

Bare Feet and Snake Tales

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### Grandmothers Too

“Andrea!” The voice couldn’t be called shrill. Piercing, maybe, but not quite all the way to *shrill*. No answer. “Andreaaaa...!” Sweeping through the house like a summer storm, she brandished a flapping shirt in one hand, a loose button in the other. She realized where he had gone when she caught the familiar whiff of Tampa cigar smoke. She threw open the window to the back porch. “Andrea, vieni, aiutame,” *Come and help me*, she said a little more lyrically. He was reclining in his folding chaise longue in a billow of sweetly redolent cigar smoke. And dutifully he rose, to come into the house and search for a dropped needle.

My grandmother was fond of raising my grandfather’s attention by raising the pitch of her voice. His name was Andrew, the proper Italian being “Andrea”, with the second syllable accented. I called him “Nanno”, the local translation of “Grandpa”, and of course she was “Nanna” to me. In fact her name was “Teresa”, and so is mine. I remember them clearly, more clearly than I would expect after all these years. My memories of Nanno are relatively few because our lives overlapped for only five years. I have many more recollections of Nanna from later times, but somehow those five early years got painted like a fresco, embedded right into the substance of my memory. Some fading must have surely happened in the last half-century, but to me the vividness always seems the same.

Back to the missing needle; to everyone's good fortune Nanno discovered it almost immediately, right under the chair where Nanna had been sitting while doing a spot of mending. She sewed only when it became absolutely necessary, and never allowed anyone else in the house to do it. Nanna was afflicted with a variety of odd fears and apprehensions, a prominent one of which was the worry that she, or someone, would misplace a needle or straight pin while sewing. This needle would then embed itself in the carpet, lying in wait to impale the first hapless foot to come along. And everyone knew that once you had a needle enter your body, it would travel to your heart, and there it would be the etiology of unimaginable cardiac horrors.

I always wondered if Nanna's phobias might stem from her having had an unsettling life. She had had a rough trip over the Atlantic on the boat from Italy as a young girl of nineteen. She had made the trip alone, after her parents left her with a maiden aunt in the old country. That had to have created some insecurities. And later, the Great Depression could only have made things harder.

Nanno had come over earlier on a different boat. They had each come to New York, passed through Ellis Island, then made their way down to Tampa to join family members who were already here. Some fifty years later I would stand at the bottom of New York's Business district, looking over the river at Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty. I tried to picture them--young immigrants, with no English--what must they have been thinking, feeling, fearing, as they saw the famous statue come into view?

Nanno and Nanna went to work as cigar makers in the heyday of the Tampa Cigar. (In retrospect, we can all be sanguine that Nanna didn't remain in New York to work in the needle-ridden garment district.) It was in the cigar factory that they first met.

If you've ever seen the inside of one of these places, you know the staff worked in cavernous rooms with high ceilings, sitting at long tables. I like to think that Nanno was at one of the tables rolling cigars and listening to the lector read the day's newspaper, and Nanna was probably sitting at the other end of the table. For no particular reason she looked up from her tobacco-stained hands and glanced his way. She had one blue eye and the other green, and perhaps that bewitched him. Or it might have been some other charm she possessed. Whatever it was, they married and had two children, the older of whom was my father.

By the time I came along Nanna and Nanno had retired from cigar making. But now they had a new job, which was to look after me while my parents were at work. I truly believe that they never regretted it, because there is not one moment I recall when either of them ever expressed a desire to spend a day somewhere else. It's possible they longed to go crabbing on some fair morning at the causeway, or perhaps got the urge to take a lazy drive over to St. Augustine and look around--but if they did, they chose to ignore it and tend to my childhood whims instead. Plenty of which I had, and fantasies. Nanna played all sorts of card games with me, and Nanno was forever playing the role of "The Preence" to my fairy-tale princess, wearing a pink blanket for a cape and a saucepan on his head. My memories of those things are that they were repeated in variations, over and over.

Some memories by comparison are real one-time stand-outs. The day the snake almost got in became one of those, as it almost inevitably would. Snakes are not stand-outish in their own right, have always lived in Florida, and will live in Florida for the foreseeable future. When you're from here you get used to them, not that you run

across them constantly. You learn to laugh quickly, if a bit nervously, after the inner startle that comes with the unexpected sighting of a slithering motion through the grass, or when the corner of your eye catches a coiled something. Once you look twice and assure yourself it's (a) an inanimate object such as a piece of hose or oddly shaped twig, or (b) at worst a black racer or garter snake, you can more or less relax. You wouldn't try to harm one of those snakes any more than you would a cat who kept the neighborhood mice under control. But more than likely, if you happen to run across one of the Big Four, your reaction will be altogether different. Pretty much everyone learns in grade school which snakes are the bad guys, and those fall in four groups: rattlers, copperheads, moccasins and coral snakes. Lucky for us here in the United States, those four are all we have to remember. We don't have mambas, bushmasters and kraits; I suspect if we did, though, they would be right at home here in the Sunshine State, basking contentedly beneath the palmettos, or perhaps dropping out of the occasional tree.

So it was on one of those sunny afternoons in 1959 that I asked Nanna if I could go outside and play awhile with the Jackson kids. They lived in the house just behind ours, and had an adjoining back yard. Nanna could keep an eye on us through the kitchen window. She said yes, but to go put on my shoes and socks. At this request I stopped short and thought for a second; I had already made a mental note that Robby Jackson was out there in bare feet, and thus resolved that I, too, would run through the yard barefoot. It seemed to my five-year-old sensibilities that shoes and socks would be an encumbrance reminiscent of the grubby red rubber rain boots my mother had made me wear the previous Halloween with my white lace bride costume. That had not been

a good Halloween, and if I could help it, this particular afternoon was not going to be darkened by thick and clumsy footwear.

“No,” I replied to Nanna’s orders. To which she turned from whatever she had been doing, looked me straight in my eyes with both her blue and green one, and in her most no-uncertain-terms Italian, told me again to go get on my shoes and socks, or I would not be permitted to leave the house. Again, I gave my defiant response. She threw me her sternest gaze, meant to intimidate.

I persisted, changing my approach to one of balm and reason. I stated that Robby was doing just dandily outside without shoes, and so would I. No need for worries, I would only be right there in the yard, after all.

“Vermi,” she said, a whiff of foreboding in her voice, as though she were next going to conjure the specters of plague or cholera from centuries long past.

“Worms?” I answered in English, trying to make myself sound somehow more erudite through not responding in the same language. “I *won’t* get--”

“Si, you get vermi in-ne you feet! You no go outside! Finito!” Her voice was up one octave. “Andrea! Come-eah,” she called, seeking reinforcements. But before she could move to roust Nanno from wherever he was at the moment, I took action.

Around her four-foot-eleven frame I darted, barefoot, through the kitchen, and out the back door. I ran out into the grass, feeling a rush of delight and fear. Rarely had I so boldly defied the express commands of parents or grandparents, and it was uniquely exhilarating. The cool grass was spiky and soft at the same time on the soles of my feet. It felt springy, magical, as though if I gave a running leap, it would sling me into the air where I might float for a long time. I saw Robby Jackson sitting by his back porch

messing around with his new bike, apparently trying to dislodge the training wheels. I was about to attempt to fly in his direction when my attention was diverted to a shriek behind me.

“Teresa! Vieni qui!” Nanna was on my tail, moving fast, just slowing enough to pick up a big pine switch she had spotted on the ground beneath a tree in the yard. That gave me time to get a head start toward Robby’s yard. The prickly grass felt so wonderful, enhancing the high I had brought on by precipitating this whole dramatic scene. I ran in ever-expanding circles as Nanna ran after me, waving the switch and shouting in Italian. Robby just watched the spectacle from his spot on the stoop of his screened porch. Nanno was still somewhere in the house, unaware of the unfolding events, although he would show up later.

Sprinting around a tree, I pivoted to find out exactly where Nanna was--a tactical error, as it turned out, because it gave her the chance she needed to catch up and land the pine switch on my bare leg.

“Oww...!” I stopped running and surrendered in the clear understanding that it was game over. Nanna shot me a look of disgusted disbelief, as if she had never imagined her granddaughter could turn into a bona fide brat. That was it. I was to march immediately back to the house, sit still, and face the consequences of my shockingly poor behavior. Still sniveling a little to impart a sense of martyrdom, I walked slowly--very slowly in fact to secretly prolong the foot-grass contact--toward the house.

My father had built a concrete carport onto the house, beside the back yard. The door to the kitchen was next to the carport. As I neared the door, my peripheral vision recorded something. I looked again to my left, and my eyes, unaccustomed to the deep

gray shade of the carport, spotted a strange shadow. I walked closer, and to my horror, there it was--a snake, no more than eleven or twelve inches long, lying very still in a loose coil. "Nanna...Nanno! Come here, look, a *snake!*" or something to that effect, I proclaimed in a sort of stage shout, not too loud for fear I would somehow upset the snake.

Nanno must have heard this through the open window, because now he did appear, hurrying out of the kitchen door toward the carport. He stopped and motioned for me to get farther away. "Is-sa rattler! Pygmy rattlesnake," he said. "Poison...no gette close!" He backed away from the snake and went for a large shovel that was always stored in the outside utility room attached to the carport. Nanna rushed at first toward us, then shrieked something unintelligible, grabbed me by the arm and pulled me even farther away. "Go in-ne the house," she said in the key of F-sharp. But I was too mesmerized by what was going on out here. You understand, this was all occurring in the space of about a minute. Then Nanno had found the shovel and was stalking the creature, taking care not to give it any warning he was planning to decapitate it.

For the first time, the snake moved--*toward the kitchen door.*

"Andrea! Va ammazzare!" *Kill it!* Nanna, tightly wound as she was, was on the verge of complete unspoolage as she pictured that snake getting into the house. She knew if that happened it would soon be the end. What would her son do when he came home to find his daughter and both his parents dead of snakebite? Whatever the actual probability, that was her line of thinking, and at that point there could be pretty much no argument.

*Chuckkk!* The shovel blade grated against the concrete. Nanno went for the neck, and that was that. The pygmy rattler lay lifeless in two pieces, and we were once again, at least for now, unthreatened by the perils of suburban Florida living. I felt a twinge of sorrow for the little creature. He had just wandered out of his territory, I mused. Probably wouldn't even have bitten anyone, anyway.

As Nanno scooped up the dead snake in the shovel to take it somewhere--I don't know where--I followed Nanna into the house. In all the clamor, I never did put on my shoes and socks, and Nanna more or less forgot to enact punitive measures for my earlier crime. She had by now determined that today's events demanded a period of quiet soap opera viewing accompanied by an ounce of red wine. After an hour or two she had calmed down, but still pronounced herself "nervosa" by the time my mother and father arrived home.

Despite my hopes that the retelling of the snake encounter would preempt discussion of the footwear debacle, sooner or later that came out too. I don't recall being punished, but I know my father probably sat me down and gave me a good talking-to about obeying and respecting my grandparents. After all, they were responsible for my safety, and if Nanna told me to wear shoes, it was not my place to argue. I'm sure I said "Yes, Daddy," and apologized to Nanna as I should. But I still might have privately held, in the very back of my mind, the notion that she had been unreasonable.

What's funny about it is, you really *can* get worms in your feet if you run around barefoot in the grass.



