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A Legacy in a Candy Dish



On Mom's antique coffee table – a deep green Asian-inspired piece once owned by my grandparents – sits a large crystal candy dish filled with an assortment of after-dinner mints and some old holiday candy. Always around, it is the kind of cut crystal that was reminiscent of the 1930s. It's about six inches in diameter with a covered pedestal lid, a mainstay among gifts of that period. Back in the day before television, cell phones and the internet when people went visiting on the weekends, every proper living room had a dish to serve visitors something sweet.

As a child, I remember being told not to touch it.

"That's good," my elders would say. Their harsh tone scared me, but I immediately understood that it was not a child's toy. I loved the delicate and artistic nature of all the fine things I saw in my grandparent's home. I loved to stare and touch them all, imagining grown-up tea parties. I couldn't wait to be big. My grandparents were collectors. During the Depression, they knew how to barter.

I always assumed that this candy dish was just another collected item, something

traded. It wasn't a piece that held much monetary value, but it had survived a few decades in different homes without getting chipped. For that it was good. Only recently did I learn why.

My Mom was eight years old in 1929 when my grandmother Alexandra Landi Camuti took her into New York to buy a wedding gift for her brother on the Grand Concourse.

Achille Landi was the catch of the day, the wealthy bachelor and a marble importer in New York City. He married at the age of 35, which was very late by standards of the day. We called him Uncle Pep, a nickname my mother gave him for his bounding energy.

Uncle Pep never had any trouble meeting women. He did his fair share of dating in the New York social circles. To test the waters when he began dating a woman regularly, he would often bring his beloved niece – my mother – along. Uncle Pep wanted to marry a woman who would be a good wife and mother. According to Mom, Uncle Pep always said that if a girlfriend wasn't comfortable with my mother, a little girl requiring attention, then she was too self-centered to be a good wife.

I always knew the sun rose and set around

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my mother and her brother, my uncle Louie Camuti, in Uncle Pep's eyes. So too, in their eyes, it rose and set the same way around Uncle Pep.

Mom remembers that many women were immediately off put by her presence. Some were down right rude. Some tried too hard to make her like them. Others were just OK for a five year old. No one was huggable or instantly likable.

"Oh no, Uncle. Not this one," she would say.

"Uncle, this one is too fancy. Her skirt makes noise when she walks."

"Uncle, this one doesn't like me."

Being a successful business owner in New York City in the 1920s and looking for a wife seemed like the original reality show called, "Businessman wants a wife."

I'm not sure how Uncle Pep met Grace, a naturally beautiful and simple woman from Long Island. She was from a fishing family and had four brothers. Their courtship and love affair was like Cupid's greatest success story.

"Oh Uncle, I like her. She's really nice, Uncle," Mom told him. My Mom had her own love affair with Aunt Grace. They adored each other. Grace taught Mom how to slow cook a pot roast properly in a big cast iron pot when Mom was a newlywed.

(I own the pot.)

When the wedding plans were announced it was a big deal. Achille Landi of Carrara, Italy and New York City was finally getting

married. Mom said there were many wedding gifts, mostly art deco bronze pieces that were popular at the time.

There had to be a presentation of the gift, a special memento from my Mom to her beloved uncle and new aunt. My grandmother took Mom into New York City on a special shopping trip, which required several trolleys and taxis. Standing inside the department store, Mom was just tall enough to push her nose over the top of the table. It was entirely covered with cut crystal glassware. The light shining through all those pieces looked like diamonds in the air. To be a little girl on a special shopping trip to buy a special secret gift was very exciting. It was only natural that the gift of choice, decided by a doting eight year old be a candy dish.

Now I know why the elders always told me not to touch it, because "it was good." Its real value was in the relationships that it lived through.

