



# Ciao, Papa

Was he still in Seattle or back in Italy? One Thanksgiving, the answer finally came. **By Liza Monroy**

**When my father** was born, he was strapped to a board so his spine would grow straight. He claimed it was a common practice in rural Italy in the 40s. Thirty-six years later, my mother spotted a handsome man — standing upright, working in a ship's kitchen. She was 24, traveling through Italy, vivacious and speaking the language fluently. They married after three months and moved in with her American Jewish family in Seattle. Italy was utopia to my mother, so she worked at its consulate. My father waited on tables.

Even at 6 years old, I sensed some tension. He was always talking about opening a restaurant of his own but never took action. She moved up in her career, eventually nabbing a transfer to Rome. My father stayed behind in Seattle. The divorce became official shortly after their 11th anniversary.

I visited Seattle during summers, staying with my maternal grandmother, Grandy, as I'd called her since I was 3. I went to my dad's apartment on Capitol Hill, a seedy neighborhood at the time, every Wednesday, his day off from serving pasta to the business-lunch crowd. My last time there, I was 17 and about to head to Boston for college. He met me in the hallway. I noticed his body swaying as we walked toward his door. It was 11 in the morning, and I knew he was drunk.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asked.

"I'm not," I said.

The next time I called him, from my dorm, his number was no longer in service. Short of flying back and combing the streets, there was no way to find him.

After college, I moved to L.A. Life went on. A few years ago my mother said she had heard my father was back in Italy, living at his mother's house in Genoa. I sent a Father's Day card but didn't hear back. My relationship with him had been reduced almost completely to questions.

My fiancé and I spent that Thanksgiving in Seattle with Grandy, who lived alone. During dinner, she got a little tipsy and revealed a secret she and my mother had been keeping from the time my father disappeared. "Someone at his building told me he'd been evicted," she said. "I walked down to Volunteer Park, and there he was, sleeping on the grass. His ankles were swollen. I practically had to drag him out." She checked him into the hospital, then

bought him a plane ticket and sent him back to Genoa. I cried out of sadness and also out of relief: I'd finally heard the truth.

The next day, I booked a flight and called my mother in Rome. I was coming to Italy for Christmas and, whether she wanted to or not, she and I were going to Genoa to see my father.

As we arrived in Genoa, three days before Christmas, I saw him running down the steps of the train station. His shaggy hair was no longer espresso brown but shades of gray. He waited at the bottom while we dragged our bags through the holiday travelers.

"Ciao, ciao," he said. He smelled like the same cologne I remembered. His clothes were clean, his eyes clear. We hailed a taxi and rode in silence, Papa in the front seat, my mother and I in the back. The apartment he lived in used to belong to his mother. My father made tea. He didn't drink anymore, he said, not even a drop of wine. My mother prompted conversation: "Tell your father about your wedding plans. Tell him about your work!" I felt like the dummy in her ventriloquist act, but I said: "I'm getting married in July in Mexico, on the beach like I've always wanted. Please come." After a while I stopped listening to my mother's topic requests. "How are you?" I asked. He didn't know I knew what happened. "Things are better now," he said.

The next day, we took a walk. "What's that?" I asked, pointing to a huge transparent globe. "A greenhouse," he said, "like the one we used to visit in Volunteer Park." I tried to picture going there with him when I was a child but instead imagined my father seeking shelter in that greenhouse on cold winter days outdoors.

We walked toward the train station, my hand in his, my mother beside me. Later, he stood on the platform, waving until we were out of sight. I leaned my forehead against the train window. My features, my father's features, were reflected in the glass.

I called him from Rome the next day to say Merry Christmas. He told me that after we left he sat by the water for a long time, thinking. He said he would come to the wedding.

But the next summer in Mexico, my best friend was the one who walked me down the aisle. I never really believed my father would come, yet I still felt disappointed by his absence. Afterward, we were cutting the cake when a lobby attendant rushed in. "Telephone at reception, señorita," he said. I put down the knife and ran in my white strappy sandals all the way across the property. "Papa?" I said finally into the receiver. "Is it you?" The dial tone droned, flat and steady in my ear. ■

*Liza Monroy lives in New York. Her writing has appeared in The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times and Newsweek.*

ILLUSTRATION BY BOB HAMBLY

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