

Morse Code

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My Grandfather and I had "Morse code" between us. On the bus we would quietly sit. My black maryjanes bobbed above the lines of the rubber floor mat. His wool trousers were prickly against the side of my swinging leg.

"What a sweet little girl," said the lady in the pink pillbox hat.

"Yes," said my Grandfather. He turned to me and smiled, "Tanto to bella."

I looked down and fidgetted with the red ribbon on my navy sailor dress. We alternated our conversations between English and Italian, but in public, Italian made me nervous. It made other people nervous too. The pink-pill-box-hat-woman smiled politely and turned toward the window.

Grandpa's square brown fingers took my hand and squeezed it four times. Each squeeze was a word, but this game had been played between us so many times, we no longer needed them. His meaning was clear to me: DO YOU LOVE ME?

I squeezed back: YES I DO.

Two squeezes from Grandpa: HOW MUCH?

I grabbed as much of his hand as I could, which was only the first three fingers, and squeezed, squeezed, squeezed.

The bus took us to the Santa Monica Pier. As it pulled away it left a black mass of diesel smoke, thick enough to bring a genie from a bottle. The continuous breeze carried it inland.

Grandpa and I walked the length of the faded brown planks. Grandpa took a slim, leaf-rolled cigarello from the silver cigarette case he kept in his breast pocket. I did not mind the smoke because the wind danced it swiftly apart.

Together we made a single bronze statue, silhouetted against the orange-lavender sky; but Grandpa never carried me. My left hand was pressed to my thigh to hold down my dress. My right hand was in his left. As his right hand brought the amber to his lips, he turned his head sideways to take a deep drag. After exhaling, he looked toward the silver sunset water and said, "Wind is good, it clears the hair."

"Capello?" I was puzzled.

"Niente affatto," he said, "capo."

"It clears the head?"

"Si bella, it clears the head." He squeezed my hand twice.

My father held my hand, as my black, patent leather maryjanes bumped along uneasily across the carpet. In front of a deep brown mahogany coffin, he stopped, slipping his pale, manicured hand from mine and running it along the white satin brink. I was not tall enough to see more.

After a moment he lifted me to his hip. My arm extended instinctively toward the cuff of the wool suit lying there very still. Daddy grabbed my hand to cease its motion. As he bore me away he held me too tight.