

Moments of transfiguration – often too modest to record.

My baptismal godfather was a first generation Italian blue collar worker who built ships along the Delaware River. He was, like my own mother's parents, of peasant stock from the province of the Abruzzo – on the Adriatic Sea due east of Rome. The Abruzzesi were described as *forte e gentile* (tough but oh so gentle). Yet Marty Giangola was self educated, a reader of books, wise and owned every record made by the famous tenor Enrico Caruso. I learned a lot from him in my early twenties. The thing he liked about Italian opera was its robust sound – requiring physically robust tenors, baritones, bassos, sopranos. No sentimentality there – unless maybe you allow Puccini's arias.

On the other hand out of my father's Irish musical heritage what I heard made me often sentimental. There seemed to be something about Irish ballads that touched the marrow of one's bones – evoking feelings – patriotic, melancholic – the kind you have after your third pint of Guinness's stout. For instance who can withstand melting away when some Celtic woman, alone upon a stage, musically recites that 1843 aria from the Irish opera *The Bohemian Girl* titled "I Dreamt That I Dwelt in Marble Halls"?

The song is quoted in a story by James Joyce titled *Clay*. It's about poor Catholic residents of a then dingy Dublin, people of limited hopes and daily drudgery, as gray as the photographs of the city at that time. Initially the story is about an elderly woman, a spinster named Maria, who works as a laundress at a rescue mission for wayward women and is looking forward to a Halloween party with Joe Donnelly's family that evening. She is well liked by everyone for her pleasant bearing, her sincere services – by Protestants and Catholics alike. She stops to buy cakes for the party – with her limited funds, smiles when the storekeeper asks if she may be buying a wedding cake, converses warmly with an older gentleman on the tram . . . in a word, is a genuinely congenial, solicitous human being, offering a smile rather than a frown in all circumstances.

But underlying all this is a tinge of sadness – given her loneliness as time passes. It's nice to be liked but she may long for more than that. Then as the evening party comes to a close the Donnelly children ask her to sing and the parents coax her. And what does she sing but the first stanza of that old 1843 opera ballad – twice! *I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls / With vassals and serfs at my side / And of all who assembled within those walls / That I was the hope and the pride / I had riches too great to count, could boast / Of a high ancestral name / But I also dreamt, which pleased me most / That you loved me still the same / That you loved me, you loved me still the same / That you loved me, you loved me still the same.*

No matter what our status, poor or rich, content or discontent, there is a longing within each of us that often we are too shy to express – but it's faith in the fulfillment of that longing that rises to the surface of our souls, even to tears in our eyes as in this case of a long forgotten Maria. It's a longing that even gets through to Joe Donnelly after Maria's performance where it says: *Joe was very much moved . . . and his eyes filled up so much with tears that he could not find what he was looking for and in the end he had to ask his wife to tell him where the corkscrew was.*

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