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## **A Rocky Hill Christmas**

David Klewicki

**Until the age of six, Christmas Eve's were spent at my Aunt Annie and Uncle Pete Derizinski's**

**in Rocky Hill, Connecticut.** Christmas day would be more or less like what most other mid 1960's middle class families celebrated in this melting pot, but Christmas Eve was reserved for traditional Polish celebration. There was kapusta, pirogues, sauerkraut, kasha and kielbasa. Presents were not exchanged but the memories remain a most special gift.

In the late 60's Rocky Hill was still a rural community. Most of the farms had disappeared but, development had not yet come. It was a mixture of fields and woods; of old farm houses and dairy barns. In the warm months it was a beautiful landscape but in deep winter, when the leaves had fallen and the fields had died, it was a bleak New England scene. My father, mother, sisters and I would climb aboard our boat-like 1960 Chevrolet Impala and drive the short miles across suburbia and into this desolate land.

After crossing the Berlin Turnpike, the demarcation between suburban and rural, the road narrowed. The lights of civilization, of the Turnpikes' restaurants and drive-ins, faded as the road twisted up a hill and past a large Victorian farmhouse. It was a bleak site. The house was in ruins. She stood twisted and sagging; the shattered windows where a portal to a black and foreboding interior. Brush and scrub clung to its stained and faded walls like tentacles. It was as if some subterranean beast drawing the old thing down into its earthly grave. The road continued past a landscape of lifelessness. Cows stood stoically beneath the stark desolation of leafless trees in farmer's fields; their icy breath visible in the cold winter air. I remember thinking how this landscape contrasted from the green fields of neck high hay I ran through in the summer.

Finally, I could see my aunt's house in the distance. It sat at the edge of a large field that had once been part of our families' farm. It was painted a washed out blue grey and, with the exception of being surrounded by cars and a single strand of Christmas lights strung around the eaves, looked outwardly as lifeless as the winter landscape that sounded it.

I remember the feeling of excitement as we pulled in the drive. I anticipated the excited bawdy drone of voices and laughter. The adults would be drinking things with sophisticated names like Martini, Old Fashioned, Tom Collins and High Ball. I knew little of what those were but I could hear the excitement in the voices as the drinks were requested. I would observe the careful mixing and measuring of the ingredients. Cherry's and olives, normally tightly rationed, were in abundance and used unsparingly as ice crashed against the insides of the sleek chrome shaker. All of this was advertisement enough for any boy to long for that day when he too would be among those so privileged as to partake.



**BOY (after Seurat)** James G. Robinson

We entered through the front door and passed, Dorothy like, from the harsh monochrome of winter into the inviting Technicolor warmth. The living room was a polyester jungle of relatives dressed in those vestments reserved for holidays, weddings, wakes and funerals. The smoke laden air softly glowed from the diffused light of the tree. It was a time for an innocent's observation of all things different. The tree was fake, white and thick with tinsel! Its' lights were as big as our ornaments and glowed red, green, and white! On the coffee table a white dimples bowl held opulent bright gold ribbon candy and nuts to be enjoyed without reprimand. There was the traditional Oplatki, a wafer much like the host used in Catholic mass. The wafer was stamped with religious imagery and would be dipped in honey as the guests would place it on one another's tongues while offering a simple blessing. I was greatly confused by this as a child who had been drilled by some very serious nuns that lay hands must never touch the host. The adults told stories of sneaking out on Christmas Eve and hiding in barns to see for themselves if the animals really could talk for some few moments at midnight. Then there was the prominently displayed Derezhinski family portrait. My cousin had divorced that year; however, one might not have known he was ever married for his ex-wife had been expertly removed from the photo. I remembered where she had stood and the closest examination could find no trace of her existence. Although not fully comprehending why, I found this slightly disquieting.

**W**e children were guided to a folding table in the kitchen for the least anticipated part of the evening; the meal. The sausage was passable but heavily buttered boiled grains and sour soups were not for a child's pallet. Served first were the perogues. These tasteless dumplings, pan-fried to perfect toughness and filled with unappetizing cheeses, kraut or prunes, were dropped onto our plates. Then bowls of kapusta were set in front of us; a soup that can be best described as sauerkraut in a vinegar bath. Mounds of Kasha, boiled buckwheat drenched in melted butter, appeared on our plates. I have no



doubt horses would love the stuff. We children appeased the adults by eating the minimum necessary of these traditional mainstays to quench their nostalgic desires, but desert was another matter entirely. Traditionally served was a hard, sweet and fruit filled ice cream concoction frozen in metal ice cube trays with the divider removed. This lush delicacy was worth waiting for. The recipe is now long forgotten and if ever written down has never been found.

After dinner the men gathered to talk, the women to clean and the children were ushered into my Uncle Pete's den. It was nothing like our house. The walls were of wood paneling and vibrantly painted duck decoys were displayed on shelves. An aconically interesting collection of old mechanical banks was displayed on a table. As the holiday approached I would greatly anticipate the opportunity of playing with those wonderful machines. Of particular fascination was the little iron dog that leapt through the air, a coin clenched in its' jaws, precisely depositing it into a barrel. The room also had a color TV set; a technological advancement that would not find its' way into our home for another decade. I was certain my Uncle Pete must be a wealthy man to have surrounded himself in such lavishness.

Soon the din of adult voices began to recede. The food and spirits had taken their toll, and it was time to leave. I, now cocooned in hooded jacket and gloves, was anxious to get home and prepare for Santa. The necessary milk and cookies needed to be laid out, and more importantly, little boys had to be in bed or Santa might pass them by. A gauntlet of hugs and handshakes was traversed as giant hands mussed my hair. Then the door closed and the night, as intensely calm as it was cold, surrounded us. The sky was pitch black and the stars shown with a perfectly focused and intense light: a pure light. I'd watch the moon as we drove, not understanding how it seemed to follow the car. Turn by turn, the moon was in unrelenting pursuit. Then one of my sisters would blurt out, "Look! There's Santa! There he is. Do you see him?" Time after time as I excitedly scanned the indicated sector of the sky, I heard my sisters' disappointed exclamations of my just having missed him.

I still remember those Christmas Eves at my aunt's house with great fondness and warmth. Those were very special times, times during which my world remained a safe and sure place. That security was soon to evaporate and I, like Jackie Paper, would come to Honalee no more. The feast, unlike the holiday, was moveable and never the same. As the generation that kept the tradition faded, those children of the children of immigrants who sat at the folding table grew to adulthood and, whether because they had families of their own or times just change, the tradition ended. My memories of it feel distant now, as if they are lost in some foggy hinterland between fantasy and reality. They are memories of the world through a child's eyes. How beautiful that over forty years later I can still walk through that door and, if only for a daydreamed instant, live those wondrous moments once more.

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