

TU SCENDI

By

Joan Leotta

“You come down from the stars” is the first line of an Italian Christmas hymn. Growing up, my husband sang this tune every year on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, gathered around the piano in upstate New York, first in his parents’ home and then in the homes of his sisters.

I missed out, but Joe and I both made sure our children, Joey and Jennie, were able to incorporate this into their lives as a way to connect to heritage and to strengthen the bonds of our small family of four living a thousand miles from their extended family. Along with eating the seven fishes on Christmas eve and emptying a “stocking” full of tiny gifts and candy on Christmas morning, singing this hymn together on Christmas Eve and Day became a cherished holiday tradition.

In 2002, however our family of four had been sadly diminished by a car accident that took Joey from us. In 2014, our little trio, still trying to maintain the joy of the holiday decided to shift venues—we decided to fly to Rome, a city Joey loved, a city we all love, to celebrate Christmas.

Rome spoke to us as an ancestral home, but still, it was difficult for us to travel away from the tree and home. Privately, I still wondered if celebrating abroad would be something that would draw us closer to each other, or simply a jaunt. We secured a restaurant reservation for the seven fishes meal. I tucked our stockings and a felt tabletop tree and mini creche into my carry-on for the hotel room.

We set off for Santa Maria in Trastevere for Christmas Eve’s Midnight Mass. In Italy, baby Jesus is laid in the creche scene at midnight on Christmas Eve, so at the end of the Mass, just before the blessing, we edged our way to the back of the church to watch them place the “baby” in the manger. As we walked to the back, we heard the priest intone the blessing and the congregation began to sing, “Tu Scendi.”

We joined our voices to theirs. This had been a good decision after all. We heard the hymn again coming from churches finish Christmas Day services, as we walked all over Rome. We learned that all over Italy, this hymn is the preferred closing melody, sung on Christmas Eve and Day. For us, in addition to the sacred meaning of Christ coming down to save us, the hymn served as a reminder that our family love, our celebrating this time together in Joey's favorite city was much more than a "jaunt."

My husband often comments that that Christmas we felt closer to each other than we had in years, attributing it to our lack of busy-ness. I had no cooking chores. There were no mounds of gifts to wrap. And indeed, we all agree that singing that song seemed to bring our son/Jennie's brother "down from the stars" to celebrate with us.

#

Joan Leotta plays with words on page and stage. She performs tales of food, family, strong women. Internationally published as an essayist, poet, short story writer, and novelist, she's a 2021 and 2022 Pushcart nominee, Best of the Net 2022 nominee, and 2022 runner-up in Robert Frost Competition. Her essays, poems, CNF, and fiction appear in *Impspired*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *VerseVisual*, *Verse Virtual*, *Gargoyle*, *Mystery Tribune*, *Ovunquesiamo*, *MacQueen's Quinterly* and others. Her poetry chapbooks are *Languid Lusciousness with Lemon* and *Feathers on Stone*.