

By Leslie Waugh

## Holy Family

My mom visited us at Christmas, although she has been gone for two years. She loved Christmas, but in her absence, much of the joyful air around the holiday has been sucked away. I haven't sent out cards in the past few years, and the thought of shopping, even for people I love, has made me want to crawl into a cave.

I feel a bit churlish about my Scroogeness, but I haven't been able to manufacture Santa spirit any more than I can bring my mom back or turn back time to ease her suffering. Holiday cheer has felt as fake as Hallmark Channel snow.

This past Christmas I felt the sting of her not-there-ness a bit less acutely. While staying at my sister's house, I listened to the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols from Cambridge University, while Dad was listening to it at his house. It's still weird to say "his" rather than "their" anything. It probably always will be, in our family's new normal.

Mom loved to listen to the program on Christmas Eve as she wrapped presents or made her family-famous raspberry trifle, the dessert we cherished after Christmas Day dinner. This year my sister carried on the tradition with a stellar A-plus version.

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My father, sister, nephew and I also went to my parents' church, the one where Mom's ashes were interred, for the afternoon Christmas Eve service. Children acted out the Nativity play, filling the Holy Family roles of Joseph, Mary and Jesus, and the other key players. In the last few years of her life, Mom couldn't withstand the 20-minute trip to town or a church service, so it was nice to go for her. We have visited her nameplate at the memorial plot, but that was the first time we'd been back for any kind of service since she died in November 2017. Sitting in the pew, I could see her looking down at us with a smile.

My husband and I had once again agreed not to buy each other any gifts. Once again, as if in a bad O. Henry short story, he broke that rule. A long, rectangular box arrived at our house the week before the holiday. He wrapped it, and we took it to my sister's house. I scrambled in that last-minute window to think of something thoughtful to get him, coming up with nothing but cheesy gag gifts. I felt less bad when he said that his present was for both of us.

On Christmas morning I unwrapped the box to find the most beautiful glasses inside, cradled in padding. They're stemless with translucent blue, gold and red swirly patterns around the base. Their beauty, and Matthew's artsy thoughtfulness, took my breath away, but

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they were strangely familiar. I didn’t realize that I’d seen the pattern before – in two places, in a way. My dad said, “Your mom had glasses like that.”

Oh. Hey, Mom.

I suddenly remembered the goblets she had kept in a white standalone Target cabinet by the fridge. I can’t remember where she got them, and I didn’t see her use them often. Maybe they were too precious to risk breaking, like the china that her mother kept on display way back when, brought out of her glass-front hutch only for special occasions.

Matthew said he hadn’t known about my mom’s glasses, but perhaps he had seen them in that cabinet at some point. Enticed by an online ad, he bought ours from a company that honors the work of Antoni Gaudí, the Catalan architect. Matthew said he appreciated the glasses’ connection to Barcelona. We spent several days there on our first trip to Spain in 2011, visiting many of Gaudí’s creations: Park Güell, Casa Milà, Casa Batlló and the Sagrada Família, Gaudí’s extraordinary and famously incomplete temple.

I adore Gaudí’s art for its playfulness, bright colors and creative shapes, which reference the natural world. They’re full of movement and

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joy. The design on the glasses Matthew bought is inspired by the stained-glass windows at the Sagrada Familia.

My mom’s glasses are not marked with the company’s insignia, as ours are. But they are so identical that I can’t imagine they came from anywhere else. Even if they are imitations, it doesn’t matter. Dad offered to give us hers, so now we have a dozen glasses in the same glorious design, six short and six tall. Back at home, a few days into the new year, I carefully washed them all – much more gently than I usually wash anything – and put them in a glass-front cabinet in our kitchen, to see and, in theory, to use.

I wondered as I was handling them how I’d feel if I broke one. Would shattering one of Mom’s glasses shatter a connection with her spirit or sully her memory? Would it ruin the gift of her presence that emanated from this coincidence? Would a broken goblet break my heart even more and add to the scattered pile of our family’s stained shards of grief?

No. My mother is – was – not a glass. The two sets, one from my husband and one from my father, live together now, like a fused family: one set new, one passed on.

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We like to make meaning out of seemingly random coincidences. But what is random, or coincidental? Maybe things just happen. Maybe patterns have been preordained, and we're just here to notice when the pieces appear and put them together, as with stained glass. Like art, significance is in the eye of the beholder.

Matthew and I can use our collection as we like, on special occasions or on any day. Or we can leave the glasses in the cabinet, untouched but viewed from a distance, as objects of art. Either way, they are symbols of connections across time and space, odes to the concept of the *sagrada familia*: holy family.