

Steady Daylight

By Joseph Bathanti

Today in Heaven,
my father turned 105.
Finally working steady daylight
he's got it knocked:
8 to 4,
double-time-and-a-half –
no asbestos,
no shoveling slag
on the open hearth;
no depending from a boom crane,
6 degrees, in sleet;
no boss –
13 weeks vacation annually
Kingdom Come.
The Union up here takes zero shit.

Home well before dark,
traffic mellow, blue sky,
nothing but green signals;
plenty of time, once home –
perfect parking spot
right in front of the house –
to sit a minute, smoke a Camel,
sip an Iron City pony
beneath the olive and lemon trees
he planted when he first arrived –
368 days after my mother
(to celebrate their 59th anniversary).
They grow well in Heaven –
mild weather year-round,
like Puglia,
save for snow on Holy Days & Feasts.
He shaves and showers in the cellar.
My mother has his clothes for the party
laid out on their bed:
khakis, short-sleeved
summer white shirt.

The party's at Aunt Lu's,
everybody there – at each stage
of their lives, concurrently.
Another time,

this would have struck them as outlandish.

Not now.

They were poor; they suffered.

Now they're happy.

Money's not an issue.

No one gets sick.

No one gets hurt.

The neighborhood's safe.

Everyone gets along. At all times,
they act reasonably.

Light surrounds them.

It's that kind of place.

Angels from the ether
bear platters of ravioli
from Groceria Italiano
in Bloomfield; sausage
from Joe Grasso on Larimer Avenue;
lemon ice from Moio's;
sfogliatelles from Barsotti;
Parmesan, aged for eternity;
scungilli from Umberto's Clam House
that Uncle Ralph scored from a Detroit crony;
wine from the wedding feast at Canaan.
My mother made the artichokes
and baked my dad's favorite –
egg custard pie,
every single candle: 105.

Joe looks good," says my mother.
Says my dad, "Gimme a kiss, Rose."
With no hesitation, she dips in –
long brown hair,
brown eyes, red lipstick,
sassy 40s dress,
halo hovering like lilac.
My dad's taken to rope sandals
and straw fedora.
They're movie stars.
She sits on his lap.
He looks at his watch.
"Tomorrow's another working day," he says, and winks.

They form a Conga line
and weave the rooms and halls,
up through the bedrooms,

into the attic, singing:
“Grandma’s Lye Soap.”
Aunt Margaret deals Blackjack
at the big dining room table.
All the food is still out,
but they decide to cook again:
peppers and eggs, hot sausage.
Black Velvet, the blonde
in the black velvet dress
and pearls on its label,
turns itself in trickles
upside down
into shot glasses.
Chubby Checker on the turntable,
the kids doing The Twist.

Uncle Pippi starts with the Italian songs.
Papa twirls Aunt Theresa
in a *Tarantella*
and, suddenly winter, it begins to snow.
Here they are, saying goodbye:
time to go home,
kissing, bundling babies,
shackling chains to cars
My father helps his mother,
Maria Cristina Bochicchio,
down the steep stone stairs
to Lemington Avenue.
He’s not seen her since he was 5 –
a hundred years (*cento anni*).
On his right arm,
his hammer arm,
is tattooed an American eagle,
arrows in its beak,
above which unfurls *Mother*.
He must’ve gotten it in the Army.
How could I have never asked?
Angelo stands to his knees in snow,
and plays his lost violin.