

GUEST COLUMNIST

PIECES OF MY PATH

Go! Kiss Zia!

by Zoe Tummillo

I'm much older now, so I can see that we were just being taught respect -- but it often felt like medieval torture.

Zia Armida was "the eldest" -- the loving, doting, and whiny sister of my Nonna, Clorinda. (But, they were as different as night and day.)

My clearest memory of Zia is of her sitting in the big chair in the living room in Nonna's house, near the front door -- where she "held court" for anyone who came in. That was the old way. When there was a gathering, the eldest of the family sat strategically located so others could show proper respect when they arrived -- especially the children.

Usually, we were alerted ahead of time that Zia would be there ... waiting. Zia had an unbelievably shrill voice, a mole on her face with the regulation one black hair protruding, a mustache, strong garlic breath, and very

wet lips!

There was no escaping the ritual. When my mother gave me that look, and said: "Go! Kiss Zia!" she meant it like only my mother could mete out an order; and, you better do it!

I was a very skinny little girl, and I would try my best to fight the coming crush, and just deliver the mandatory greeting kiss, but -- forget it! In a flash she'd grab my little body in a hammer lock and deliver juicy kisses all over my face, with the final one a huge, wet smackeroo right on the mouth!

Respect. There were many rules and many forbidden things -- at least in my mother's world, which was absolutely black and white.

"Go! Kiss Zia!" was just one item on my mother's very long Respect-and-Behavior list: Keep your mouth closed when the grown-ups are talking (she didn't just mean close your mouth; she meant

with your little lips pressed together -- just in case you forgot!). Don't come in the front door; come in the back door. Shut up and tell me what happened! (Huh?) Wait until your father gets home! (I never quite got that last one, because, didn't we always wait until our father got home? Delivered as a threat, it was actually a high point of my day!)

There were car rules, train rules, taxi rules and walking-along rules. But, when we went to Trenton, the Go-kiss-Zia rule was the most daunting. I thought she was a Witch -- a real Witch! It was that voice you could hear across the house or from the garden!

Zia wanted to examine my clothes in great detail, and all in screechy Italian. She would pull and tug at every ruffle, sleeve-poof, hair-bow and bracelet -- all the while putting a giant fright into my little soul! She would pinch my cheeks, pull at my ears, all

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while exclaiming, Bellissima! Bella!

And she never forgot my hair -- she would grab my head with both hands squeezing my cheeks, pull my head up and down, planting kisses on the top of my hair! When she had enough, she would give me a shove and say: Go help your mother!

When I grew up I thought, well, Zia didn't have a daughter, and maybe that was why she made such a fuss. She just had her handsome sons, Remo and Rico.

Then, in 2000, I met Zia's granddaughter at our family reunion; she told me that Zia Armida did have a daughter -- who had died of pneumonia in her twenties. I knew and remembered her son Rico who had died in his thirties of rheumatic fever...

Respect. Part of that

concept has to be trust -- for the parts of another's life we do not know, and for their reasons. So, I began to see those memories in a different light ... perhaps, it was her own little girl who was in her heart when she fussed so over me ...

One day when my granddaughter, was 4 or 5, I had hold of her -- hugging, squeezing, kissing the top of her curls -- something I loved to do! Then suddenly, I thought of Zia, and missed her crushing embrace. I was that little girl again, in Trenton, standing in front of the big chair in Nonna's living room -- with Zia's brand of love raining down on me like a hurricane! And I wished I could tell her that, finally, I understood.

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