Christmas. When I Was Nine

Robert Viscusi (December 24, 2020)

Postwar Christmas in America. Memories of a nine-year-old boy raised in a household of Italian immigrants in New York. A Christmas story that Professor Robert Viscusi generously offered us for publication years ago. We propose it again in this difficult Christmas also as a tribute to Bob's memory, who sadly left us a few months ago. Thanks Bob, and buona lettura to you all.

When I was nine, my mother let me buy the Christmas tree [2]. I bargained fiercely and managed to get it for seventy-five cents. It was a little skimpy. We had two sets of colored lights on that tree. At night, we'd stand outside and admire the lights, which we could see inside the living room window. We thickened the sad little tree with tinsel. There was enough tinsel so that, seen through the curtains, it looked like icicles.

Visiting the family

Christmas morning in our house was a competitive celebration of American booty. We'd open

presents in the early morning, making as big a mess as we could with all the wrapping paper. Then we'd begin the round of visits to my father's brother's house, my little sister's godmother's house, my big sister's boyfriend's house, my mother's sister's house, and during the course of the morning all these people would also visit us in our house. During these visits, the hosts would provide cookies, coffee, whiskey, brandy, cake, pizzelle, and they would also display their gifts: baseball mitt, winter coat, board game, fur-lined mittens, sled, bike, camera with strap, plastic purse with strap, sweater, waffle iron, toaster, flashlight, remote-control car or motorboat or airplane, machine gun. The showing of these items was a serious ritual, as each gift had been restored to the box it came in from Namm's or Loeser's or Macy's or Gimbel's and needed to be extracted, held up for admiration around the circle, and then folded or turned off or dismantled and returned to the box so that the same procedure could be repeated when the next troupe of cousins tumbled in through the kitchen door. Each of these shows was an ordeal of competitive feelings and cognitive skills, as one would assess the value in dollars and cents of every gift, add up the prices, comparing the totals per person and per family. The champion was always my father's brother's daughter, an only child with a German mother and a very well-paid father who doted on her. One Christmas morning she found a brand-new piano with a big shiny red bow on it, which pretty much flattened every other price list for the rest of the day.

My mother's Abruzzese clan

Christmas afternoon turned towards Italy. Here we managed to even the score. The German part of the family was small, but my mother's Abruzzese clan had twenty people in it, and we were always together on Sundays anyway. On Christmas, we would have a big turkey or ham or roast beef, with many vegetables and sauces, just like the people on the cover of the Saturday Evening Post, but all this was really in the nature of an afterthought. The real action was the appetizers and the pasta. Gnocchi [3]. Ravioli [4]. Ragù [5]with meatballs and pork braciole [6]. Plenty of red wine on the table for the men. Plenty of bright colored soda water for us. Mission Orange or Grape or Sarsaparilla. In later years, we turned to soup with chicken and acini di pepe [7]. But we were by then getting a little refined. When I was a child it was all heavy pasta, handmade the day before by my mother's mother, a magnificent cook whose powerful arms made it clear that the kitchen was a place of actual work.

The Holy Mass

There was also church. We'd squeeze that in someplace. Usually at 9 in the morning, sometimes at midnight mass. Only the children. In my family, grownups did not go to church because it was not meant for serious persons.

Being G. I. Joe

Our Christmases always had the same theme. Plenty. Plenty of plenty. And more than plenty of plenty more. We knew dimly that our cousins in Italy were scratching to survive. We ignored our own sacrifices. We were so happy to be in America it was as if we had erected our skinny Christmas tree inside a B-52. After dinner, we'd take out toy planes and bazookas and fight the battle of Iwo Jima all over again, struggling to plant a flag between the back cushions of the couch or, if the weather was mild, on the top of the huge woodpile out back. We would flip a coin to decide who would have to be the Japanese, because the G.I.s always won.

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