



Tending the Home Fires

Qur hardworking parents always did their best to provide memorable holidays for their family of seven.

Weeks before Christmas, my father pulled double and even triple shifts at the cement mill to make sure there would be presents under the tree. Coated in ashes and soot, he'd drag into the house each night, bone-weary from cleaning out

smokestacks. Besides one full-time job—as city clerk and another one mothering us, Mom did all the things necessary back in the 1960s to make our budget stretch: sewing clothing into the wee hours of the morning, mending hand-me-downs, packing school lunches and laundering cloth diapers.

Even so, my parents emphasized the memory-making moments: designing elaborate macaroni ornaments to decorate the tree, hanging dozens of cheery greeting cards from loved ones around our bedroom doorframes, and singing carols as we hauled aging boxes of decorations from the basement to the living room. In mid-December Mom gathered her baking sheets, her huge wooden rolling pin and her kids to spend an entire day in the cramped kitchen baking and decorating sugar cookies.

And she always delegated one duty to me.

Because our scant living room had no fireplace to hang stockings, we used a cardboard-kit substitute. It was my job to assemble it each year, that special place where Santa would soon leave his few presents for us.

Against one wall, I unfolded the fireplace front. Then I placed and balanced the black cardboard mantle that bore wounds from dozens of punctures where we'd thumbtacked our stockings during holidays past. After I inserted a red lightbulb into the hole near the metal spinner, I plugged in the cord so the logs would “burn.”

Satisfied at last, I settled to the floor in my favorite nook across from the fireplace—directly in front of a furnace vent. I knew the warm air blew from the basement, but in my mind, the heat spread from the cardboard logs to ignite my imagination. It was there that I spun my boyish dreams and lived my foolish fantasies.


he years drifted on, and so did I.

When all of us kids were grown and on our own, our parents hit the jackpot. I mean, really hit the jackpot. In a big way. They won over two million dollars in the Lottery!

As instant millionaires, the first thing they did was look for a new place to live. My father insisted on only two musts: an attached garage and... a working fireplace. My mom wanted more space.

And they found it: a beautiful two-story house with four bedrooms, a spacious kitchen, a dining area, a two-car garage, a roomy basement—and a living room with a working fireplace.

In December after their move, we all came home for our first holiday together in years.

hile everyone lazed and chatted by the fireside on Christmas Eve, I rose to my feet to stroll through the house on a private tour. Mom had decorated with recently purchased crystal ornaments and a hand-carved Santa from Germany. Embroidered holiday doilies graced new end tables, and expensive wrapping paper enveloped dozens of presents under the beautifully lit tree. From top to bottom, the place murmured, “*New. Gorgeous. Tasteful.*” It certainly wasn’t home as I remembered it.

Near the stairwell, I glanced up ... and did a double take. Perched at the top, like a forgotten old friend I might bump into on the corner, stood the raggedy cardboard fireplace. With a smile as wide as Mom’s rolling pin, I climbed the stairs and sank to the top step as a wave of boyhood memories washed over me.

Before long, Mom found me upstairs and stood silently at my side. I looked up, waiting for her eyes to meet mine.

“You kept it, this old fireplace in your new home. Why?”

After a long moment, she placed her hand on my shoulder and bent toward me. “Because I don’t ever want any of us to forget the simple joys of Christmas,” she whispered.

And I nodded in understanding, pleased that I could still feel the warmth radiating from the old, cardboard fireplace.

