



The Italian Granite Worker

*This story is based on interviews conducted with Giacomo Cloetti
as part of the Federal Writer's Project 1936-1940*

The shrill alarm clock breaks the silence of the bleak February morning in 1939. Almost instantly Giacomo Coletti reaches across the bed and turns the alarm off before it wakes his wife, Nina. Dawn has not yet broken, but it is time to get up for work. He begins every morning trying to clear the granite dust that has settled in his throat and lungs.

Giacomo has worked in the granite sheds (the buildings where the stone is cut, carved and sculpted) since he arrived in the United States from Italy more than 20 years ago. As the years pass, the coughing spells last longer and longer.

Giacomo's eldest son, Giorgio, hears his father's cough. He, like his father, works in the sheds. He worries about his father's health as well as his own. In an attempt to breathe as much fresh air as possible, Giorgio sleeps with his windows open even during the harsh New England winters.

Giacomo is well aware of the dangers of working in the granite sheds. Today, they will bury his good friend Pietro. He died of tuberculosis, which is a lung disease. Giacomo recalls with a twinge of guilt the letter he wrote his dear friend, convincing Pietro to leave Italy and join him in Vermont. Pietro was a dear friend. It was Pietro who escorted Giacomo's wife, Nina, across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States. Nina tries to convince her husband that it is not his fault. She says that it was Pietro's time to die-whether he lived in Italy, Africa, or Montpelier, Vermont.

Giacomo and his Italian, Scottish, Scandinavian, Spanish, and French coworkers will put in a full day's work before they visit Pietro's home. The sheds are grim and gray. spurts of steam escape from the chimneys. But Giacomo chooses to think of the satisfaction and joy he finds from turning a piece of stone into a beautiful carving.

Inside, Giacomo begins his work. Today, he is carving an angel on a tombstone for a young child who has passed away. He works hard to capture the right look of innocence and joy in the cherub's eyes. Giacomo takes special care with this project-he knows the young boy's father.

At lunchtime, Giacomo and Giorgio make their way home-happy to be free of the confining sheds. Nina has prepared their favorite Italian foods

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for the midday meal. Giacomo and Giorgio also enjoy the many new recipes Nina has learned from her American-born neighbors.

After work, Giacomo laughs and jokes with his friends. But in the back of his mind, he is thinking about his friend, Pietro, who is not there- the friend he will say good-bye to tonight.

Pietro's home is crowded with granite workers and their families. Eventually the women return home and the men take turns sitting with Pietro. Each time a man coughs or wheezes a tense silence falls on the room. The men wonder to themselves who will be the next to follow Pietro to an early grave.

Years ago, Nina tried to convince Giacomo to find a different line of work. But he never wanted his family to suffer financially. He wanted to feed his children and pay his bills. Giacomo could not take time off to find a new job. Instead, he accepted the fact that the granite dust he breathed in every day might shorten his life. He is too old now to learn a new trade. Besides, he had come to love and appreciate the beauty of granite. Giacomo takes pride in the sculptures he makes. He is proud that his hands create the monuments that keep alive the memory of those, like Pietro, who went before him.

