

Long-Lost

*Becoming the archeologist
of your own family*

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I'm flipping through a thirty-year-old community cookbook by the Saint Ann Society of St. Michael's Church in New Haven, Connecticut when a recipe for struffoli, the Italian pastry, catches my eye. Crispy on the outside and cakey on the inside, these marble sized balls of dough are first deeply fried in vegetable oil, then drenched in warm honey laced with tangerine peels. Every year at Christmas time, they are served piled high in a mountain of sticky goodness. And for me, struffoli are inextricably tied to my great Aunt Chris.

I tasted her struffoli just once, when I was very young. I sit on a green and gold velvet couch in the living room of another great aunt, from another side of my family. I place the struffoli in my mouth in bunches. They are sweet and syrupy. I know, because my father told me, that my Aunt Chris made them, and that they are special.

Born in New Haven to Italian immigrants, Christine Angelina Zito was one of seven children, growing up in her family's little house in the then-Italian neighborhood of New Haven known as Fair Haven Heights. Her sister Antoinette was my grandmother; she died in 1972, nine months before I was born.

Chris was the only unmarried daughter in the family and lived at home with her parents. She inherited their house after they died. Like many other uneducated working class Italian-Americans in New Haven at that time, she worked in factories: Gant Shirtmakers and later Calabro Cheese. One of rows and rows of women lined up at machines, a community of workers.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Aunt Chris took a city bus to my grandparents' house once a week and she and my grandmother would spend the day together, shopping and doing errands downtown. My uncle Joey remembers Aunt Chris always laughing and making jokes. He would lie awake in his room, evading his nap while

his mother and Aunt Chris were out, because he knew his aunt was sure to bring him home a candy bar after their day out. Aunt Chris and my grandmother also cooked together. Uncle Joey watched them spreading a sheet over the dining room table, upon which they would roll out the long rows of dough for struffoli. She also made struffoli in the house on Farren Avenue with my great grandmother, Maddalena. Like my father, my Uncle Joey loved my Aunt Chris' struffoli. He recalled: "It was Christmas Eve, 1962, your dad and I were coming home from Grandma and Grandpa's and Aunt Chris' house. We were in Gramps's new 1963 Caddy on Chapel Street. I was holding a sacred bowl of struffoli! The light turned red and the road was icy... we rear-ended a car and there was struffolis stuck all over the dashboard and windshield!"

By the time I was born in 1973, Aunt Chris's existence was very different. Her mother Maddalena died in 1965, her father Vincenzo and then her beloved sister Annette in April 1972. New Haven also changed drastically during those years. The devastating urban renewal led by Mayor Richard Lee in the 1960s resulted in the demolition of old neighborhoods, the insertion of miles of highway across residential communities, and the displacement of more than 22,000 people, many of whom relocated to the suburbs surrounding the city. Manufacturing plants left. And *downtown* was no longer the golden destination it used to be. The small neighborhood of Fair Haven Heights that Aunt Chris, along with many others, called home, changed entirely, along with the rest of the city. Old family businesses closed. Young people moved away. People started driving more cars and stopped taking city buses.

I recall Aunt Chris coming to our house in the country outside New Haven only once when I was very little. She sat at our dining room table, her back to the china cabinet, facing the entrance to the kitchen where I stood. She was heavy and hearty, and she laughed. She called me "honey" in her low, caramel voice. I admired her red nail polish.

My mother tells me this didn't happen. That Aunt Chris was too

nervous to leave New Haven I wonder if it matters what the truth is. She either came to our house once, or she never came at all. Either way, she wasn't really a part of our lives. And, for whatever reason, that side of my father's family was fractured, with no matriarch, and no web of cousins. No big holiday gatherings. For me, the heart of my family was my grandfather's side of the family. Aunt Chris was on the periphery of my life.

Aunt Chris would regularly talk to my father "long distance." I'd eavesdrop from the hallway outside the kitchen while he stood by the mustard-yellow wall phone, laughing with her through the long curly cord as she told fresh but harmless jokes. My father always told me about her struffoli, long after she stopped making them. For me, they were a golden food made during a golden era that preceded me.

At some point, Aunt Chris fell on a city bus and injured her leg so badly that she could no longer work. She accepted a paltry settlement from the city and lived in poverty the rest of her life. Asking for more than what she was offered was unthinkable to her.

When I was in elementary and high school, we occasionally visited her duplex house in New Haven. She lived upstairs and her sister Arlene and niece lived downstairs as tenants. She didn't charge them enough rent to get by. Aunt Chris never invited us upstairs to her floor and she wouldn't let us up when we tried. She always came downstairs to her sister's. She sat and visited and drank a small glass of Foxon Park strawberry soda. She was friendly, but somewhat ill at ease. She was stiff when I hugged her goodbye. She was, as my mother says, "odd."

Aunt Chris sent me Hallmark cards on holidays, her pen underlining certain words in the card she felt were important, signing with old-fashioned careful cursive. No matter how little she had, she included a small check on my birthday and once sent me a rosary and a small plastic bottle of holy water from Lourdes.

After her sister, my Aunt Arlene, died, she was alone in the house with her niece downstairs, and my cousin was inexplicably angry with her for the rent she charged, measly as it was. Her younger

brother Gaetano (“Guy”) kept an eye on her, but Aunt Chris was increasingly isolated.

When I was just out of college, living in New York City, auditioning for plays and flinging myself at my new life, I would sometimes call Aunt Chris to chat. She urged me to get onto one of the soap operas she watched on Channel 8 every afternoon. She demurred when I suggested that I come and visit her.

After my parents’ divorce while I was in college, my father slowly annulled his relationship with me, and with that annulment, eroded the part of my history that was fabricated from his stories. In 2001, he briefly emerged to let me know that Uncle Guy had found Aunt Chris days after she had fallen onto the floor in her apartment. The roof of her house was in such disrepair that the ceiling inside her kitchen was crumbling. I took the train and went to visit her in the convalescent home. Her hair was gray and she looked very tired. She smiled at me while I chattered, but didn’t say much. I talked about the old stories my father used to tell, about her trips downtown and her struffoli. I rolled her compression stockings up her legs for her, and put an ornament I had brought of a tiny red cardinal on the mirror facing her. I propped up an 8 x 10 photo of my father as a little boy where she could see him and then I hugged and kissed her goodbye. She didn’t embrace me back.

Soon after, I called the floor nurse to see how she was, and she told me Aunt Chris had died the week before. My father had not called to tell me. I cried angry tears for her, and for me, in my Little Italy apartment, heartbroken that I had not said goodbye, and not paid my respects.

I’ve engaged in a kind of archeology lately, trying to piece together memories and stories about Aunt Chris’s life. I left an unanswered voicemail for someone with the same last name, whose number I found in the phonebook. I spoke to the Greater New Haven Labor History Association and W.E.B. Du Bois Library at UMass to find records of Aunt Chris’s time at Gant, unsuccessfully. When I called Calabro to see if they had any records of Aunt Chris’ employ-

ment, the person I spoke to laughed at the idea. I searched for her obituary, but there wasn't one. I went to New Haven City Hall and paid \$20 for a copy of her death certificate and saw that she had died finally of colon cancer, and that she was buried through Mar-tesca's, a funeral home both sides of my Italian family have used for more than fifty years. I called its third-generation owner Neil, who told me Aunt Chris had a small service at St. Rose's Church, in the Fair Haven neighborhood, and was buried in a family plot. He gave me the location of her grave on St. Theresa Avenue at St. Lawrence Cemetery in New Haven. When I visited, her resting place was near her parents, her grave unmarked.

I haven't been able to find people who can tell me about her. My father is gone, now totally estranged from his former life and family, with a new wife and small children, none of whom will visit the house on Farren Avenue, know my Aunt Chris, nor, I suspect, hear stories about her struffoli. I've lost then any photos of her my father might have, as well as his stories, now locked away forever

I have only two photos of Aunt Chris, both with her family. In a box buried somewhere in my basement, I have some Hallmark cards with her handwriting. And somehow, I have her struffoli. My memory of her struffoli is formed by an alchemy that combines my memories, my father's memories, my uncle's fifty-year-old stories, my imagination and my research.

Struffoli originated in the Naples region of Italy in the 17th century. Nuns made them each year at Christmas as an expression of gratitude for the patrons who supported them. Each December, the hands of these women reached out through the bars of their convent to the open hands outside to offer their gift, created in the warmth, seclusion, and camaraderie of their kitchens.

I made struffoli myself for the first time last year. I rolled the dough over my kitchen table into long ropes, cutting it into tiny slices, then rolled the dough into small balls. I discovered that it is a time-consuming task to undertake alone and asked a friend to help me. We made the struffoli, talking and laughing, and I could see that

it is meant to be made with others. I imagined when Aunt Chris did the same with her mother and her sister. And then after they died, alone in her second floor apartment, and, eventually, not at all.

I place a handful of the struffoli in my mouth and feel a communion with Aunt Chris, a woman I didn't really know, a woman who died very much alone and is—almost—forgotten.

