

Nonna Concettina and the Ballad of the Pans

B. Amore (January 04, 2010)



Naples, 1963: ... She banged the cover against the pan, beat it like a drum, rolled the spoon around inside ... Nonna explained that in Italy this is what you did at midnight to greet the New Year...

Who was she, this woman who banged on pans outside the window at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve? I hardly recognized my grandmother with her glee and antic pleasure in this transgressive act committed in the midst of our small community.

My parents were out, celebrating at a party. I was very young, head just above the window sill. Nonna had gotten two aluminum pans from the kitchen with their covers, and wooden spoons. The night was dark, silent. Only the streetlights created cones of glow in spots along the street. At midnight, determined by Nonna who could read the clock, the window was opened. Sharp, cold air stung my face but the thrill of the unexpected drew me in. Into the void of night, my grandmother sang out her cacophonous celebration of the New Year's birth.

She banged the cover against the pan, beat it like a drum, rolled the spoon around inside. I watched in exalted awe, wondering what had come into this generally staid woman. I was given my own small pan and cover and carefully held it just above the window ledge to join in the concert. I saw no one else on the street, watched the windows for curious eyes, but nothing. Only our blatant joy filled the night. Nonna explained that in Italy this is what you did at midnight to greet the New Year.

Welcoming 1963 in Naples, from my friends' home on the Vomero hill, was not dissimilar. On the



stroke of twelve, fireworks lit the black sky with streams of light. People began to throw dishes, chairs, beds from the windows. Boys with bastone romped in the streets, banging each other and any unsuspecting passers-by on the head. Only then did I fully understand my grandmother's glee of nearly twenty years before - a momentary return to her home village - shared with a child too young to judge her actions which seemed crazy in America; a throwback to the simplicity of a time when that was the way to make noise, not turn up the volume on the TV or radio or CD player.

Shouts and bangs announced the New Year at 17 Gladstone Street. With the adult care-takers gone, Nonna could revel in the absence of stricture and share with me the glee and unrestrained joy as we laughed in that carefree moment together, reaching through the square of black cold into the wider world of encompassing night.

(Photo: "Following the Thread VI: Concettina - a Life" in An Italian American Odyssey by B. Amore)

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