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MIDNIGHT MASS

Midnight mass on Christmas Eve in the early sixties, was a big deal in my village of Flatbush, in Brooklyn, New York. My specific place of worship was St. Rose of Lima, or as we teenaged congregants pronounced it, Saintrosaleema, said as one word; same number of syllables, but its meaning lost, replaced by a soothing communal sound.

Being asked out to midnight mass by a guy you were aware of, but not actually dating, was the neighborhood equivalent of being asked to the prom and was far more romantic than any prom at any of the local schools. It was the allure, I think, of huge gold-colored urns with bright red poinsettias showy and grand, the flickering golden light of chest-height candles, and the unique scent of incense. St. Rose, a small cathedral, took on a whole other look and feel than the *do-I-have-to-go* Sunday morning masses.

The much-anticipated ritual started at 11:30 PM, so that we were all bathed in the light and solemnity of the Latin celebration at the stroke of midnight, the surrounding neighborhood quiet, except for the slight hiss of snowflakes hitting the cars, fire hydrants and sidewalks. There was something about the juxtaposition of the holy reverence of the event, and the teenage sexual tension of two young bodies pressed up tight side by side on the hard wooden pew. The fashion-conscious among us wore mini-skirts, flimsy high heels, and fake fur coats. The church-required-hat was a small pillbox with lacy black veil that came down just past one's eyes. There was a crackle of excitement in the perfumed air mixed with the chill of being underdressed for the weather, that sent a nightclub kind of vibe through the cavernous marble and stained-glass edifice.

It always snowed on Christmas Eve, or so it seemed. Maybe I just don't remember the rainy ones or those so balmy a winter coat was unnecessary. Anyway, I like to believe they were all fantastically snowy, like a Currier & Ives Christmas card. It was, after all, a special night like no other. Even the local mafia types, bad boys all week, dutifully dropped their mothers off at midnight mass, then waited in the car, motor running, radio playing, or left to take care of 'a little business', back in time to pick Mom up amidst Mom's friends all praising – 'such a good boy.'

One year, Frankie Blue, one of the best-looking guys in the neighborhood, asked me to accompany him to midnight mass. Thrilled doesn't describe it; flabbergasted was more like it. He was one of the older guys I passed in the street or spied getting into his baby blue Thunderbird convertible. We never actually spoke except for his occasional, 'Looking good,' as I passed by and tried to smile. My girlfriends surrounded me when they heard. What did he say? How did he get your number? Really, Frankie Blue?!

I was in as much disbelief, but quickly pulled myself together and began to plan what I would wear. Black and white was always a good choice, dramatic and sharp. Lace was a definite

Christmas accessory. Maybe pantyhose with sparkles, and high-heeled black velvet slingbacks. And of course, the required little pillbox with black-flecked veil; very Mata Hari.

The night of my Cinderella dream come true Frankie was late picking me up. Oh, well, it was snowing, after all, and a Thunderbird is nothing to mess with on slick, snowy streets. He showed up looking like a model for a Macy's ad, suit, starched shirt, tie, hair freshly razor-cut. The car, which he kept referring to as *Camille*, smelled of pine scent, and the leather seats against my panty-hosed legs was thrilling. As we drove through the snowy night toward the church, I kept sneaking sideways glances at Frankie's perfect profile as he chewed scented gum and the radio played 'Just Walk Away Renee'.

We found a parking space down the block from the church and I held onto Frankie's arm as my feet slipped and slid on the slick sidewalk. The feel of his arm through his camel-colored overcoat was thrilling. When we entered the church, Frankie insisted on walking up the wide center aisle. 'I want to find us a good seat,' he insisted, his eyes scanning the rows and rows of parishioners. 'But we're late,' I said, as we both genuflected and made the sign of the cross in front of the imposing altar, 'the only seats will be in the back.' After walking back from the altar, like a newly-wed bride and groom, we found a spot three rows from the back of the church. 'Isn't it beautiful?' I whispered, once we were wedged into the crowded pew, in awe of the whole unfolding fairytale. 'Mmm,' Frankie responded. Frankie's leg pressed against mine generated feelings that Sister Francis Margaret in religious instruction class said I would burn in hell for. I kept hoping he would take my hand in his and place it, affectionately and possessively, on his perfectly-creased-gabardine clad leg. He didn't.

Before the communion lineup began, I noticed Frankie kept looking to the right side of the church beyond the narrow side aisle. I followed his gaze. Was it the statue of the blessed virgin that had his attention? Was he that religious? There was so much to learn about my new heartthrob. Every time one of the back doors opened for a late parishioner I shivered from the blast of cold, although my little velvet clutch bag, gripped tightly in my hands through the entire mass, was damp with sweat by the time Monsignor Reilly blessed us and sent us on our way.

The custom was to go to someone's house after mass for refreshments. After all, who would want to waste all those precisely coordinated outfits, inspired hairstyles and makeup on just one hour. When I asked Frankie if he wanted to come to my friend Lorraine's house, he said he'd better not. He had an upset stomach and didn't want to be sick for Christmas Day. I was disappointed but, feeling very Clara Barton I wished him a speedy recovery. I walked with Lorraine and a gaggle of friends through the snowy streets back to Lorraine's house as they all peppered me with questions. Where was Frankie? What happened? I answered in my most solemn voice that he wasn't feeling well, and they all commiserated.

It was festive at Lorraine's parent's house – adults drinking wine, laughing, falling into jovial familiar patterns of glossing over troubles and celebrating a new year coming. My friends and I stuffed ourselves on baked ziti and cannoli and snuck a few glasses of prosecco. Sufficiently sated and content, I walked up the block to my house, light snow falling, my high heels

occasionally skidding across the slick sidewalk, catching snowflakes on my tongue, and dreaming about Frankie Blue.

It didn't take long via the Flatbush grapevine, to learn that Frankie, whose girl had broken up with him two days before Christmas Eve, had planned a determined remedy for his romantic woes. Me. Knowing his ex-girlfriend, Camille, would be at midnight mass, and that I would no doubt look as good or even better than I did when he saw me in the neighborhood, he asked me to accompany him so he could prance me up the aisle for all to see, especially his ex, who, hopefully, would instantly regret letting him go. My friends swarmed around me, offering condolences, levying curses on the head of the rat who disrespected me. It was the topic of discussion for several days and I was given the requisite sympathy and pampering deserving of any jilted female friend.

I nursed my wounds and eventually got over Frankie, like a receding blip on a sonar screen. Slow but sure. I also learned years later that Frankie and Camille eventually got married, had six kids, and that Frankie wound up in jail for insider trading. Ah, payback.

I haven't been to a midnight mass in many years. In fact, I'm not sure they even exist anymore; now relegated to a tamer seven o'clock spot, trading authenticity for convenience, like president's birthdays celebrated all in a lump on a more appealing weekend day than the actual days they were born. Although I haven't thought much about those long ago, adolescent days, I did muse once about what it would have been like if my infamous date with Frankie had gone differently. A quick image of walking down that impressive aisle of St. Rose, poinsettias, candles, friends and family filling the church. Would I have been a better influence than Camille, perhaps sparing Frankie his stint in the joint? One snowy night, though, back in Brooklyn for a quick visit with friends, walking back to my car, I did think about Frankie, Camille and their six kids. I looked up at the dark sky sending down snowflakes over a much-changed Brooklyn. I caught a few snowflakes on my tongue, smiled to myself and wished them all well.