



Watch Out: the Befana is Coming to Town!

Marina Melchionda (January 05, 2009)



More than 2000 years ago the Three Wise Men visited Jesus after his birth and gave him three symbolic gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. From that time on, the Befana comes every year, on January 6, to fill Italian kids' stockings with all sorts of goodies!



While I am writing now, most Italian kids are sleeping and waiting for the “Befana” (Witch) to come and fill their “stockings” with lots of goodies and sweets. They can’t stay awake, no...otherwise she would spank them with her broom! They are all excited because most of the times she brings them what they asked for but didn’t get from Santa Claus! You can see that in their minds this isn’t just the day that celebrates the visit of the Three Wise Men to baby Jesus; it is basically the night when this old lady lands on their roofs with her “scarpe tutte rotte e il vestito a trullalà” (broken shoes and cobbled dress), as an Italian rigmarole says!

The legend of the Befana is very old: even if she is not cited in the Gospel, popular tradition has preserved her as a protagonist of this Christian holiday. The legend recounts that the Three Kings from the East, who were following the star to visit Jesus in Bethlehem, got lost and decided to ask for directions. They stopped by a small house and knocked at the door. A very tiny, old woman answered but she wasn’t able to give them any information because she didn’t know anything about “a newborn King”! The kings invited her to go with them, but the good lady refused because “she had too much to do at home”. However, she understood pretty quickly that she had made a huge mistake and she started her own journey. But she couldn’t find Jesus... so guess what she did... she gave a gift to every single child she found on her way, hoping that he was the Messiah. The legend says that from that time on she never stopped searching. So, every year, on the 6th of January, she takes her broom and travels the world looking for Jesus. She stops in every house and leaves small gifts for the good kids, while the bad kids receive a whole bunch of coal!

Nowadays, actually, children are not the only “recipients”. Grownups of every age, in fact, leave an empty stocking (or a sock!) at the foot of their bed or, maybe, by the fireplace and hope to find it full the next day! My parents did it too before going to bed and I just finished stuffing their small stockings with their favorite sweets...and of course some sugary coal: it is sweet on the tongue but still sends a message!

Let’s say this is the occasion us kids are waiting for: when we were small we got so much coal we could light a fire to last the whole winter! And dare we mention the rest? A whole half of our stocking was filled with potatoes, garlic, onions...Plat du jour? Soup! That wasn’t exactly the kind of treat we were expecting.. The bigger our stockings were, the worst we had been... The “winner”, in that case, was always my little sister... what a consolation!

But once the ingredients for the stew were collected, nothing could stop us from devouring our favorite goodies...all of kinds of creamy, sugary snacks... we became “chocoholics” in no time, three small Willy Wonkas in their chocolate dream factory. Those were the moments when the Befana was loved just as every single woman yearns to be loved, if even for a second of her life: immensely. With no restraints.

Those were some moments! I remember that my sisters and I sort of locked up our stockings: they were our treasures, we could share a toy but not a box of lollypops! I must confess that we are still that way: we grow up, yes, but our bellies do too!

My family has followed this Italian tradition for decades and several generations. Two years ago, when we were in America for Christmas, we also passed it on to our small American cousins, Joey and Jimmy. And that was when I discovered that the Befana can easily be loved worldwide! You should have seen how those two kids appreciated her coming! I think that all Italian-American families should know what this tradition is all about... at least, and most importantly, it’s a means for parents and children to spend joyful moments together...

Well...I’d better go to bed too... who knows, the Befana could also come for me...and if she finds me awake she could go away...and I just wouldn’t bear it!

Good bellyful and Happy Epifania to everybody!

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