

AND TO ALL A GOOD NIGHT:

...the feast of the seven fishes

by Joe 'Kirsch' Curcio,

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Here I am once again on a cold winter's day, snuggled up to a small glass of brandy and a Dr. Seuss book preparing to follow in the footsteps of my uncles before me as the holiday traveler. Fortunately, the journey will take me all but a mile away to the home where I grew up in my small town of Greenpoint Brooklyn, New York, USA – to my mama and papa's house.

In spirit, I'm still that young Brooklyn Italian kid, born in 1960 who, for as long as I can remember cherished everything about this night - Christmas Eve. The scent of the Seven fishes and garlic frying in my mama's Italian kitchen. The fragrance of a new shower curtain hanging in the bathroom. The glimmering waxed linoleum floors throughout our railroad rooms - the same floors we'd sprinkle with baby powder and in our mother's stockings, glide across as if skating on ice. And, of course, there's the unmistakable aroma of freshly painted walls, also a tradition especially reserved by my mama for my papa as we neared the holidays.



Curcio siblings: Tina, John, Joe

The youngest son of three siblings who heard his Italian father say that you couldn't give him a "*million bucks*" for one bite of meat on Christmas Eve. I still believe if anyone ever approached him with a suitcase filled with money, and a dish of Brooklyn's *famous Peter Luger steak*, that my father, in his own kind Italian way, would say "*no thank you*", on Christmas Eve.

Confusion and commotion were as much a part of this neighborhood Italian family's Christmas Eve as the salted cod *baccala* salad chilling in the refrigerator.

The snipped edges of Christmas wrappings and the papery sheath of garlic cloves mingling together in a colorful scene of merry debris on our kitchen table as mama and papa prepared for our traditional Christmas Eve dinner. My sister sitting in the *parlor* tying the final bows on her gifts and making change for her money envelopes glancing nervously at the Christmas tree - saying "*don't turn the television on - it's too close to the tree*". Although this artificial bush was completely fireproof and probably tested with a blow torch by Underwriters Laboratory, "*sis*" still worried that the broadcast of the Yule log just might set it ablaze.



Mama & Papa

Joe "Kirsch" Curcio:

Then my aunt would arrive huffing and puffing from her *long trip* down the stairs from the second floor of our 2-family house. In 1967 families still lived together or at least nearby. The Italians were no different, but it did pose somewhat more of a challenge trying to figure out which Michael or Anthony was being called in from the top-floor window for dinner. But like clockwork, no sooner than she arrived, the annual debate would begin between her and my mother as to the precise date when Aunt Concetta passed away – although Aunt Concetta was long dead for more than 50 years. This was followed by the quibble over whether or not the seafood *sauce* was too spicy for her diverticulitis. All of this always ended with my father pointing out that *there was plenty of Brioschi in the medicine cabinet* and a reminder that *in this house it's gravy, not sauce!*



Beadle Street, oil by Brian Larken

Each year was a wonderful encore of food, family, festivities, and light quarrel - but always ending with a delightful reprise of heartfelt family tradition.

Now as I walk down my old street, a grown and married Brooklyn *guy* I am once again prepared to do what I have done for the past 60-odd years on this night - Christmas eve.



Brooklyn Streets

Bethlehem, and Scrooges' old London flat may have been as far off from these Brooklyn streets as any other place in the world - yet pieces of each of their wonder came alive in our little town of Greenpoint.

Old lady Molly had a Christmas tree in front of her painted red brick house down the block. It was the centerpiece on Beadel Street standing two stories tall and in full Christmas bloom. It's limbs yielding bags of glass balls, golden music staffs, and yards of garland and sparkling tinsel whose twinkle could be seen from as far off as the *Brooklyn-Queens expressway*. One past Christmas Eve *Old Molly* herself lifted the blinds to take a peek out of her window. Then as she wiped the frost from the pane her timeworn friendly face even appeared to look like an imported Italian holiday ornament as she emerged in the center of the cleared frost.

Across the street on Toms window ledge, speakers like sonic portals dressed in cotton balls filled the air with a silly, clumsy, merry sound of Christmas that only *Good ole' Tom* or perhaps Homer Simpson could provide. Long before iPods and playlists he somehow always knew the perfect moment to switch to the Perry Como music.

Joe "Kirsch" Curcio:

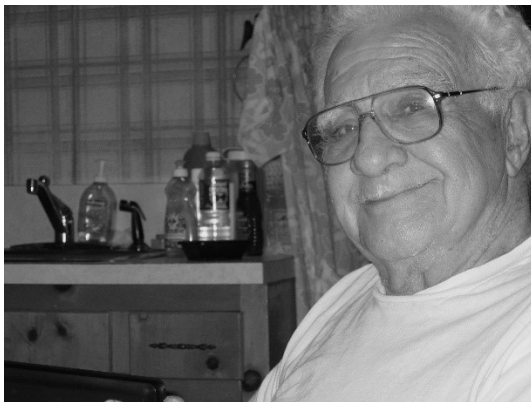
Then with the expectation of the arrival of pudding on the Cratchits dinner table – actually more like a pageantry of neon in Las Vegas – Ray's home comes into view. Consolidated Edison the regional power company, and probably Thomas Edison himself from the grave smiling at this perfect spectacle of illuminated excess.

His house was decorated with one hundred, or perhaps one thousand lights too many. A surplus of twinkles, and sparkles, fleeting reflections of light flashing like diamonds and glitter. The Star of Bethlehem and the lights of London there for all to see in Ray's front gate in our little town of Greenpoint USA.

Right next store, up the 3 steps of the *stoop* was my mama and papa's house. I could already smell the garlic frying from outside! Through the front doors and into the kitchen where more preparations for the great Christmas Eve feast continued. Mama shelling the shrimp, cleaning the calamari, breading the fillet and praising the size of the scallops. The rest of the world may have called these delicacies crustaceans – but on this special night the scallops, shrimp, calamari, and clams magically transposed into the sumptuous participants in the feast of the Seven Fishes. It's one of the smaller miracles that occurred on this night, Christmas Eve.



The Stoop



My Papa

Papa opening the anchovies; prepping the spaghetti *aglio e olio* frying garlic slices in olive oil to a perfect golden brown. Grinding the hot peppers that had been stitched on string and hanging in the kitchen to dry since Thanksgiving. Saving them to make the crushed, spicy pepper flakes of his special version of *peperoncino* to sprinkle across the *al dente* pasta. He softened the hard friselle bread biscuits in water – soon to be covered with his seafood *sauce*, served along side the shrimp and calamari. Papa's white gravy-stained T-shirt displaying the labor of his day.

Soon it would be time to drain the *macaroni's* in what most called a colander, but forever known in my house as a *scolapasta* (pasta strainer). Finally the table would be set, as always with one *accidentally placed* dish too many. And Mama would say "*leave it there for the souls*".

When the feast was over, and the table cleared, Papa would offer coffee by asking "*who's having black, and who's having brown*". The difference being a choice between *black*, espresso coffee made in a *mog-uh-nett* - a steam pressure moka pot (*macchinetta*) - with a little anisette and a twisted lemon peel or *brown*, *American coffee* brewed in an old-fashioned stovetop percolator.

Joe "Kirsch" Curcio:

Then after the gifts and the great Christmas Eve feast, families strolled through the streets of Greenpoint. All familiar names and faces. *"Merry Christmas Sal."* *"Merry Christmas Lina."* *"Merry Christmas Sam."* Bellies full, smiling their way past *old Molly's* tree on their way to church for midnight mass.

Midnight Mass at St. Cecilia's was a solemn gathering yet as festive as old *Fezziwig's Ball*. A place to see and to be seen sporting a new Christmas coat and hat. School Carolers making their intentions clear: It was Christmas Eve in Greenpoint, and they sang to summon its merry. The heavenly voices of a full Christmas choir. Christmas music - music that reminded us of those who would not be home for Christmas like my older brother in Vietnam, and those who used to be. But especially for those who are thankfully here to join hearts and hands to celebrate alongside us tonight.



I now place down my empty glass of brandy and smile at the picture of The Grinch as *"he himself carved the roast beast"* – obviously not Italian since he was eating meat on Christmas Eve. Myself *"with ribbons, and tags, and packages, boxes and bags"* in hand as I prepared for my short drive under the festive lights and holly hung high above the main roads of Greenpoint. Noticing that some things have changed as many things do. But 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". (Charles Dickens)

"Merry Christmas Sal." *"Merry Christmas Lina."* – and Merry Christmas to you and all in our little town of Greenpoint Brooklyn New York USA."



Joe "Kirsch" Curcio:
