

SUSAN VIOLANTE

INNOCENT
WAR

REVISED EDITION

BEHIND AN IMMIGRANT'S PAST SERIES
BOOK 1



Outskirts Press, Inc.
Denver, Colorado

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Behind an Immigrant's Past Series Book 1
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Outskirts Press, Inc.
<http://www.outskirtspress.com>

ISBN: 978-1-4327-7047-1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011922553

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Praise for Innocent War

HOLLYWOOD BOOK FESTIVAL 2009 HONORABLE MENTION and #16 on the Cyrus Webb's Conversations Book Club Top 50 Non-Fiction Titles for 2009



“Violante’s retelling of Nino’s incredible life grips the reader from the first page...It’s a wonderful book!”- **Penny Warner, Author of *How to Crash a Killer Bash*, and *Dead Body Language*.**

“I love the heart felt story that is told in *Innocent War*. It is a very personal account of a well-known event that brings so much meaning to the historical context. It is an important, but often forgotten part of the War. The story, told through the eyes of a coming of age Italian boy, is incredibly easy to read. The story flows through the pages as you recount the horrors faced by the civilians on a side long forgotten. This book helps fill the many gaps in fully understanding the impact of World War II”.- **Anna Morrison High School History Teacher at SMCA – Austin, TX**

“It was fun to try and place my-self in Nino’s shoes and see how I would react if faced with his same choices. I would recommend “Innocent War” by Susan Violante to people who like adventure and

non-fiction. This was a true story and it was interesting to see what Nino had to live through. It was a fun read, and I will recommend it to my friends who are interested in history.”- **Ben Weldon (age 12) for Reader Views (11/10)**

“I cried along with Nino and laughed at his antics. This is a touching book on so many levels.” - **Brain Foggles Review**

“... based on a true life experience, I gather she took some artistic liberties in order to bring this story to life and she does an excellent job.” - **Sonia Reppe of Bookpleasures.com**

“I really enjoyed this book and am looking forward to Violante’s future books.” - **Sweeps4bloggers**

“Innocent war, all in all, is a good book...It is definitely a good firsthand account of civilian life during the conflict, especially in a country that was destined to lose the war.” - **A Kid’s Review/Amazon.com**

“This book was so entertaining and enthralling! I could not put this book down after I started reading it. ...I hope they make a movie about this and can’t wait for the next books of the series! I would definitely recommend this to everyone!” – **Elen/Amazon.com**

“The story of the young boy is well told by the author, Susan Violante. She wrote it in a way that made you feel and experience everything that Nino had experienced in his young life...” - **renaissancemanSK / BarnesandNoble.com**

“For the past two days I have been engrossed in *Innocent War* by Susan Violante. This is one of those books that stays with you. It is

one that I will pick up again and again.” - **Maria’s Space**

“...Fascinating and compelling. I read it in a couple of hours...I learned a great deal about the history of the time, from a perspective most Americans don’t ever hear. I thoroughly enjoyed it, and can easily recommend it...” - **Holly’s Review**

“This is such a compelling story that I thoroughly enjoyed reading. Throughout this quick read, I learned a lot about the history of this time period and found it hard to stop reading. We highly recommend this great read and look forward to reading the rest of Nino’s story in the future books.” - **All Because Two People Fell in Love - Stacey Moore**

“A delightful read which can be harrowing and humorous, heart-wrenching and heart-warming. – **N. Manning / Back to Books**

“As a reader I was able to see the war from the other side’s point of view. It’s strange to read about *you* being the enemy, but very fascinating...I would most definitely recommend this book. I was hooked from the start!” - **Red Sox Mommy**

This book is dedicated to my parents and to those who, during their childhood, were cheated, lied to, and cowardly abused by those who promote false ideals; and that once they had discovered the truth were able to react and learn to build a new life.

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Acknowledgments

Nino and Silvana, thank you for your life, for my life and for sharing who you are and where you came from. I love you.

Michel, Nicollette, and Arianna, thank you for supporting and putting up with all of my crazy ideas. I love you.

Ilio Giusti, I would have never written anything if it wasn't for you. I miss you.

Tony, thank you for helping in publishing this book.

Sabrina, thank you for always being there.

Irene Watson, author of *The Sitting Swing*, without your advice this would have never been possible, and my life today as a writer would not be what it is.

Tyler R. Tichelaar, author of *The Marquette Trilogy*, thank you for your editing input in some portions of this book.

Nicollette and Taylor, my editing team, thank you.

All of you, who took the time to read and post a book review, thank you.

Phenix and Phenix Publicity thank you for helping me to

jumpstart my writing career.

Noel Gribble, thank you for your editing suggestions and friendship.

Austin Creative Fiction Writers, thank you for all of your feedback and friendship.

Emily Rosen and class, thank you for motivating me when I needed it the most.

Penny Warner, class, and the East Bay Writers Round Table, thank you for helping me to get started on this project with your feedback and support.

To all of the people that in one way or another have motivated me to pursuit my dreams, either by example or by challenge, Thank You.

Foreword from the Author

I wrote a book to get to know my father, and in the process I got to know myself. This didn't come without hardship, loneliness, disappointment, and frustration as I set myself to break the circle of silence between parents and their sons and daughters.

I was clear in my quest. I convinced my father to tape his accounts so that I could transcribe them and leave his legacy to his grandchildren. My goal of getting to know my dad was achieved at the very moment I got the tapes. Little did I know that listening to them would bring so many other quests and dreams.

Whisper to yourself, I was told by someone who I loved and trusted when I was young. So I started writing at 13 in Spanish, as I grew up in Venezuela. Writing them to share within the family was not a problem. But the story I found in those tapes was so powerful, I couldn't keep it for us, I needed to share it. Plus, we were now in the US, how well would our kids be able to read in Spanish was the uncertainty that bothered me. I couldn't take the easy way; I had to write it in English.

Sixteen years have gone by since I first listened to my father's tapes. My life now can't compare to life before my Nino journey, because I have changed. I have grown close to my parents, and close to my kids. In my world no life lesson is forgotten, no transfer

of information to my kids is stopped. I can now say I have an idea of who I am, most times; but am sure of where I belong always.

Whisper to yourself; I was told, and so I did in my writings. I wrote a book to find my father, but found so much more. I found myself within the family I thought I knew.

Prologue

It was 12:00 p.m. when Susanna got to his place. Nino had called her the night before, asking her to go to his house for lunch that Saturday without the girls.

She had been calling her father by his name for some time. Her mother opened the door and stepped out at the same time she was going in.

“Hi Mom, Are you going out?”

“Yes, I’m going to have lunch with your sister at the mall. Your father is waiting for you.”

Silvana had always been a very elegant woman who carried her years very graciously. Her gray roots were now beginning to outgrow her brown hair-coloring, and her red silk blouse matched her lipstick giving her bare skin a nice contrast.

“Tell your father I’ll be back in a couple of hours. Ciao!”

“Ciao!” replied Susanna, closing the door.

Susanna felt awkward seeing her mother go out by herself. But if all of Silvana’s children could agree on something, it was on the fact that it was about time she did.

The scent of tomato sauce made itself present in Susanna’s stomach as she went through the living and dining rooms toward the family area. She felt at home. Even though she hadn’t been

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living with them for five years, every time Susanna walked across the white tile, she kicked off her shoes. It always amazed her how such cold floors could feel so warm.

“*Pà!*” Susanna called out looking toward the kitchen. She noticed the water for the pasta was already boiling, and the sauce was also done so she turned down the heat on the stove.

“Papi!” she called again without an answer.

Susanna opened the fridge and got a bottle of *Orvieto*, her favorite white wine. It was a cool February day, like the ones that hit Florida during cold fronts. A glass of wine was truly inviting. Susanna poured herself a glass. Then as she walked toward the couch, she saw Nino through the sliding door. He was sitting outside on the patio chair enjoying the lake view.

The midday sun reflected in his light gray hair. His classic linen trousers, his white long-sleeved cotton shirts were always his favorite outfits for relaxing on a cool weekend. For Susanna, seeing him was like looking at a picture in an art gallery. He was sitting there lost in his own thoughts; his sunglasses made it impossible to decipher whether his eyes were open or not.

Then with an unexpected move like a rock falling into the peaceful lake, he broke the stillness of the picture, grabbed his scotch that was sitting on top of the table next to him, and almost in slow motion took a sip from it.

Drinking his scotch before lunch had always been a ritual for Nino. He first enjoyed its color, then the sound of the ice cubes bouncing against the glass, and the fragrance that only anticipated its strong but delicate flavor. Only after tasting the cherished elixir did he turn around toward the sliding doors to see Susanna staring at him. With a jester smile, he signaled her to join him outside.

Susanna paused for a moment before opening the sliding doors,

realizing how little she knew about Nino even though she had seen him almost every day of her life, even though Susanna had always tried to imitate him on most of her own decision making.

Nino had molded Susanna's personality with his own hands as the years went by, and yet she had always felt so distant from him.

"Hi," said Susanna as she opened the sliding door.

"Hi," he replied, keeping his funny face intact.

"So, are you going to tell me why all the mystery?"

"You know, an important personality like me must think of his reputation."

You could never speak seriously with Nino. His sense of humor always came out almost like a defense mechanism when there is an intimate moment dangerously close.

"Seriously Pà, what made you call me last night, making me come over without the girls?"

"Here," said Nino as he reached toward the table and grabbed a stack of five tapes. He paused for a fraction of a second before he handed them to her.

"What is this?"

"Don't you remember? You told me a few months ago that it wouldn't be a bad idea to put some of my experiences in writing. Well, here you have them. Now start writing!"

Susanna's jaw dropped. For the first time in her entire life she realized he had actually been listening to her when she spoke!

"Are you kidding me, Pà?"

"Come. Let's have lunch. Afterward, you can go to my office and listen to the tapes there. I will wait downstairs in case there is anything you don't understand."

They went inside, and as Susanna finished setting the table, Nino finished preparing the pasta. Lunch was good. Susanna got

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to tell him about her life, and Nino got to tell her a couple of jokes. Then he asked her to make some espresso, and with her coffee in one hand and the tapes in the other, Susanna went upstairs to his office. Once there, she placed the cup on top of his desk, being really careful not to spill it all over his things. The stereo was placed on the middle shelf of his wall-sized library. *Má did a good job painting it black*, she thought. Now everything matched. She could feel his personality inside the room.

Nino was an enigma to Susanna. He could be a very sober man when working. It had always amazed her how he balanced his incredible sense of humor with so much sense of responsibility.

Susanna slipped in the first tape and started listening to Nino's voice.

Chapter 1

War, Fire, and Cannons

“Nino, wake up! You’re going to be late,” hollered Papa from the hallway outside of my room.

Papa was always the first one up. He rushed to the kitchen and gulped his *caffè latte*, along with almond biscotti while heading out the door. I was always the next to rush a *caffè latte* Papa’s style, heading out the door and running the five blocks to my school down Via Garibaldi, the street where our house stood.

It was June 10, 1940. I was ten years old. I started this day like any other day in Tripoli. I could feel the sun’s warmth as its light reflected on the Arabian style; all one-story and small white concrete villas.

People were already doing what they usually did every day, walking up and down the narrow streets. The open markets were packed. The smell of fresh baked bread lingered in the air as I rushed toward Corso Vittorio Emmanuele III, the road where my school was located. School started early in the morning, and ended at 1:00 p.m.

I had been attending the same school for three years since the first grade when we moved to Libya. Tripoli was an Italian Colony, so most of my teachers and friends were Italian.

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During the last period, my history teacher, a Silesian Priest, was explaining Julius Caesar's murder that day. I was sitting in the second row on an old wooden desk, which had been personalized by my own carved initials on its top right corner. Our uniforms made us feel like antique puppets.

We were forced to wear black shoes and white socks pulled up and held by a black elastic band beneath our knees. On top of our regular clothes, we had to wear a black tunic down to our knees, with an over starched collar and white front buttons. The ultimate touch was a white stiff organza tie on our necks. My blond hair and hazel eyes stood out in all of that darkness, unlike my skinny body which would get lost inside the tunic.

On my left side sat my best friend.

"Psssst, Angelo look," I whispered as I illustrated Julius Caesar's murder pretending to stab Carniglia, the teacher's pet who sat in front of me.

"Nino stop, you can't get in trouble again," Angelo whispered, holding back his laugh.

I motioned a decapitating swing at Carniglia. It was too much for Angelo to handle,

"Ha. Ha. Ha!"

"Angelo Aiello!" called out Father Mario, his voice as stiff as his face. We could probably be able to hear his skin tear if he ever decided to smile.

I froze.

Angelo stood up next to his desk, all eyes on him. He was a little shorter than me; his enormous dark eyes matched his short black hair. He was still trying to stop laughing.

"Yes, sirrrr," Angelo managed to say.

"What on earth is the matter with you?" Father Mario didn't

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finish the sentence; the bell rang loud and clear. There was a moment of expectant silence. “Never mind, you can go,” he finally continued.

Everyone grabbed their books and headed out the room. The school building was a contemporary structure, but it had the typical characteristics and distribution of all the buildings around the area. Right in the middle of the structure, there was a courtyard with a very nice garden, and a big water fountain marking the center. All the classrooms formed a big circle around it.

On the other side, from my classroom across the patio there was a long corridor that led to the front door and the principal’s office. Above the huge double doors to the outside was a picture of Italy’s young prince, Umberto Di Savoya. I walked toward the door with Angelo.

“I’ll see you later, *va bene?*” he said, trying to keep up.

“Okay, let’s meet at the piazza after dinner,” I said.

“Sounds good, ciao,” concluded Angelo

“Ciao,” I replied as I waved at him and headed towards the opposite direction, taking that stupid uniform off and folding it into a bundle.

It was 1:00 p.m., and my stomach was already crying for food, so I ran the five blocks to my house trying to imagine what my mother had prepared for lunch. Remembering the scenery around Via Garibaldi in my mind was always easy because there was really nothing to remember. There were no trees, no flowers, and no grass. There was the road and the houses, one next to the other. I never understood how I managed not to get confused and go into the wrong house.

Finally, I got to the door and went inside through the corridor. Like all the others, my house had an entrance hall that ended in a

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courtyard. The floors throughout the house were made of rustic red clay tiles. The kitchen was on the right side of the corridor, and on its left through a door was a stairway that went up to the balcony located on the roof. I went through the hall and called out for my mother.

“Mamma, I’m home and hungry!”

“Calm down, it’s almost ready,” she said while standing in front of the stove serving a bowl of Minestrone, which I smelled as I opened the house’s front door.

Mamma was very petite, with black long hair and dark round eyes. She wore her hair up in a bundle, and had on a flower-patterned, short sleeve dress that went down to her knees. She turned to look at me when I came into the kitchen, and handed me the small bowl as I kissed her hello.

“Here. Nino, give this to your sister, *per piacere*.”

I placed the bowl on the table in front of Gina, my three-year-old little sister, and sat beside her. Gina sort of looked like me. Her tiny body disappeared next to her big hazel eyes, but her hair was dark brown and not blond like mine.

“*Ciao* Gina,” I petted her head.

“*Ciao*, Nini!” she replied, always with her beautiful smile.

“Nino, did you wash your hands?”

“*Si*,” Mamma would never miss a thing. “Go wash up before I send you to bed without eating anything today for lying to me,” she reprimanded.

“I’m washing my hands!” I got up, and in one jump, I was at the kitchen’s sink. On my way back to the table, she handed me my bowl and sat on the other side of the table.

Once sitting, I reached up over my head and turned the radio on. In ten minutes, the sport news would start.

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Our kitchen was very simple. We had the old black iron stove, a sink, the wooden table, and few wooden shelves on the wall over my head. The radio sat on the lowest shelf.

“Where’s Papa?” I asked.

Lunch or dinner would never start unless Papa was sitting at the table. We would all sit and wait until he started eating.

“He is working and won’t be home for lunch today. You can start eating,” said Mamma.

I grabbed my spoon and started eating one full spoon after the other.

“Nino slow down, the food is not trying to run away you know,” said Mamma as she helped Gina with her spoon. “How was school today?” she asked.

“It was all right. Angelo got in trouble again,” I said with my mouth full.

“Hmm, I wonder why?” said Mamma while cutting a piece of bread.

“What? I didn’t do anything,” I replied.

“Oh, yes, of course you didn’t,” she said in a sarcastic joking tone.

“Nini, is a good boy!” interrupted Gina, and we all laughed.

We were eating, listening to a Luciano Taioli song, waiting for the sports news to start when the program was interrupted by a sudden special news report.

“Silence Nino, please turn the radio up it is Mussolini speaking,” said Mamma.

I lifted my arm, reached the volume dial on the radio, and turned it up. It was Italy’s Prime Minister Benito Mussolini speaking to the Italian Nation from Palazzo Venezia in Rome:

“*Italiani*, farther than the mountains, farther than the seas.” He

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was referring to all Italians, the ones living within the country's territory, and the ones living in its colonies. "Black shirts of the revolution: men, women, children, and all Italians! We announce to you that Great Britain and France have been presented each with a war declaration from our nation at their respective embassies."

The speech continued, but we weren't listening anymore. We could only hear the background voices from the masses at Piazza Venezia through the radio as they sang in choir:

"Guerra! Guerra! Cannoni! Cannoni! Fuoco! Fuoco!"

"War, War! Guns, Guns! Fire, Fire!"

We then almost simultaneously heard other screaming. Mamma, speechless and with a confused stare, ran toward the window. I followed.

"Mamma, what's happening?" I asked.

"I don't know," she answered, looking out the window.

"Mamma, I'm scared!" cried out Gina, still sitting in her chair.

"Something is wrong, come let's go!" Mamma concluded and ran toward the table. Not knowing what was going on, she grabbed Gina with one hand, me with the other one, and rushed through our front door to join the crowd running down Via Garibaldi. She didn't understand why everyone was on the run, terrorized. She was so confused, she didn't think. She could only follow everyone else. Then in the middle of that human stampede, we heard a buzzing noise.

It sounded like planes flying at a very low altitude, followed by the sound of firecrackers. She stopped and turned around.

"Holy Mary mother of God!" she screamed.

The noise came from airplanes wearing the French colors, and they were coming toward us from the back. Shooting! Almost at the same time that Mussolini was announcing the declaration of

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war, Tripoli was being attacked by France from their base in Tunis.

“MAMMA!” screamed Gina while I stood hypnotized, staring at the planes.

Mamma instinctively pushed us down onto the side of the road and launched herself over us, trying to shield us from the bullets.

“What do I do? What can I do?” She kept asking herself as we saw people running by, looking for cover. We saw others falling on the ground, wounded crying for help, or just lying dead on the road. I watched the planes turn around aiming toward us again, and again.

Nobody knew what to do. But how could we? We weren't prepared! Having no experience in warfare, people ran outside to the open fields and streets, providing the enemy excellent targets instead of finding cover in their own homes under a table or a bed. They ran pointlessly, screaming like crazy while the planes dove down shooting at us. I wanted to look up and try to see the pilots. They were so close, but the running crowd and the bullets created so much noise and dust that it was impossible see and think clearly.

Then, as suddenly as they appeared, they vanished, leaving death and desolation behind them. Although I could hear the cries of the wounded, it felt horribly peaceful, silent.

“Mammaaa,” Gina kept crying.

“Nino, Gina, let me look at you. Are you all right?” cried out Mamma, getting on her scratched knees and inspecting every inch of our bodies.

“We're fine, Má, but what about you? Your knees are bleeding!” I said, trying not to cry even though I could feel tears rolling down my cheeks.

“I will be all right. Let's go home,” she whispered, holding us so tight, it hurt. Mamma got up with my sister wrapped around

her. Gina had her eyes shut tight, and was still sobbing when I held Mamma's hand and started home.

Wounded people and dead bodies all around us were hiding under clouds of smoke and dust that covered the roads. I could smell the powder of the fired shots still in the air. Small streams of blood traveled under our shoes. Everything looked so different from just a few minutes before! It was like stepping into Dante's Inferno. I was scared, but at the same time my curiosity kept my senses running, and my eyes wide open. I needed to grasp every second. I couldn't tell if all the people I saw laying still on the ground were dead. I wanted to see if they moved, but Mamma kept covering my eyes, clutching me against her side with her arm as we walked.

We finally got back to the house. Even though it wasn't that far away, it seemed like we walked for hours. I saw a familiar shape through the dusty fog.

"Mamma, it is Papa!" I yelled out.

"Oh! Thank God, Salvatore!" she cried, relieved that nothing had happened to him.

"Maria!" He rushed out of the gate and hugged us all at once. "Are you all right?" he asked Mamma while he helped her carry Gina who had fallen asleep in her arms. She nodded, speechless. Half of her long hair was still up; the other half had fallen out of place onto her shoulders.

"I came home as soon as I could," he said, walking toward the door, still with his arm around her.

"Nino, are you okay?" He asked, turning his head toward me. I nodded, pretending to be cool.

Mamma was so tiny compared to him that her forehead barely reached up to his chest. Papa was tall and slim. His light brown wavy hair seemed to be the same color as his eyes. He always dressed

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with dark trousers and a white shirt, tucked in.

“Salvatore, what’s going to happen now?” Mamma asked Papa in search of comfort.

“I don’t know, but we’ll get by somehow. You’ll see,” he replied, holding Mamma tighter.

We went back into the house and closed the door, leaving the lifestyle we knew behind.