Bare Feet and Snake Tales

"Andréa!" The voice wasn't really shrill. "Andréa!" A little piercing, maybe, but you couldn't quite call it *shrill*.

No answer.

"Andréaaaa...!" Sweeping through the house like a summer storm, she brandished a flapping shirt in one hand, a loose button in the other. She knew where he was when she caught the whiff of sweet-pungent cigar smoke. She had opened the windows to air out the house, and irritated at the intrusion of smoke, she stepped up her pace to the back porch. "Andréa, *aiutami!*" Come help me, she said, waving the shirt as though it would clear the air.

He was reclining in his folding chaise longue, a half-gone Tampa cigar between his teeth. Dutifully he stubbed it out and rose to come in and search for a dropped needle.

Nanna was fond of raising Nannu's attention by raising the pitch of her voice. His name was Andrew, the proper Italian being *Andréa*. Her name was Teresa, and so is mine. I remember my grandparents clearly, more clearly than I would expect after all these decades. My recollections of Nannu are relatively few because our lives overlapped for only five years. 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 over six decades, but to me the vividness is always the same.

To everyone's good fortune, Nannu found the missing needle almost immediately, right under the chair where Nanna had been sitting with a touch of

mending. She sewed only when it became absolutely necessary, and never allowed anyone else in the house to do it. Nanna had a variety of odd fears and apprehensions, one of which was that she, or someone, would lose 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 a needle entered your body it would travel to your heart, where it would set in motion unthinkable horrors.

She forbade other activities too, albeit with less urgency. At a meal you were never to combine water with fish (especially mystifying) or milk with watermelon. I was never sure exactly what this did to you, but I followed the rules for fear of finding out.

I always wondered if Nanna's phobias might stem from an unsettling early life. She had braved a rough steamship journey over the Atlantic from Sicily as a young woman of twenty. She made the crossing alone, having lived with a maiden aunt in the old country since age six, when her parents left for America. That must have created some insecurities. Then the Great Depression could only have made things harder.

She didn't meet Nannu until a year after being in the States. They both came in through Ellis Island, but at different times. Fifty-odd 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, hoping, fearing, as they saw the famous statue come into view?

Nannu and Nanna both wound up in Tampa because they already had family here. I've often thought how fortunate it is that Nanna didn't stay in New York to work in the needle-ridden garment district.

They both found jobs in a cigar factory, and it happened to be the same one. If you've ever seen the inside of one of those places, you know the staff worked in cavernous rooms with high ceilings, sitting at long tables. They were mostly Spanish or Italian immigrants who had settled in Tampa's Latin Quarter, called Ybor City.

I like to think that Nannu was at one of the tables rolling cigars, listening to the lector read the day's newspaper, and Nanna was 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 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 Nannu had retired from cigar making. But now they had a new job, which was to look after me while my parents worked. I truly believe that they never regretted it, because neither of them ever expressed a desire to spend a day somewhere else. It's possible that some sunny mornings they longed to go crabbing at the causeway, or got the urge to take a lazy drive to St. Augustine–but if they did, they chose instead to ignore it and tend to my childhood whims and fantasies. Plenty of which I had. Nanna, ever conscious of health and safety, was less indulgent of the fantasies. She made sure I was clean and properly nourished, and she played cards with me most days. Nannu was her fairy-tale counterpart, playing *The Preence* to my princess, wearing a pink blanket for a cape and a saucepan on his head. He would defeat the dragon, but another one would always show up sooner or later. My memories of those things are that they happened in variations, over and over.

Some memories by comparison are real one-time standouts. The day the snake

almost got in the house became one of those, as it inevitably would. Snakes are not standout-ish in their own right. They're long-time denizens of Florida. You don't run across one daily, of course, but when you live here you more or less get used to them.

You might laugh nervously if you spot a slithering motion through the grass, or the corner of your eye catches a coiled something. Once you look twice and assure yourself it's a piece of hose or an oddly shaped twig, you can relax. Or suppose it *is* a snake, but it's a garter snake or a black racer. You wouldn't fear a black racer any more than you would a cat who kept the neighborhood mice under control.

But if you run across one of the Big Four, your reaction is likely to be different. Everyone learns in grade school which snakes are bad: rattlers, copperheads, moccasins and coral snakes. Lucky for us Floridians, 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, basking under a palmetto or casually dropping out of a tree.

The incident happened some time in 1959. On a sunny afternoon I asked Nanna if I could go out and play with the Jackson kids. They lived in the house just behind ours, with an adjoining back yard. Nanna could keep an eye on us through the kitchen window. She said yes, but go get on my shoes and socks.

At this I stopped and thought for a second. I had made a mental note that Robby Jackson was out there in bare feet, and resolved that I too would go barefoot. It seemed to my five-year-old sensibilities that on this day I simply could not abide shoes and socks. It was reminiscent of the previous Halloween, when the neighborhood was full of puddles after a rain. My mother had insisted I wear red rubber boots with my

white lace bride costume. That was not a good Halloween, and if I could help it, this afternoon would not be darkened by ponderous footwear.

"No," I replied to Nanna's orders. To which she turned from whatever she had been doing, looked me straight in the eye with both her blue and green one, and in no-uncertain-terms Italian, told me I would not leave the house until I had put on the shoes and socks.

"I don't *want* to."

She drew herself up to her full four-foot-eleven, and threw me her sternest gaze.

Seeing that direct defiance wasn't working, I changed my approach to one of balm and reason. Robby was doing fine outside without shoes, I said, 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 horrors of alien parasites.

"Worms?" I answered in English, pretending her native language was beneath me. "I *won't get*–"

"*Si*, you get *vermi* in you feet!" She switched to match my English. "You no go out! *Finito!*" Her voice was up one octave. "Andréa!" she called, seeking reinforcements. But before she could move to roust Nannu, I took action.

Past her petite 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. Never had I so boldly defied the commands of parents or grandparents, and it was uniquely exhilarating. The grass was cool and spiky on the soles of my feet. It was 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.

Robby Jackson was sitting by his back porch messing with his bike, trying to dislodge the training wheels. I was heading in his direction when my attention was diverted to a shout behind me.

"Teresa! Come back, *questo minuto!*" Nanna was on my tail, moving fast. She slowed just long enough to pick up a big pine switch she had spotted on the ground. 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 shrieking in Italian. Robby just watched the spectacle from the stoop of his porch. Nannu was still somewhere in the house, unaware of the unfolding fiasco.

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

"Oww...!" I stopped running and surrendered in the stark realization that it was game over. Nanna shot me a look of disgusted disbelief, as if she never dreamed her granddaughter could achieve such heights of naughtiness.

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 to convey a sense of martyrdom, I walked toward the house slowly–very slowly, to prolong the foot-grass contact.

My father had built a concrete carport beside the back yard. The door to the kitchen was next to the carport. As I neared the door, my peripheral vision recorded something. Looking to the left, 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, no more than fourteen or fifteen inches long, gray-brown with black spots, resting in a loose coil.

"Nanna...Nannu! Come look, a *snake*!" I proclaimed in a sort of stage shout, not too loud for fear I would somehow upset the snake.

Nannu must have heard through the kitchen window, because now he appeared, hurrying out the door into the carport. He stopped and motioned for me to back away. "Pygmy rattle s'nak-eh!" I had never heard his voice this urgent. "Poison…no go near!" He went for a large shovel that was stored in a utility room by the carport.

Nanna rushed toward us, screamed something unintelligible, grabbed me by the arm and pulled me even farther away. "You go inne the house!" She said in the key of F-sharp. But I was too mesmerized by what was going on out here.

Nannu found the shovel and stalked the creature, taking care not to give it warning he was planning to decapitate it.

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

"*Vai ammazzarlo!*" Kill it! Nanna, tightly wound as she was, was on the verge of completely unspooling.

She was picturing that rattlesnake getting into the house.

If that happened, it would surely be the end. What would her son do when he came home to find his daughter and both parents lying dead of snakebite? However improbable, that was her line of thinking, and at that point there could be no discussion.

Chuckkk! The shovel blade grated against the concrete. Nannu went for the neck, and that was that. The pygmy rattler lay lifeless in two pieces, and we were once again unthreatened by the hazards of Florida suburban living. I felt a twinge of sorrow for the little creature. He just wandered out of his territory, I mused. Probably never would have bitten anybody anyway.

As Nannu scooped the dead snake into the shovel to take it somewhere–I don't know where–I followed Nanna into the house. In all the uproar I never did put on my shoes and socks, and Nanna more or less forgot my punishment. Or maybe she decided the pine switch was enough. By now she had determined that today's events required a quiet period of soap opera viewing accompanied by an ounce of red wine. After an hour or two she was calmer, but still pronounced herself *nervosa* by the time my mother and father got home.

Despite my hope that the snake story would eclipse the footwear issue, sooner or later that came out too. I don't recall any major discipline, but my father gave me a serious talking-to about disobeying my grandparents. After all, during the day they were responsible for my well being.

"Next time Nanna tells you to do something," he said, "you are not to argue. Understand?"

"Yes, Daddy," I ventured, "but I think she's way too worried about feet."

Of course I apologized. But I privately cherished the delicious memory of that barefoot frolic. And in the back of my mind I still thought that Nanna had overreacted.

She was right, though, about the worms.