Santa Lucia Chapter:
Lucy, our home girl

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In 2004, the 1700$^{\text{th}}$ anniversary of Santa Lucia's martyrdom, an Italian naval cruiser brought her home to Siracusa. Hundreds of us lined the railing along the *Lungomare*, the street that circles Ortigia like a ribbon, as if offering it as a gift to the sea. On this side of the island, overlooking the harbor, the *Lungomare* runs high along a part that once was a rocky slope falling steeply into the harbor. We looked down on a flat esplanade, a strip of land that the Spanish Bourbons reclaimed from the harbor centuries ago to make a marina: now it is a mooring place for expensive yachts and a place for *passeggiata*, the early evening parade of people dressed to meet friends and enjoy the passing of the midday heat.

We looked left to where the harbor entered the sea as a sleek grey ship rounded the point of Castello Maniace. It was the Italian Navy carrying Lucia's bones (all but one) down from Venice. A city as richly textured historically as this abounds in irony: Maniace Castle was named for Byzantine General Maniakes, precisely the guy who had carried Lucia's bones away in a naval vessel ten centuries ago. Now another naval vessel was bringing her home. A great many uniforms have elbowed themselves into the story of a girl, one who herself was headstrong and not afraid of a fight.

I have written "Lucia's bones (all but one)" because at some point in her history of being jerked around, her arm—rather just the ulna of her left forearm—became detached from the rest of her body. Her ulna has rested in a reliquary of honor in the Cathedral here in Siracusa for as long as anyone knows.

On the day Lucia visited us, her ship pulled in alongside the quay, deck guns sheathed under canvas codpieces. The gangway creaked down and a naval honor guard in blue lined up; ashore stood a file of sailors in starched white, like a row of freshly painted mooring posts. We looked down on a speaker's platform where a dozen or more men in suits sat with flabby

importance, as grey and blue as the ship and harbor beyond. Among them, however, flashed a dab of scarlet, like a playful stroke in a Manet seascape: the Archbishop was in attendance. As it was an official event, even more as it was an event of historic importance, the air buzzed with focused indecision. We thousands of ogling peasants, of course, were expected to wait with patient servility as important officials leaned heads together and lackeys flitted back and forth, until the event was running late enough to satisfy the gods of solemnity. So we stood and leaned and waited, until finally an electric current jolted the figures to life. As if receiving some divine cue, the blue honor guard snapped to attention, the white mooring posts saluted; the whistle piped; and six pall bearers carried a gleaming polished wooden casket down the gangway and ashore. The archbishop, his red cassock aflame in that sea of muted colors, approached our patron saint and waved her off, which seemed unexpected inhospitable. Rather, he must have been sprinkling holy water; we couldn't be sure from where we stood. One thing that was sure: after 1700 years, Lucy was home.

She of course has a story. In the AD 280s, the parents of a young girl from a prominent family arranged with the parents of a young lad from another prominent family to marry their kids for the greater good of both families: a perfectly common event. The new and unpredictable factor, however, was Christianity. Two-and-a-half centuries after the crucifixion, there were underground cells of Christians in all the major cities of the Roman Empire. Syracuse was among the first, for, as we know from Acts 28:12, after St. Paul was shipwrecked in Malta in about 60 CE, he stopped for three days in Syracuse. Reportedly, he found Christians here, in the central Mediterranean, a thousand miles from Jerusalem, only twenty-seven years after the Crucifixion. Bold letters high in the nave of the Siracusa's Cathedral claim for the city the oldest Christian congregation outside the holy lands. Not to be outdone, Catania claims that St. Peter had stopped by there even earlier, and also consecrated a Church. Legends sometimes serve our more ignoble impulses.

Two centuries after Paul's passing, however, the climate was no more friendly to Chris-

tianity. Lucia lived when the Roman administrators under Emperor Diocletian actively were persecuting Christians. The Romans were marvelously open to religious freedom of worship, by the standards of ancient times, but they demanded that everyone, whatever they do privately, in public pay at least lip service to the official religion: the posthumous divinity of the Emperor. The only people previously unwilling to do so were the monotheists, the Jews. But with Jerusalem effectively erased by Hadrian and the Jews flung out into their Diaspora, they too had learned to be quiet about their worship. However, the members of that breakaway Jewish sect called Christians would not be quiet. Not that all of them stood on street corners proclaiming the One God, but some did, and, occasionally, large numbers of them publicly refused to take the compromise the state was offering: a "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

Lucy grew up in Roman Syracuse, her parents not connected at all to the underground Christian community. Her father died when she was young and her mother, Eutychia, suffered continually from dysentery. Lucy heard tales of miraculous healing by Agatha of Catania (even after Agatha's misogynist martyrdom) and decided to take her mother to pray at Saint Agatha's tomb. The two women prayed into the night, finally falling asleep. Saint Agatha appeared in a dream to Lucy and said, "Soon you shall be the glory of Syracuse, as I am of Catania." When they awoke, Lucy's mother was cured, and grateful Lucy became a Christian (though, oddly, not her cured mother).

Well, as we have seen, her parents had chosen a husband for their daughter; yet now Lucy refused any idea of marriage, except the mystic marriage to Christ. In effect, she wanted to become a nun avant le lettre, before there were such things. Eutychia was remarkably accommodating (and perhaps grateful that they were spared paying out the large dowry), suggesting that the dowry be held as a behest for the poor after Lucy's death. Lucy, an idealistic teenager, refused: "Whatever you give away at death for the Lord's sake you give because you cannot take it with you. Give now to the true Savior, while you are healthy, whatever you intended to give away at your death." She announced publicly that she was

to marry a divine bridegroom not a mortal one and began handing out the dowry to the poor. Her mortal fiancée was not amused: not only had he been dumped by his beautiful bride for a guy more heavenly, but he was out the dowry as well. So, the betrayed betrothed denounced Lucia to the authorities as a Christian.

Denouncing people to the authorities is a classic Sicilian method of getting even. Everyone in Sicily has some concealed illegality, which neighbors are eager to find out about so they have something on you, for how could you trust someone unless you had some blackmail material on them in reserve? (I know this from hard experience, losing at least one or more dowry's worth of money from denunciations.) Lucia saved them the trouble of an investigation by rashly proclaiming her illegality in public. The Roman authorities first tried to haul her off to a brothel (to shame and humiliate her), but teams of oxen could not budge her, so firm her virtue. Then they tried to burn her at the stake, but she was impervious to the flames. Only after attempts to kill her failed was a trial held (which shows how rough was justice out in the provinces). The Roman magistrate convicted Lucia of blasphemy, and only now does the story allow her to die. A narrative to justify sainthood requires that certain important characteristics of the life of Christ be imitated by the prospective saint, including extreme piety, virginity, miracles, official condemnation, and a proper Passion. Now that she had been condemned officially, her martyrdom could be completed. They stabbed her in the neck (and/or beheaded her).

There is no mention in the early accounts of her eyes being plucked out, but in almost all images of Lucia, she carriers her eyes on a platter. The story that her martyrdom included losing her eyes (thereby gaining a role as the patron saint for the blind) seems to have entered her legend in the early Middle Ages, nearly a millennium after her death. This may have something to do with the fact that the name "Lucia" derives from the Latin word for light (*lux*, e.g. "lucid"). Hence also her popularity in Scandinavian nations with long winters. Not coincidentally, Saint Lucy's Day falls on the winter solstice on the old Julian calendar. The many winter solstice-related festivals—Lesser Dionysia, Roman Saturnalia, the birth of

Mithra, Christmas, New Year, St. Lucy's Day, et. al.—show how very central the return of the sun has been to the agricultural peoples of mid-latitudes Christendom.

> 'Tis the year's midnight, and it is the day's, Lucy's, who scarce seven hours herself unmasks; The sun is spent, and now his flasks Send forth light squibs, no constant rays; The world's whole sap is sunk; The general balm th' hydroptic earth hath drunk, Whither, as to the bed's feet, life is shrunk, Dead and interr'd...
>
> (from "A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day" by John Donne)

Despite Donne's self-indulgent depressive fear that the sun will decide to abandon us to retire permanently in the sunny south, in fact winter solstice festivals like Santa Lucia's celebrate the sun's turn northward again, a joyful celebration of light.

Ironically (there's that busy little ferret called irony popping up again), in being killed in 304 CE, Lucy suffered from bad timing. Only six years later Constantine came to power, which led to the Edict of Milan in 313 CE, and official tolerance of Christianity across the Roman Empire. But from another point of view, she got in just under the wire, else she had died in obscurity. If eternal fame is what you want, then, as they say of Buddy Holly, dying is a good career move.

How then did her bones get to Venice? The common story is that the Byzantine General George Maniakes (he whose name was attached to the castle at the mouth of the harbor) rescued her bones from Arab Syracuse in 1038 CE and carried them to Constantinople. This is the tourist guidebook orthodoxy, an orthodoxy possibly based on stealing misinformation from other guidebooks. The Catholic Encyclopedia claims that it was the Syracusan Bishop Stephen II, who in 768 carried to Constantinople the relics of St. Lucy, before, not during, the Arab takeover. I have no stake in either story, and so happily tell both. Then came the Fourth Crusade (1204 CE) and one of the worst massacres in history: Western Crusader Christians (Catholic) slaughtered Eastern Christians (Orthodox) in Constantinople. The

Crusaders brought Santa Lucia's remains, with all the other loot they could carry, back to Venice. She had her own church until it was demolished in 1861 to build the train station at which you likely arrived when visiting Venice. Homeless, she had to shack up with St. Jeremy in the nearby Chiesa di San Geremia.

The Jeremy in question might be the one who, with three other Egyptian Christians, attempted to relieve the suffering of Roman Christian slaves who were being worked to death in a mine. Roman officials nabbed the four and had them killed as dangerous subversives. San Geremia might be that Jeremy, though there is also some suggestion that the church is dedicated to some other Jeremy even more fictitious. Lucia seems to me to deserve more substantial company; she is after all one of the world's major saints. Jeremy also has not proven a very reliable host, for on 7 November 1981, thieves stole her bones, leaving behind her head. Police recovered them five weeks later, exactly on her feast day, a sign that Lucy was quite able to take care of herself. For a Syracusan it is some comfort that, in Geremia's church, she is the main attraction. (In fact, the San Geremia church website is only about her; oddly, Jeremy doesn't even get a mention.) Lucia may be visited there during normal opening hours, except for one week every 1700 years.

And, how did her ulna get separated in all the confusion? I haven't any idea. There are even unsubstantiated claims that other parts of her corpse have wandered off over the ages to Rome, Naples, Verona, Milan, and even Portugal, Germany, and France. I don't know anything about these claims either. When a tour guide doesn't know, or his clean simple story is in danger of getting complicated by inconvenient details, he blows smoke or pretends the information doesn't matter and presses on. So, let me press on and return to the story of her 2004 visit.

For the next week she lay in state in uptown Siracusa, in the Norman period Chiesa di Santa Lucia Fuori il Muro (Church of Santa Lucia outside the walls), a Norman-period church once in the countryside, now swallowed up by a residential district. as multitudes

of us passed, day and night, to gawk reverently at our dead princess. As navies have more important things to do with their cruisers, even the Italian Navy, the ship didn't wait to carry her back to Venice, but sailed off. For the moment she seemed just another tourist abandoned in some forlorn village by some bus that wouldn't wait.

No matter, we didn't want her to leave. An hour or so before midnight, we stood, an enormous and patient crowd. A friend had made me an honorary member of the local Siracusa Ladies Historical Society to take advantage of a special Lucy viewing appointment, a ticket in high demand. There we were an hour or so before midnight near the end of a thick queue of overcoated folks, dark lumps shuffling and stamping in the damp air. The queue ran past the crumbling concrete arch of the old Fascist football stadium, a decaying cement statue of some anonymous muscular Zarathustra out front. It continued down the narrow street ahead and around the corner into the Piazza di Santa Lucia and into the church. We crept along with reverent pace and within the hour we were passing by the open casket. There she lay, and I could have reached over and touched her hand. Her head caught me by surprise: it was a likeness in pure silver (I suppose a likeness, but how would they know?). In 1955, Angelo Roncalli, future Pope John XXIII and then Patriarch of Venice, had a silver mask put on Santa Lucia's exposed face, ostensibly to protect it from dust, but I imagine that her mummified skull would have been gruesome, distracting from due reverence. The mask gives the impression now that Lucia had begun to rigor-mortise into silver, that literally she was becoming an icon. Her hands and feet protruding from her robe remained dark and leathery, bony and taut, dead things.

But it was really she, certainly, and that is itself something remarkable. Unlike other historical objects or places confidentially affirmed by tour guides who will turn slight possibilities into absolute certainties because their tourist clients want to believe they are getting the real thing; this desiccated body actually is/was Santa Lucia. Her friends and followers—and her mother—certainly knew her gravesite. Within a decade after her death, Christianity was permitted, and quickly became all the rage. The cult of Santa Lucia began in earnest

even while all her original friends and followers were still putting flowers on her grave. So the thread of identity (as historians say) has not been broken.

Perhaps the skin stretched dark across the thin bones of her hands and feet meant that she had dark olive skin, but of course all mummies become dark. Her hands and feet are all of her that we could see. But the qualities of the girl that matter were visible in the crowd of thousands who came to see her, audible in the fireworks and shouting during the great festivals in her name, evident in the nervous excitement of Scandinavian girls with candles in their hair. And this is the point. Lucia is loved, loved for the psychological solace that the unjust sufferings of Christ and the saints gives to us, their sharing of our own unjust suffering. In contrast, the winter solstice ritual behind her festival day, Lucia's exemplification of hope in midwinter, seems less relevant today, when we know that spring will come again and we are well and comfortably insulated from winter's deprivations. But I don't live in Norway. In Siracusa, Lucia is loved also for her generosity to the poor, for Sicily has been poor almost without relief from her day to ours and Sicilians themselves nonetheless are (or like to think of themselves as) a generous and empathetic people.

Generous enough to give her up again, for the Italian authorities had not abandoned her at all, of course. At the end of her weeklong visit, she rode back to Venice by helicopter and airplane, leaving behind her lonely arm, separated perhaps for another 1700 years. I have wondered why, over the eight hundred years since the Fourth Crusade, Syracuse hasn't attacked Venice to take our Patrona back home. Perhaps it is because Venice was always a regional superpower and we'd have been whipped, or perhaps because this is Sicily and we are too comfortable in the easy, responsibility-free attitude of impotent resignation. Perhaps we assume that all we deserve is her ulna, in the Siracusa Cathedral, in the glass case on the second chapel on the right.

She remains no less our Lucy, our beloved, the local girl sanctified, our patron saint, our *Patrona*: not just some third-century victim of Roman justice, but our personal goddess.

She lives here, even if her body is elsewhere. In 1582, the people of Syracuse were in the midst of a famine and they gathered in the cathedral on Santa Lucia Day to pray for help. A ship loaded with wheat sailed into the harbor even as they prayed. The starving people cooked the wheat immediately, instead of waiting for bread to leaven and bake, and thus we have the *cuccidata*, or cooked wheat porridge, of festival meals. (To be entirely fair, we cannot claim all of her attention. The Swedes also were starving one midwinter, when across Lake Vannern came a boat full of grain steered by a beautiful woman dressed in white, Santa Lucia, her head in a halo of light. For this do we have Scandinavian girls with halos of candles.)

Christ gets third billing in Christian Siracusa. His mother, who trumps him everywhere in Italy, here only comes in a solid second place. In Siracusa, the *Festa dell'Immacolata* in honor of the Madonna, on December 8, is but warm-up for enormous and lengthy *Festa di Santa Lucia*. Awarding first place in the heart to the patron saint is an example of *campanilismo*, an Italian's extremely localized loyalty, trusting only those within the range of the bell tower, only their family and well-known neighbors. So, the Vatican, the Pope, are very all very well, but the woman in the street is most loyal to her own local patron saint, her *Patrona*, and that saint's day is the most important day of the year. Every 13 December, Lucy's ulna goes on parade on the *Festa della Santa Lucia*, and that is enough for Siracusa to make it a day to be proud of.

Midwinter—on the few days it is not raining—can be a time of very pleasantly mild weather. So it was at my first *Festa di Santa Lucia*, December 13, 1999. I joined mid morning mass. There is always a special mass at the Cathedral on that day—only Christmas and Easter receive the same honor—and invited dignitaries give the sermon only on Saint Lucy's Day. This time it was an Archbishop from Columbia, who had to read phonetically his Italian sermon and did so a great length, flipping through a few too many sheets, until the throng squeezing through the doors grew restless. His voice gave way to that "Santa Lucia" tune, which had been running through my head all week, the one we all know. I have

to admit that the song in fact is Neapolitan, from boatmen of the picturesque waterfront district, Borgo Santa Lucia, Naples, trying to entice listeners to take a boat ride in the cool of the evening.

Siracusa's enormous silver statue of Lucy towered behind the visiting Archbishop, gleaming down from the altar, looking over his shoulder. It is a priceless statue from the sixteenth century: larger than life-sized, cast in solid Spanish silver (possibly from Peru), breasted with emeralds and diamonds, shining brilliant from crown to hem. She stands on a large platform that imitates a Roman sarcophagus with scenes from her martyrdom on the sides. She stands atop it like the risen Christ standing on the empty tomb. Lucy immortalized, dipped in silver. Oddly, on Lucy's real body, only her head is silver, as if she had been dunked head-first into immortality. On this statue in contrast her face is the only part not silver; it is rather a generic ceramic face, painted in flesh colors. A glittering dagger stabs into her neck, deep enough to support itself vertically. Small jewels of blood trickle down her neck.

On my first Lucy Day, by mid-afternoon, the Piazza del Duomo was a sea of Siracusans; if you were not already in the piazza by then, you might as well watch it on the late news, or go down the parade route to camp along Corso Mateotti, or go down by the bridge for a vantage point of the procession and the fireworks over the bay. But if you do that, bring a chair and good book, as Lucy won't reach the bridge for three to four hours. In the Piazza Duomo, a vast swell of coats and hats, browns and blacks, and the odd splash of pink or blue, brimmed and overflowed into the side streets. The crowd moved in slow eddies as people looked for friends ,and children got lost. Above them floated large bunches of balloons under a brilliant blue sky. Band music came from somewhere. A lone inflated dolphin leapt out of the sea of people, rose hesitantly, then caught a breeze, slipped past the angels on the Cathedral pediment reaching for it, and soared into the heavens. Four-foot tall fluted candles, yellow and white, the papal colors, poked above the crowd, random scatterings of stalks rising from black clusters of older women, bundled within their shawls, like enduring clumps of darkest

night.

In front of the steps, strangely, men seemed to sit on the heads of the crowd, as if seated in an undulating mosaic field. They were dressed in comic operetta-ish eighteenth-century frock coats in Christmassy red and green, the *Patrona*'s colors. The colors were festive but the men slumped morosely under tricorner hats and cotton costume wigs. Only after a moment did I see that some of them were sitting on horses; others sat on the driver's seat or stood on the runners of a splendid seventeenth-century gilded carriage, an honored veteran from the days of Spanish rule that is (literally) trotted out from the museum once a year for this occasion. The carriage is lit from within but carries no passengers, seeming to me like a statement of good riddance to the Spanish viceroys and Bourbon kings, the foreign rulers sent packing by Garibaldi. Not even their ghosts occupied anymore the empty interior, for I imagine hardly a soul remembers who once rode in it, or the grief they inflicted on Sicilians. Concurrently, though, I also could feel within it a lament—in that eerie, illuminated vacancy of the empty carriage—for the absence of the old royal pomp, a sense that something was lost when we replaced the gilded circus of corrupt aristocracy for Armani-suited corrupt plutocracy. I pushed closer to the horses, white, beautifully groomed and colorfully plumed; but with the bodies of powerful wagon pullers. I imagined them embarrassed by their foppery, but also as cynical veterans, resigned to the costume, the crowd, and the noise. Again I thought of the week before, December 8, the Festival of the Immacolata: The Virgin Mary had had no horses, no vacant royal carriage, no inflatable dolphins, no slouched guys in cotton wigs.

Suddenly, Santa Lucia emerged from the Cathedral. She came out of the west door, the one that cathedrals made huge, expecting Christ to doff his pretense of humility and return gigantic. As she emerged, her crown barely clearing the arch, explosions erupted all around us. The first of these were from kids scampering around the forest of dignified skirts and trousers gleefully igniting firecrackers. But almost immediately, high above, fireworks sparkled and cracked like lightning, shaking windowpanes and setting little babies and car alarms wailing. I glanced at the horses, but they stood sleepily; they've done this before.

After a few minutes of these silver and gold explosions (again imitating Vatican colors, the Church never missing an advertising op), there were announcements garbled from loudspeakers, a shout from the steps, and Lucy began to move. The guild of dockworkers, in their green felt caps, always have the honor to carry her, for she is their special Patrona. Two rows of them bore the two-ton statue on its platform, by shouldering the weight on two horizontal poles. As they carried her, Lucy bounced and swayed, perhaps enjoying her week of freedom. For the other fifty-one weeks, she hides in a great armoire behind closed doors in the middle of her chapel, but for a brief spin around the piazza in May in thanks for saving us from plague in 1599.

Bands struck up Austro-Hungarian marches, the crowd surged, and a happy inflatable Santa Claus slipped from some small grip, swirled past the *Patrona*, and sailed into the blue. "Viva Santa Lucia!", her porters shouted in unison each time she was lifted. The blinding silver goddess of suffering descended the steps, paused, turned right, bounced along for a few meters, paused, then turned right again, into the shadow of the Cathedral's Greek columns along Via Minerva. She proceeded haltingly because with every lift and shout of "Viva Santa Lucia!", she was carried only a few paces and set down, her weight obviously substantial. Since her progress was slow, I searched for friends in the crowd, but most of my friends are shorter than average and I saw none. A half an hour passed and after a hundred or so meters down Via Minerva, she turned left on Via Roma. I gave up looking for people I knew and found a cafe for a *caffé americano* and a Santa Lucia *cuccidata*, sweet pudding.

A few hours later, evening was coming on. I had stumbled upon my friend Loredana, a small package of grumbling ebullience spinning along below my normal level of vision. We found the parade nearly finished with its circuit of Ortigia, now approaching the short bridge to the mainland. "Viva Santa Lucia!" People streamed past, scurrying far ahead to capture a place on the curb. The *Patrona* is expected to arrive at her church some seven to eight hours after leaving the Cathedral and although she is never on time, there are people massing the entire eight or so kilometers. The Madonna had a parade not half so long and

only a few hundred faithful remained with her to the end. We looked across the bridge and the full kilometer of Corso Umberto on the mainland sparkled with garlands and sprays of light. People overflowed the sidewalks, as the police, in their usual officious politeness, forced a passage for the procession. The crowd surged and jostled, but without annoyance; this is Italy, where people love a crowd or any other kind of outdoor social opera, where the social rules of a party are in effect on most occasions, including street crowds and traffic jams. People carried their towering candles high, bright flames dancing in the breeze, dripping wax on the streets and each other. Tomorrow, police will cordon off sections of these streets to clean them of wax, as cars can skid on it.

The procession rounded a corner and advanced toward us, band music thumping. "Viva Santa Lucia!" sounded the masculine shout from up the street. At the front of the entire parade, a platform was borne aloft by longshoremen, carrying a sliver reliquary: Lucy's spiritually charged left ulna leads the procession. Behind the holy relic marched several rows of worthies in black suits and pompous sashes, including our archbishop, the newly elected mayor (right wing Forza Italia, not a popular choice among the group I usually hang out with, but Loredana is something of a neo-Fascist), and presidents of various unions, guilds, and other associations. The horse-drawn carriage followed, the coachmen looking as resigned as the horses, the lit empty interior even more eerie since the carriage was moving. A marching band appeared, shuffling along, a dark blue irregular mass gilded with glints from dented and tarnished brass. The music thumped and wheezed continually, until I heard the Austrian march playing in front of me echoed back faintly from up the street transformed into something from *The Sound of Music*. Odd, but perhaps not beyond the *Patrona*. Of course, as I learned at this first festival, the *Patrona* gets two bands, the municipal band and the school band, often playing at the same time in careless conflict. Soon, the great glittering silver Santa Lucia bounced by, towering over us, punctuated by the repeated, "Viva Santa Lucia!", not detectably flagging in energy even after all these hours. Then came the school band, followed by a river of townspeople advancing with their tall burning candles

held high. The tail of the parade snaked with lines of *penitenti*, the barefoot pious, suffering in empathy with the Saint.

A heated argument began among the veteran Lucy-watchers around me as to when to expect the fireworks, on the causeway or at the Cathedral. A whoosh of rockets settled the matter. In an instant, the sky over the harbor exploded in light and did not let up for a furious ten minutes. Colors and shapes I had never seen; huge stars that changed color as they spread across the breadth of sky, exploding clovers and trefoil shapes, swirling silver banners with gold filaments that curled upon themselves, tiny puffs suddenly ballooning as pink or green circles stretching a filament width of light across the entire sky, lavender corkscrews screaming through the dark, red clusters gathering into blue clusters and talking, babbling in near-human speech. A pagan would shed his creed and fall prostrate before Lucy at such sky-borne deviltry. In our more secular, blasé times, it was enough that such a display would bring out enough lapsed Catholics, Muslims, and Atheists to swell the crowd to festive numbers. The saint of light, Santa Lucia, paused during this demonstration of her power over the darkness.

Then it was over. The procession continued its unhurried way, sweeping up the masses that eddied along its flanks; balloonmen cried out; peanut vendors huddled under lighted tents. I looked around, but Loredana had vanished; she works at the tourist office, grew up in Siracusa, and thinks the whole thing a bunch of nonsense. She doesn't understand why I enjoy immensely the theater of it all—theatre in the ancient sense of commune with the gods—why I am moved by the ritual that is a descent of the goddess to walk among us, that for some is a renewal of faith and for all certainly is communality refreshed. The truest festivals are timeless and above doctrine: This statue of Santa Lucia seems almost interchangeable with the statue by Phidias of Athena from the Parthenon. We want from Lucy in the 21st century the same communality with the secure embrace of feminine (somewhat maternal) protective power that the Athenians sought from Athena. Still, one major difference is the source of the goddess' authority, for Athena owned by birthright her confi-

dent and loving power, while Lucia was once one of us deified only by suffering. This is the Christian difference. I turned home. Several hours later, at dinner, I heard distant thunder and knew that more fireworks were announcing the arrival of the *Patrona* at the uptown Church of Santa Lucia.

Six days later, the evening of the next Sunday, I ascended to this Church. Merchants' stalls lined the approaches along the city streets: blinding bulbs, cotton candy, trinkets, fried foods, carnival games, people pushing along. I recognized this scene: until you peered closely at the food or merchandise, it was similar to the street and Buddhist temple festivals I had known in Japan. The Italians and Japanese (and most non-Protestant peoples) never seem to feel that this money-making detracts from the spirituality of the place or event, but instead adds sensual excitement and joyful community. So, let us not thrash the moneychangers outside the temple. In the square, a student orchestra tried to offer a concert, light classics timidly squeaked, overwhelmed by the bullhorns of the vendors and the fireworks of little boys. Inside the medieval church, Siracusans in their Sunday-best crushed together for evening mass. It was Lucy's final night of freedom. She stood above the high altar, ever proud in blinding silver. Television lights glittered on the dagger in her throat and the service proceeded in its heavy Catholic pace. Returning outside, I stepped down into the sepulcher of Santa Lucia for inspiration from the lady's ulna, down in a little grotto under a chapel, looking grim and painful behind glass. This too is what this is about.

The following day, 20 December, the statue and bone fragment returned in triumphal procession back home to the Cathedral. I heard the fireworks boom across town at four as the procession began in the upper town. By six-thirty, people swirled aimlessly back and forth the length of Corso Umberto leading back onto the island of Ortigia waiting for her; the shops did a brisk trade, but no sign of the *Patrona*. Italians are not in a hurry when there is society about. I repaired to a cafe. Another hour and I noticed townsfolk in their coats and scarves moving briskly down the street as people in rags and bare feet were straggling past: hopeful *penitenti* hurrying to join the procession. Perhaps I will join them next year;

who doesn't have reason enough to do penance?

I moved back to the causeway; the night was dark and streetlamps spilled yellow over the gathering crowd. People now clogged the street and the police again were trying to clear a path for the parade. Band music could be heard, and as I looked over the heads of people, down the corridor of Christmas arabesques spilling from the buildings, and gleaming in the distance came Lucy. Clouds from sidewalk stovepipes swept the air with the steam of roasting chestnuts. The mayor and his worthies approached, but now it was difficult to distinguish paraders from watchers. Bare feet were the ticket for ordinary folk to join the parade and hundreds shuffled along, not at the end as last week, but mingled throughout the length of the procession, their long candles drooping and dripping. Directly in front of our beautiful Lucy came two stunning young women, with long golden blonde hair and in full-length white fur. These were a delegation of beauties on loan from Sweden, representing sister peoples under Santa Lucia. I learned later that indeed on Santa Lucia Day the week before, a select Siracusan beauty, representing the Saint, goes north (as well wrapped I hope) to charm Lutherans at the head of some frigid Swedish parade.

Again, fireworks did their deviltry in the black sky and with the usual thundering conclusion, it was done. The band picked up the beat; the carriers lifted up the Saint, the *penitenti* raised up their candles, the crowd gathered up its children and popcorn, and the procession crept ahead. Much later, at my desk writing up these impressions, I heard a few more explosions, a quiet and somewhat wearied coda, and knew that she had reached the Cathedral and home.