rule, we suffered as never before. My wife and I kept careful track of the days. Back then there weren't many people in the village, but the handful of us who hadn't been enslaved or slain or imprisoned went to the tree together under cover of darkness on the one hundredth anniversary of its tapping to drink of the wine and live another hundred years. I think most of us just wanted to see if it would work. It did.

Sadly, by the bicentennial of the first drinking, more of us had been sold, indentured, or outright killed, while some, I imagine, had simply grown tired of living, including my wife, who'd wandered off after one of our spats to take up with a Roman senator and never return. I was the only one to drink of the tree a mere two hundred years after its planting.

I never saw Giovanni again. At some point, I'd heard about a prophet named Jesus Christ who was crucified in Jerusalem for performing miracles, and I couldn't help but wonder if it was Giovanni Cristo nailed to that cross. The names were similar enough, and languages in those early centuries came and went, lived and died, as fast as the people who'd spoken them. But the Giovanni I knew seemed too wise to have become ensnared in the kind of political gamesmanship that would have cost him his life at the hands of a government lackey, so I preferred to think it was another man who died that day.

Eventually the Romans left our land. As did the Goths, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, French, Spanish, and I'm sure I'm forgetting a few. I have almost no memories of the wives and children and nieces and nephews I've left behind, having given up families long ago as the pain of outliving them became too heavy a burden for me to bear. I believe I've forgotten more of my life than I'll ever remember.

But some things I will not forget. I can still feel Giovanni's kiss on my cheek from that morning long ago as if it had happened yesterday. I rise each day with his words echoing in my ear, "*Pulvis et umbra sumus,*" we are but dust and shadow, and wonder if I must

someday die to understand exactly what he meant. I continue to return to the tree every hundred years, bearing the same spout and mallet Giovanni left behind, where I tap the tree, drink the fruit of the vine, and go on living for reasons I myself don't fully understand.

And what of our village? Today it's known as il Villaggio delle Ombre, the Village of Shadows, or simply Ombre, and you won't find it on a map. Life has not changed much since the early days. People still farm, fish, harvest olives, tend the grapevines, and make the best wine. Yachts sometimes anchor offshore, but they don't stay long. Cars occasionally appear on the roads, but most of them drive past without stopping. Tourism has grown around us like weeds, and yet there are no hotels here.

For the most part, we're happy with our simple lives, sheltered as we are from the ravages of time. It's almost as if the tree has protected the village from the outside world with such quiet, godlike dignity, with its soft and impenetrable shadow, no one else could find us even if they wanted to. I can't help but think this was the true purpose of Giovanni's tree all along. Although, for the life of me, I can't figure out why.