Pleasant Avenue

by Tomas Martin

At the exit of the 116th Street subway stop, brushing the wrought iron, Galileo emerged piecemeal – when viewed from street level, one step at a time – onto the burned sidewalks of Spanish Harlem. At the top of the gritty, worn, steps, he did an about-face north on Lexington Avenue, and looking up to the store awnings diagonally across the intersection of 116th Street, was instantaneously enthralled with the *Barrio*, due at the very least in part to the familiar *salsa* sounds of Hector LaVoe being piped out onto the smoldering concrete by a little *tienda*. The busy street windows advertised Puerto Rican *salsa*, side-by-side with the iconic Mexican performer, Vicente Fernandez – reflecting the newest influence in the area. The LaVoe storefront, and its little carved out nook of a patio, showcased too the tools of *Boricua* music: drums of all sorts, and the stringed *cuatro*, the national instrument of Puerto Rico .

At the crossing, the older gentlemen waiting for the M102 bus – dressed as though still islanders with their satiny *guayaberas* – brought him back to Rio Piedras and the family home that he hadn't seen in three years. Galileo had been teaching Puerto Rican literature and culture at a Massachusetts college for a few years now, and this little taste of home might have been enough to tide him over until a sabbatical semester back in San Juan . Dating back to the post-WWI years, the *Barrio* didn't really take off as a Puerto Rican enclave until the fifties when islanders became "*Nuyoricans*" in simply coming to the mainland. Covering Fifth Avenue to the FDR, and the Harlem River to Ninety-Sixth Street, the neighborhood in fact took over the territory of the earlier immigrant culture of the Italians. Pleasant Avenue, backed up against the FDR, is about all that remains of their years. Galileo's reason for his visit to Spanish Harlem, coincidentally, concerned the blending of these two cultures. His college friend, turned journalist, wanted to interview him for a piece that he was doing on families of the Italian diaspora in Puerto Rico during the early years of the twentieth century. Galileo's family had arrived from Positano around that time, and because of this fact, he was in New York to both catch up with Domenico, and to informally interview with him, the recently hired reporter for the "New York Latino Observer". Turning the corner in the direction of the distant Central Park , Galileo located the designated place, and entering the little diner, sat down for lunch with his old friend.

As with the neighborhood's divided past, both men wanted something different from this conversation. The journalist genuinely wanted to hear another telling of the Southern Italian immigrant experience, a story as equally significant to Puerto Ricans as to Argentines. The professor, and friend, needed to understand the obscure details of a mutual friend's death in a boat off the coast of San Juan two years earlier. The diner was of the ruddy New York type, and Domenico explained to him about these city institutions, where mostly Greek *restauranteurs*' menus offered a spate of cuisines – Chicken parmigiana sat next to moussaka, breakfast was served twenty-four hours a day, and the coffee was bottomless.

"Try the *mofongo*. You'd be surprised, it's the best in the *Barrio*. I know. How is that possible? Yes, the owners are from Athens , but the cook is one of ours. The plantains are perfect, and they do this fantastic one with bacon. It'll clog your arteries, but do you really give a damn?" In chatting about this, Domenico was gently inviting Galileo into Harlem , and also dealing with what he believed to be an uncomfortable air. It was not that there really was bad blood between the two, but it was just that he felt a bit opportunistic for dragging his friend into New York from Massachusetts , just to get his little story written and published. He would try to make his old friend feel less used by putting the neighborhood's Puerto Rican charm out there as chum. In the same manner, Galileo would use his family history as a bribe for the truth about his other friend, Miguel's death. He had his motives as well.

"I haven't had good plantains in ages. I think I'll have it," accepted Galileo. "There just aren't many Puerto Ricans in western Mass. " Good comfort food was an added enticement for the trip. The two

exchanged pleasantries at first, and then got to catching up for nearly the length of the meal. All the while, each planned on how to extract his intended story over the remainder of the afternoon.

"So listen, can we talk about Italy ? I am so glad that you were able to come down. You really are a friend."

"I hope my family's interesting enough. Maybe I'll make up a few details for your article," he joked. "Let's see, the family is from the area around Naples , the southwest of the boot."

"I had a friend who went through Naples in college. Got robbed. Apparently, it's a pretty dangerous city."

"Well, we're actually from Positano, which was really just a fishing village when my great grandfather, Rocco Giaconne came over in 1908. Now, it's a Hollywood backdrop for quaint movies about the charming Italian coast," he explained, not without sarcasm.

"Wait, was that the one in the Steinbeck story?"

"Exactly. So, the family comes over, and Rocco gets work in the fishing industry."

"Did he work the docks, or was he onboard the boats?"

"Oh no, onboard the boats, like a real man," he said with a jocular tone of voice.

"Tuna, Marlin, Tarpon?"

"Tuna boat – big bluefin, yellowfin, big-eye. My grandfather, Antonio, took me out too on charter boats fishing for tuna – something like his father did."

"Did Rocco have any brothers, cousins, anyone else who might have come over as well?"
"Two brothers and a sister."

"That's it? Not much in the way of support down on the island."

"They had some acquaintances from Positano, just a few. Enough to help them find a room when they got off the boat," said Galileo. While he would have loved to tell all about his family, he needed to work his curiosity about Miguel into the conversation… "Have you talked to Miguel's family lately? I hope they are getting over his death. It's been awhile, but it's all so unsettling."

"You know, we should head across the street. That guy with the cart makes the best piraguas in Spanish Harlem. Seriously, the best." Domenico picked up the bill, and the two walked straight over the shimmering street. They ate their ices, and began to meander towards the Park, several avenues away.
"So, your great grandfather comes over, and he's still single, right?"

"Yes, but again, he has his brothers and his sister. Some bit of comfort."

"Ok, he's working the docks and the nets. Does he do this for a long time?"

"Yeah, he, and his brothers, fish for the rest of their lives. It was stable income, and paid for my grandfather's Catholic school education." Then, cutting in on himself, Galileo asked, "So, where is Sammie now? After he came back to the docks and reported the death to the police, what did he do?"

"Not sure, I think he's in Asia . The last time I spoke with him he had a building design being put up in Hong Kong . We lost touch after all of that, but I should track him down. He's the only link I can say I have to Miguel. It's still all so hard to believe. How does one die like that? Freak accident, I guess…

So, tell me about the fishing back in those days."

"On the smaller boats they dropped multiple lines with mackerel bait. On the bigger boats they used nets like in the Med. The three weren't professional fishermen back in the Old Country, but certainly could knot line and work nets. So, you can see how men from the Italian coast, knowing their way about a boat, would be a commodity. The vessels came out of San Juan , but other ports as well. My grandfather always told me how each commercial fleet from the same harbor had this strange way of cooperating while competing – some kind of code of the sea. Funny, huh? They all left the port – what is now the Old Port – at around five in the morning heading out to the shoals and reefs, or if the take was better, out to where the shelf drops off towards the ocean floor – deep water and its currents make for a good catch. He also told me about how hard the work was. His own father, my great grandfather, had hardy, creased, shipboard, net hands – man's work kind of hands. The job made sure of that. I remember when I was really young, how rough too were my grandpa's hands when we walked to church, hand in hand."

"Have you, yourself, ever been out fishing with the bigger boats?"

"Sure, my grandfather took me out on charters, just like his father. Line fishing only though, no nets… Were Miguel and Sammie out with a charter when it happened?"

"You know, I think it was Sammie's own boat. He liked to fish, and must have bought it after you and I came here to the States. He had some money from his work, so my guess is that it was pretty nice."

"And whatever happened to it? Did the police take it in?"

"I would assume so. They usually use the thing to clear up accidents... So, your great grandfather Rocco, did he ever marry, or was Antonio from another situation?"

"No, no illegitimate births here," joking. "Rocco married a woman named Ellie. She was an Italian immigrant too, from Naples proper. My mother still has my great grandmother's Old World recipes, all these years later. Her cooking is legendary, and remains, to this day, the culinary backbone of the Giaconne family. Oh, and my family is huge. Did I mention that? My great grand uncles, Jimmy and Ricky, had six and seven kids, Sophia had four. So, you can imagine all of the aunts, uncles, cousins and assorted bullshit. But wait, it gets better – my grandpa, a generation later, had seventeen kids. I have sixteen aunts and uncles. Damned crazy Catholics, right?"

"Seventeen? What, no condoms?"

"Whatever", he said in a teasing tone. "You've been whoring yourself around since you were in college, and have yet to come close to a real relationship. What would you know about creating a family? Speaking of families, how many brothers and sisters did Miguel have again? They must have been crushed."

"I'm sure they were… So, Rocco had the two brothers who came over with him, and a sister, Sophia, who came a bit later. And after that generation, are their kids still alive?" Mimicking the other end, "Yes. Still fishing a bit and always cooking a little. Tell me more about your grandfather and the fishing scene for the Puerto Rican-born generation of immigrants? That's often the most interesting generation as they try the hardest to blend in, and hide where they come from – sociological phenomenon. You agree? What was the experience like for him?"

"Well, by Antonio's time, the work was less rudimentary. The captains had learned the patterns of all the fish and their schools, the depths, the reefs. It was something like having the entire map of the sea floor. The water was still full of fish, and the work was steadier than ever. The family grew fast too. Seventeen kids… you have to figure, what, a kid a year or so."

"What can you tell me about your aunts and uncles?"

"Well, three of the boys went through the Naval Academy in Annapolis – seafaring, family thing, right. All three became pilots, though, ironic, no? But, they're retired from the service. They live back on the island, one in Fajardo, two in Ponce . Three of the girls went through college, and are teachers around the mainland. One of the others left the island after high school. Nobody's heard from her since. The best guess is that she's in Hawaii . Oh yeah, add this to your story. I bet you didn't even know this. Sorry, got to do the professor thing for a second: Hawaii has a significant Puerto Rican population. Sounds crazy right, but when I tell you, it will all make sense. Think about it? What is one of the main industries in the Hawaiian Islands ? Sugar cane. So, who else knows more about cultivating and working sugar cane? Puerto Ricans. The Puerto Rican diaspora is just like the Italian one – go where your skills are transferable. Italian fishermen to the Caribbean, cane cutters to Hawaii ."

"Would never have known that… What about the other kids?"

"Oh, doing random things back on the island: bartending, house painting, working as loan officers in banks – all sorts of things… Hey, Sammie and Miguel had a firm together. So, it must have really hit home when he lost Miguel?"

"Well, they were architects – you knew that. They were studying it when we were in college together. They had their own firm, and were doing great things. I think they were working on a big design at the time. I'm not even sure if Sammie finished that job. He would have had to take on the work himself… So, lots of kids. What connections remained between Italy and Puerto Rico ?"

"Well, Italian was still spoken in the home by my grandparents, or, at least around the time of the first of the seventeen children. Naples has a distinct dialect, and most Italians around that time could speak their dialect, plus standard Italian. Standard was the *lingua franca*, allowing different Italian immigrants in Puerto Rico to find common ground in their New World experience, and share advice and mutual support. So, that was an important factor. Many had families back in Italy – a common theme. They might send money back to Europe – times were tough in Southern Italy . Also, these Italians with their common language formed 'Social Clubs', where men got together and provided every resource possible for those fresh off the boats from the Old Country. Some people believe to this day that these were Mafia fronts, but I'm not really sure. My grandfather never denied it, but never really said it was true either… Did Sammie bring back any big game fish when he returned to the docks?"

"Hey we should cross the street again. The guy on the other side of street has the best *churros* in the *Barrio*. You've had a *churro* before, yes. Ok." They traversed the street, and ordered up two of the sweet confections. Galileo agreed that they were the best he ever had, but then again, he had little experience with Mexican snacks. As they walked away from the street vendor, they grabbed a flyer being handed out by a newly exploited arrival in the *Barrio*. The tiny square card promoted the little market diagonally across the street. They crossed once again, and the resident showed the professor all of the Puerto Rican spices and kitchen necessities available, and Galileo picked up some to stock his home in New England .

"They checked the tackle when Sammie got back to the harbor? Right?"

"Yes, of course. That was the source of the accident."

"They were working and designing really closely at that time? They were putting a building up in Dubai , right. Must have been a big one for their little firm?"

"Well, it's like we all heard. They had hooked a big marlin. Miguel was supposed to be strapped into the fighting chair. He went overboard with all of the heavy equipment when the lock came undone. Got pulled straight down, and drowned. I'm telling you, it was a really freak accident. Sammie couldn't have been more broken up, and shaken. He got back to the docks and reported the accident right away. He gave away their catch, and headed away to a bar, dejected, defeated, inconsolable, and stuck with the responsibility of talking to Miguel's family. Sammie picked up their work where they had left off. He was in Dubai for over a year. That one led him to the Hong Kong gig, if I remember correctly… So, let's go

back. Tell me more about the broader experience for Italian immigrants of your great grandfather's generation." The two walked and talked on the sticky afternoon over to the northeastern corner of Central Park , where children on summer break put out their lines for small ones at the *Harlem Meer*, the little lake that rounds the corner of 110th and Fifth Avenue.

Tomas Martin was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and raised in the New York City area. He attended Holy Cross College, and did his graduate work at Princeton, Yale, and the University of Paris. Martin has held teaching positions in French at Yale and Columbia Universities as well as in programs of the Rassias Foundation at Dartmouth College. His work has appeared in the *Broadkill Review* and *Creative with Words*. Martin's current project is a novel tentatively entitled "A Parisian Fairytale," and tells the story of a young Puerto Rican's desperate search for his family's past in the slums of Paris. He currently resides in Harlem, New York, with his wife Paula.