

..And to All, A Good Night

by Joe Curcio

"On this cold winter's day, I decided to snuggle up to a warm snuff of cheap port, and a Dr. Seuss coloring book. I knew, with pen in hand, and money envelopes clenched within my finger tips, that I, as my uncles before me, the holiday traveler, would prefer something a bit stronger than mistletoe".

I was once, and still am in spirit, a young Greenpoint lad who, on this night, enjoyed the aroma of Christmas Eve. The fish, and macaroni in oil cooking in my mothers Italian kitchen. The fragrance of a new shower curtain hanging in the bathroom. The scent of freshly painted walls. Gleaming waxed floors throughout our railroad rooms. The same floors that, as children we'd sprinkle with baby powder, and in our mother's stockings run and slide as if it were ice.

A kid who heard his Italian father say, that on Christmas Eve you couldn't give him a "*million bucks*" for one bite of meat. I still believe that if one ever approached him with a suitcase filled with money, and a dish of Peter Luger steak, that my father, in his own kind Italian way, would say "*no thank you*", on this night, Christmas Eve.

Although I knew that before the end of this evening that there would be an argument between my mother and Aunt Tessa over their twenty-five year old grudge , which neither were clear on the details any more, I also realized that the confusion, and commotion were as part of this Italian family's version of Christmas Eve as was the baccala salad chilling in the refrigerator. I am now, regardless of my present spirit, a grown and married Brooklyn guy who again is prepared to do what he has done for the past thirty-some-odd Christmas eves.

Bethlehem, and Scrooges old London flat may have been as far off from these streets as anyone would agree, yet pieces of each of their wonder came alive in our little town of Greenpoint.

Molly's Christmas tree, the centerpiece on Beadel Street, standing two stories tall, and in full Christmas bloom. Its forest limbs yielding bags of glass balls, golden music staves, and yards of sparkling tinsel whose twinkle could be seen from as far off as the Kingsland Avenue. Old Molly herself, lifting the blinds, clearing the frost from her window appeared to look like an imported Italian holiday ornament on one past Christmas Eve.

Across the street on Toms window ledge, speakers dressed in cotton balls fill the air with the silly, clumsy, merry sound of Christmas that only "Good ole' Tom" or perhaps Homer Simpson could provide. Somehow he always knew the perfect moment to switch to the Englebert music.

Then with the expectations of the arrival of pudding on the Cratchets dinner table - to be more specific: like the neon of Vegas, and the rhinestones on Elvis's underwear - Rays home comes to view. Con Edison smiling at a perfect example of my fine heritage's skill of excess. Decorated with one hundred, or perhaps, one thousand lights too many. A surplus of twinkles, and tinkers, and ringers. More than a single set of eyes could contain. The Lights of London and the Star of Bethlehem , all here in our own little town of Greenpoint USA.

In my home, the preparations for the great Christmas Eve feast. Mama shelling the shrimp, cleaning the calamari, breading the fillet and praising the size of the scallops. And although the rest of the world may have called the delicacies of this meal "*crustaceans*"- these Scallops, shrimp, calamari, and clams amazingly transposed into "fish" when they entered my parent's home on Christmas Eve. . It's one of the smaller miracles that occur on this night.

Papa opening the anchovies, preparing the garlic and oil, and grinding the hot peppers that had been hanging in the kitchen to dry since Thanksgiving. "*Don't gimme that crustaceans stuff*" he says - "*it's fish*"- His T-shirt displaying the labor of his day. Soon it will be time to drain the linguini in the scolamaceroon sitting in the sink - again, the rest of the world knowing this as a common kitchen tool to strain pasta. I did not know it as such by any other name until I was well into my 20's.

Paper shavings of Christmas wrap and the skin of garlic cloves - a fine scene of merry debris on our Christmas table. Brother John sampling the deep fried delights and dunking fresh bread into Papa's special seafood sauce. Myself, sitting, smiling, writing, and wondering when Aunt Tessa would arrive to begin the fight with my mother.

Sister, tying the final bow on her Christmas wrappings and making change for her gifts of tens and twenties, looks nervously at the Christmas tree. "Don't turn on the TV, it's too close to the tree." she'll say, and even though this artificial bush is made of solid aluminum, completely fireproof , tested with a blow torch by Underwriters Laboratory, and NASA themselves , sis still worries that the broadcast of the Yule log just might set the tree a blaze.

Soon the table will be set, and as always by "*accident*" with one dish too many. And Mama will say "leave it set for the souls". And when the feast is through, and the table is clear, Papa will offer coffee by asking "who's having black, and who's having brown"

After the gifts and the great Christmas Eve feast, families stroll through the streets as families. Bellies full, smiling their way past the blinking lights and on their way to midnight mass. "Merry Christmas Sal." "Merry Christmas Lina." "Merry Christmas Sam."

Midnight Mass - a solemn gathering and a great social ball. A place to see and to be seen sporting a new Christmas coat and hat. At the Mass, ready and waiting is the cream of the Irish catholic altar boy crop: The Bolan boys, The Donovan brothers. The heavenly voices of a full Christmas choir. The music. Christmas music. Music that reminds us of who are now, and who were then. School Carolers, and yes I had been one in younger days, made their intentions clear . It was Christmas Eve in Greenpoint and they sang to summon its merry.

I now place down my glass of cheap port and smile at the picture of The Grinch as *"he himself carves the roast beast with a heart that grew three sizes on this night"* , and I like my uncles before me, prepare as the Christmas traveler. *"With ribbons, and tags, and packages, boxes and bags"*.

A drive under the festive lights and holly hung high above Graham and Manhattan Avenues. With a stop at Rosalie's bakery to fetch the hard bread *"frizale"* biscuits for the great fish feast. A friendly visit to Teddy's Bar for a taste of holiday cheer. A ring on the doorbell of Frank Sessa's home, the North Side clarinet player who taught us all so well. I, this native to the streets of Greenpoint on route home -noticing that some things have changed as many things do.

I do believe that one thing does remain the same: , *"Christmas is a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time; the only time I know in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seen by one consent to open their shut up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys"*.

"Merry Christmas Sal." "Merry Christmas Lina." " Merry Christmas to all in our little town of Greenpoint."