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Nothing Short of a Miracle

by Victoria Costello

Under the guise of my helping with her morning braids, Nana lets me stand on the toilet in her bathroom, close enough to reach the gray and white clumps of hair that hang long and loose over her bosom and back. My seven-year-old hands gently graze her side as I pull one section down to her waist, divide it into three rows, and begin to plait. Nana looks at me and smiles.

“Prettiest eyes,” she says, boring hers into mine.

With Nana, there was always some kind of benign competition going on among her grandchildren. She could be counted on to congratulate my brother Neil for having the handsomest nose, then remind us how he looks just like her *Allessio*. It was a likeness we could readily see in the portrait of Nana and Grandpa that hung over Nana’s bed. Dressed for an engagement photo, theirs was storybook elegance; posed in fine-tailored clothes, their studio backdrop suggests a renaissance villa. In the foreground, they stare royally at the lens. It’s as if Nana were born for the red carpet. But in her wise way, there was plenty of fame to go around for all of us. To that end, she would always say my baby sister Rita had the cutest little face of all her grandchildren but then, with a requisite sigh, add that Rita’s loveliness came in spite of her cheeks and nose being covered with those oh-so-Irish freckles.

Even then, I knew Nana’s standoff with Dad wasn’t personal. It was just the weakness of his kind. Since the time Dad drank away our mortgage, and Nana paid it, he never came with us on our regular visits to her apartment; in fact, his name was rarely mentioned in her presence. Which is why, the week before this idyllic morning, Mom told us before we got there why she was bringing us to stay with Nana in the Bronx. She explained that Daddy was dying in the Veterans Hospital in Westchester, and she needed to stay close by for

when *it* happened. Maybe it was because of the unemotional way she said it, but by the time we got to Nana’s, and I saw her waiting for us on her front steps, I was bursting with excitement and had pretty much forgotten why we were there.

Although I adored my father, he was to me already gone. It had been a month since he’d come straight from the hospital to my First Communion. From where I sat with my class, I watched him walk into church and thought he looked like a ghost. Afterwards, I ran up to him and hugged his legs as tight as I could. When he kissed me goodbye, he looked down with a sad face and said, “Pray for me.” Then they just walked away: Father Anthony in his long black robe, Dad in his dark, baggy suit. To tell the truth, I thought they were leaving for Heaven right then and there. I tried to pray, but, well, somehow I knew there was nothing I could do to keep Daddy on this earth.

But none of this is on my mind as my hands ride down Nana’s half-finished braid. Loose hairs fall into my palm, and I mold them just the way she taught me, one row upon the other. In my eyes, this transformation is nothing short of a miracle.

“Nana, how long since you cut it?” I ask.

“Too long,” she sighs, “for an old woman.”

I feel a moment of panic at the idea she might do what Mom kept bugging her to do. Then she’d look like everybody else’s grandma, like Mom and her friends, with their boring little bobs of dyed and sprayed-in-place hair.

“Why bother with it anymore, Ma?” my mother would say, as if Nana’s braids took something from her. Nana was always the first one up, the last to bed, so it couldn’t have anything to do with how long it took. It reminded me of Mom complaining about Nana talking to her in Italian—which she did most of the time. Mom once told us that kids at school had teased her about only speaking Italian. Still, it seemed odd to me that she could have



forgotten it completely. Nana didn't seem to believe it either, since she kept talking to Mom in Italian, waiting for an answer, which she usually got—in Italian—after pretending not to hear otherwise.

Being part of Nana's morning ritual, I feel like I'm part of a secret society where only we special few get to witness her without the crown that completes her public persona. Later, I recognize Nana in Medusa, her head ringed with serpents. But it's different being alone with her in the morning bath. There, I'm closer to a younger, less formidable part of my grandmother. It's Nana as the brave girl in the story I beg her to tell me again and again, until she says, "*Basta, go play.*"

At 16, Nana, born Carmela, the youngest of 13 siblings, traveled alone by train from Atessa, a poor mountain village facing the Adriatic Sea, to Naples. There she got onto a steamship called the *Kaiser Wilhelm II* and set off for New York City. It was 1898. I can picture her on that ship, seasick and afraid, but certain something better waits for her in America. To me, it's as good as Wendy and the boys flying off to Neverland. I especially love the end, where Nana falls into the arms of her five elder sisters waiting anxiously for her in the Bronx. Nana and her sisters all married and raised their families in the same neighborhood. It was where she met Alessio, who was handsome and showed great prospects, since he was already apprenticed with a Jewish furrier in lower Manhattan. The story goes that Alessio learned Yiddish before mastering English and, as a tailor in the salons of Fifth Avenue, managed to carry everybody in the family through the Great Depression. I had sketchy memories of Nana and my great aunts, always in the kitchen, chattering in Italian, a symphony of industry, while my sister, brother, and I, with our cousins, played—always in shouting distance.

Five days after Mom drops us off at her apartment, Nana surprises us with the news that Daddy died that morning. She says it tenderly, but she doesn't cry, so I don't either. She explains that she

won't be going to Daddy's wake or funeral so that she can stay and take care of us until it's all over. All I know is that I don't want her to leave. Then she gets up and walks out of the room. My brother Neil takes his baseball mitt and runs outside. Through the screen window, I hear him angrily smacking the ball into his mitt over and over again.

But then Nana calls my sister and me into the kitchen where she announces we're going to make pasta for dinner. It is, by design, a daylong project: Nana standing over her tomato sauce, stirring, tasting, adding spices, whispering in Italian — coaxing it into some higher state. Compared to Mom, whose current enchantment is with Swanson's frozen dinners, Nana is Merlin. I'm thrilled when she lets me use her rolling pin to flatten dough on the yellow Formica table. After a few false starts, when I smash the dough to smithereens, Nana looks over with a smile and says, "Ay, too heavy." I lighten my touch and successfully produce several wide strips of pasta.

On we go to Nana's metal pasta maker, which is in its customary spot atop her red tile counter. Rita and I take turns with its rotating handle, and, as the first strands come surging out of its other end, we squeal with delight. The process goes on until a large pot of linguini is ready to be topped with Nana's beautiful red sauce. Then she directs us to wash our hands and set the table with her fine china and silver. When we're all seated, Nana pours red wine into our tiny juice glasses, and with a silent toast, we repeat after her, "*Mangia.*"

Later, I'm mopping the kitchen floor when I suddenly feel exhausted and dizzy. The mop makes a nasty snap on the tile as it slips from my hands. At the kitchen table, Nana puts down her crocheting and motions me to her. I sink lifelessly into her lap, not wanting there to be any other world than this. I barely notice as she pulls a comb from her pocket and puts it to my mass of tangled hair. Although I normally run and hide in the corner when anyone tries to get at my hair, now I have no energy or desire to move. My last memory that night



is of Nana's gentle hands and her whispered words: "Daddy's pretty curls."

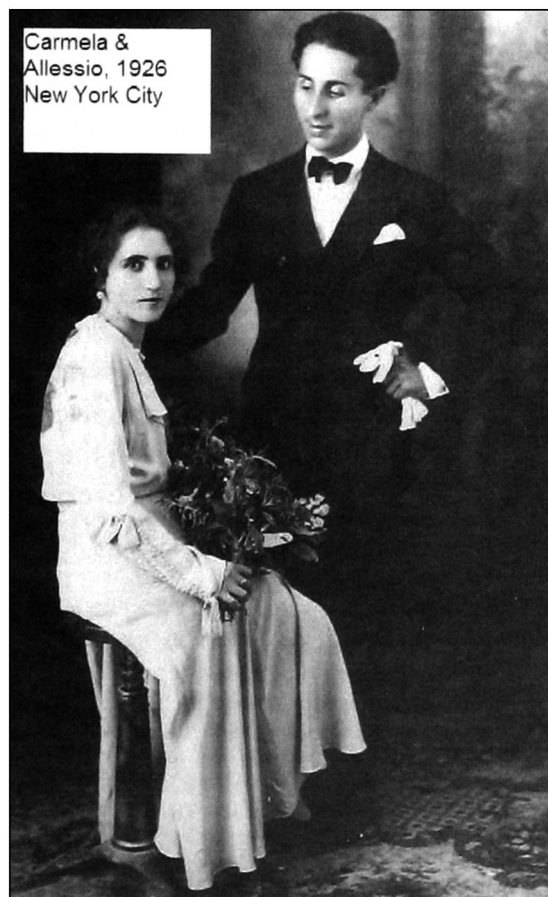
It's two years later; I'm nine. In all that time, Mom has never mentioned Daddy, not once. She's gone back to work, as a school bus driver—pretty good for someone who just got her driver's license the year before. Actually, I'd never seen her so happy. A few times, the man who fixed our car called to ask her out on a date. When I whispered to Mom who it was on the phone, she made me say she wasn't there. Right then, I knew I'd never hate men like Mom did—I missed Daddy too much for that.

That summer, we're at Nana's apartment again. But this time, Nana is the one in the hospital. She had her second heart attack the day before, and the doctor told Mom that she won't make it to tomorrow morning. When Mom repeats this news to us, I run out of the room, refusing to talk to anyone. When she calls me for dinner, I'm not hungry. I

want to go to bed and insist on sleeping in Nana's four-poster with her snow-white, crocheted bedspread, not on my usual cot next to Rita and Neil in the spare room. Curled up in her bed, I can still smell Nana's scent on the pillowcase, and I hold it very tightly against my chest. Mom comes in to tell me she is going back to the hospital and, after another unsuccessful attempt to get me into my own bed, leaves me there with a resigned sigh.

Once the apartment quiets down, I start. For many hours, or so it seems, I talk to God and explain to Him why I need Nana to live: how with Dad gone and Mom the way she is, Nana simply can't leave me. Not yet.

And, as I knew He would this time, God agrees. Nana gets a miraculous reprieve; actually, she stays on this earth another five years, long enough to get me to 16—the same age Nana was when she crossed the Atlantic.



Carmela &
Alessio, 1926
New York City

Photograph provided by Victoria Costello

