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# A MOVING EXPERIENCE: HOW THE MYTH STOLE CHRISTMAS



CFlisi

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Some Grinchy, grouchy, Scroogy types say that only small children can

experience the true magic of Christmas. And, in the US, only for the first few years of life, because family doesn't count much and money counts a lot. In Italy, by contrast, a place with which I have native familiarity, family and social ties are still intensely felt, and money is yes, important, but not the single overriding factor in existential happiness.

Yankee Christmas curmudgeons will claim that the magic is all over once you stop believing in Santa Claus. American teenagers are too aloof, grownups too hyper, and old people too out of it to get what the holiday is about. Or they insist that it's always been humbug — a commercially confected gift of coins rattling around in cash registers worldwide, with a collateral bonus for organized religion of the Christian persuasion.

In Italy, Santa Claus (aka Babbo Natale) is a recent invention appropriated from the US. It used to be that Gesù Bambino brought presents for children on Christmas Day, and the Befana (the Witch) brought more for good boys and girls on the eve of Epiphany (January 5). Since both a resurrected baby Jesus tramping around on Christmas Eve and a witch balancing millions of bundles of toys on a single broomstick 12 days later press the imagination of all but the most credulous toddler, the magic of an Italian Christmas doesn't have as its focal point the carrier of gifts. It's more about family ties, friendships, and of course food. (You know, *Italy*).

The differences between the two countries and cultures are clear and stark. So why is it that I have two powerful memories of holiday magic — one in the States, one in Italy, and neither one relating to gifts brought by sled or broomstick?

The Santa sled fantasy wouldn't have mattered anyway. The North Pole myths were not the foundation of my holiday magic: at the age of four I was already a "Santa skeptic," thanks to my several-years-older sister who was mature beyond her age and determined that I should not delude myself with illogical fantasies. When she told me, I wasn't disappointed. I had already realized something was wrong when so many stores offered their versions of "Santa" and, if he was tied up juggling kids on his knee, how could he possibly be filling all the toy orders that were addressed to him? My parents had proffered the explanation that these wheezy old men were "Santa's helpers" because the Genuine Original Santa was obviously occupied at the North Pole. If so, why did every store insist that we line up to reveal our wishes to "Santa?" There were too many discrepancies with these stories and explanations. The four-year-old me didn't buy it. Still, I filled a plate with cookies for Santa and the reindeer that year. What I believed didn't matter. The story was great, although it wasn't *magic*.

That came later, when I was 13. I was Christmas shopping in downtown Trenton, New Jersey, with J, my best friend from school. It was cold and had begun snowing. My father was going to drive us home so we stopped at his office and waited for him to finish his work. About an hour later, we came outside and started down the steps of the building, right next to the New Jersey capitol. And gasped. In 60 minutes or so, the scenery had turned white and thick flocks of snow enveloped our jackets and scarves. The holiday lights strung around the capitol now glowed with unearthly beauty. The new snowscape had done that. J and I giggled with delight. We held hands and skipped down those steps in unison, looking around, looking at each other, transformed by the splendor of this metamorphosis. We had bags with presents for our families, we had (what seemed at the time to be)

unassailable friendship, we had a shared epiphany of holiday magic. Christmas was palpable in those few blurred white minutes.

Flash forward 40 years. I was Christmas shopping in downtown Milan with L, a close friend I knew through college. It doesn't snow often in Milan anymore, but that day there was a dusting of white powder on the city's grey streets. The urban lights gleamed as we walked, laughed, and talked. Emerging from the Galleria, the arched 19th century prototype for all indoor shopping malls in the world, we suddenly saw a vision appear on the tram tracks in front of La Scala. Instead of the usual brown tram, we saw a fantasy in lights — a tram decked out with thousands of tiny white bulbs that twinkled as dramatically as a parade at Disneyland. We found out later that this “Tram di Luce” made an annual appearance in the city between December and Epiphany and followed a prescribed circuit. Neither of us had had any idea, since neither of us was living in Milan at the time; this sparkling vision was completely unexpected and altogether enthralling. We clasped hands and giggled, just as I had done four decades earlier in a different country, in a different context.

The usual rattles and rumbles of what is known as the “rolling noise” of the tram were absorbed by the light snowfall, so all we heard were the *ohhs* and *ahhs* of people out on the street as we were, struck — as we were — by the splendor of this light-driven vision. It crystalized the enchantment of the season, without the need for mythical Santas or broom-powered witches, or a religious overlay, for that matter. Christmas magic consists of beauty arriving unexpectedly, and someone with whom to share that beauty — who might not be a parent or child or lover, but someone who delights, as you do, in the wonder of it all.

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Christmas

USA

Italy

Santa Claus

Milan



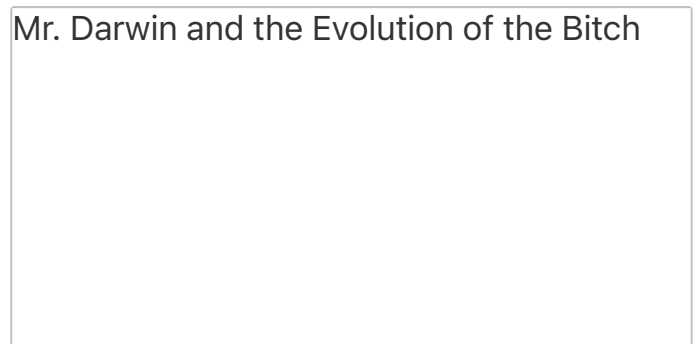
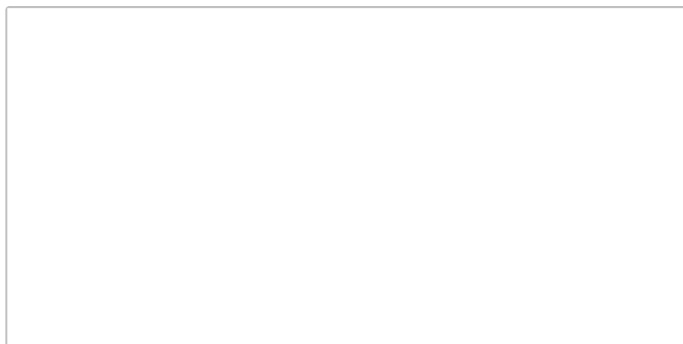
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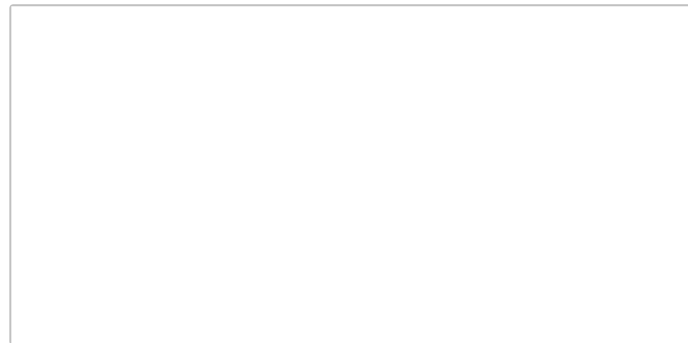
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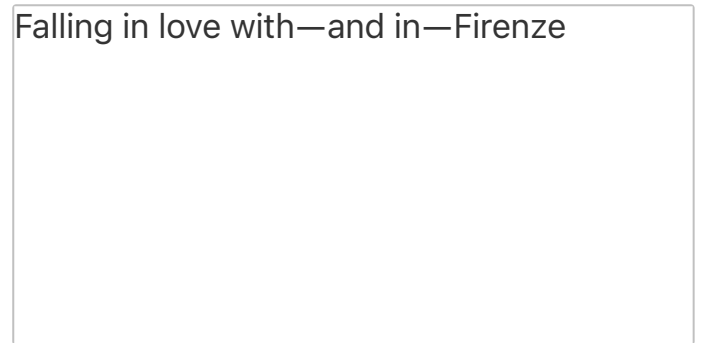
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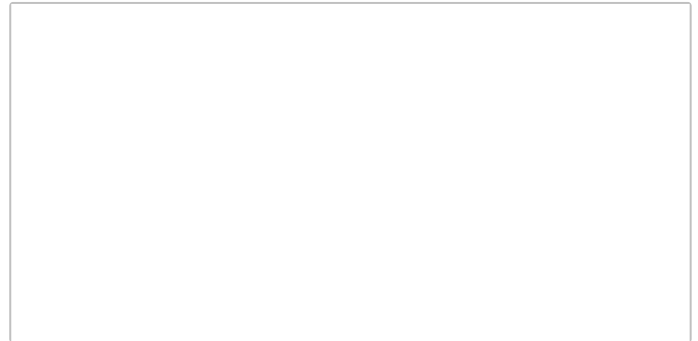
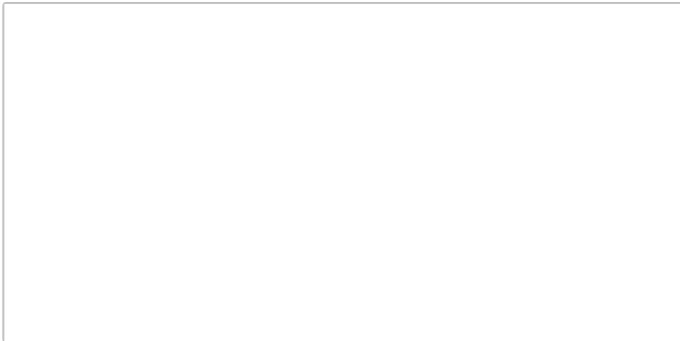
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