

The Fig Trees of Bensonhurst

by Thomas Maschio

I hesitated before walking through the alleyway that led to my old backyard. I could see that my mother and father's old fig tree was still there in the yard. It was late summer and there had just been a light rain. This would have been prime fig picking time back in the old days. I remembered that after a little rain in late summer we could sometimes pick more than a dozen sweet black figs from our tree. The fruit that was close to ripening would swell from the rain water, signaling to us that it was ready to be taken. But, I saw that the current owners of the house weren't interested in the figs. The base of the tree and the garden patch under the outer branches were strewn with rotting fruit, a lot of it half eaten by birds and squirrels. We used to put a plastic mesh net over the tree to protect the figs from these marauders. I felt badly that the tree really wasn't being looked after, or even picked once in a while. Seeing the tree brought back many memories of my family and of my old neighbors.

Uncle Johnny, who lived next door (we called him uncle as a sign of respect though he wasn't a relative) once told me that the tree had come from a cutting from Sicily. Lots of people on our block claimed to have gotten their fig tree cuttings from relatives in Italy, somehow managing to get them through customs when returning from visits there. As a kid I knew that the trees were a tie to the Old Country. Later I came to see that they also symbolized the sense of abundance and prosperity that these Italian-Americans associated with America. Many people of my parent's generation had managed to scrimp and save enough money to buy their own houses and to have backyards of their own where they tended vegetable gardens and fruit trees. They had become property owners, just like the padroni back in Italy that their parents used to have to work for and basically genuflect to when they walked by.

My grandfather even told my father that back in the old country when the padrone belched in his presence, he had to say something to the effect of "God bless you padrone". They didn't have to do stuff like that in the States. And they had their own fig trees. Somehow those two facts were related.

I remembered that some of the neighbors had different sorts of trees from ours. Jack, who lived a few houses up the block, had three trees: one gave white figs, another green, and then he had a tree that gave black figs that were shaped differently from the ones on our tree. Jack kept a discerning, almost proprietorial eye out for all the block's fig trees. It was almost like they were all part of his grove. He'd make the rounds to neighbors' houses, going straight into their backyards and looking over their trees. He'd tell people what sort they were and how best to care for them. If someone had gotten too old to care for a tree or if a neighbor was away traveling at summer's end he'd come to his backyard and throw a net over the tree to keep the birds and squirrels away and of course he'd pick the trees.

Jack would also bring some of his figs for us to taste, and then we'd be expected to give him some of ours. Lots of people on the block would drop by once in a while with a small plate of figs. They'd stay and talk with my mother for a bit about the news on the block and what was happening in everybody's families. My dad would put the coffee pot on and bring out some cake for them to have as they talked. Sometimes my mom would speak to them in Neapolitan dialect, a sing-songy form of Italian with seemingly no verb conjugations and a pronunciation style very different from the formal Italian I learned when I lived in Italy after college. I didn't really notice it at the time but now years later in my memory, it sounds archaic and beautiful. And I very much miss my mother's Neapolitan hand gestures. I never really learned that language either, a hand language used to punctuate dramatically the points of her speech. The figs were a catalyst for the spirit of neighborliness.

When my mother died and my father got too old and sick to tend to the garden and the fig tree, Dolly or Rose, two other neighbors, would drop by to help. Jack would also come over to put the mesh net over the tree. Sometimes the birds would tear the net and Jack would mend the torn section. Once I was visiting when Jack was doing that. I remember my dad looking out the backyard window, surveying the scene. I remember him sighing and saying to himself, but out loud, "Oh geez, I can't do stuff like that anymore, everything's just gonna go to pot from here on in."

During the last year of his life I moved back in with Dad to keep on top of the household chores. I'd go shopping, shovel the snow off the sidewalks and shovel out the alleyway. That last summer I planted tomatoes, basil and some eggplant in the garden, and I tried to keep on top of the weeding and the fig tree situation. It struck me, living there, that I didn't see many of the old neighbors anymore. Many had died or moved in with their kids out on the Island or in New Jersey. Jack came by once or twice that summer to exchange figs, Dolly helped me with weeding the garden if she thought I was dropping the ball a little bit with regard to my weeding duties. Everything seemed so quiet in the house; no more boisterous conversations in Neapolitan, no more neighborhood gossip fueled by coffee, cake and plates of figs. By the time my father died all that seemed like it belonged to another time and a different place.

When my father died there were a lot of feelings about what to do with the house. In the end we decided to sell it. My brother told me that he wanted to uproot the fig tree and take it to his place in Long Island. But he never got around to doing that. I think we were all too saddened by dad's death, and too exhausted from working out the details of inheritance to take on such a big task. So, we left the tree; we didn't even take a root cutting. For years after at every family gathering we'd talk about the old house and the old neighborhood. Inevitably someone would bring up the subject of the old fig tree and then my brother would recount how he had once planned to take the tree to his place out on the Island.

After my surreptitious visit to the back yard that day I decided to take a drive around the old neighborhood. I especially wanted to see if there were any fig trees left. I saw one in the front yard of a house on 21st Avenue, past 65th street. I remembered that had been there for years and years. And I remembered that the owner would always rap the tree up in canvas in the winter. My father did that to our tree just a couple of times. But he thought it hurt the tree, or at any rate wasn't worth the trouble. But one year the tree almost died. That was the year New York had all those ice storms. After that winter it took a year for the tree to come back and start sending out branches again. I was really happy that it did.

Anyway, I didn't see any more trees. Most would have been in people's backyards so I really don't know why I was looking in people's front yards, but I was. I drove back to my old block and stopped the car by Jack's alleyway. I could see that his fig trees were still in his yard. He had also built some trellises for his grape vines, and I could see that the vines were heavy with fruit. I'll bet he's going to make home made wine, I said to myself, something my own family used to do at a little cottage they had out on Long Island. I wondered if Jack had managed to find some new fig trading partners with whom to share his fruit and to exchange news about the neighborhood. I hoped very much that he had.