

The Christmas Candle

by Lia D Mason



I recall nearly every Christmas Eve growing up. Candlelight services at church, then home to open presents. Dad would stare intensely at the candle while joyously belting out the Christmas carols. After the service, he would take two fingers and then gently pinch the flame of the candle, “to preserve the wick.” It always amazed me how brave he was, to put out the flame in that way. Conversely, he opened presents with childlike excitement.

On the first Christmas after he died, I wished to turn back the hands of time and be at candlelight services with him again. I wanted to share gifts and hear him say once more, “What’d you get me, Dee?”

I had no gift for him that year, but he had one for me.

That first Christmas Eve without him felt so different. I was thankful that the homeless shelter scheduled me to work it. I reasoned, “Working Christmas Eve will divert my grief.” Although I would miss the candlelight services, I was working with my favorite co-worker.

Only the two of us were on duty—for the entire 90-bed facility. At the start of my shift, I checked my office mailbox. Nothing was in there but papers: the typical requests from residents and some notes and cards from our co-workers. However, toward the end of my shift, I happened to glance at my box again to discover a distinct shape within it.

“That was not there before,” I mumbled. I went to examine the small white candle with a cardboard drip-guard, the type I used at candlelight services every Christmas Eve—except that year. I stared at it and then relished the moment, although it was obviously a once-burnt candle.

I brought the candle back to my desk and thanked my co-worker. “I never expected to hold a candlelight service candle in my hands tonight! How did you know what this means to me?”

She looked confused and quizzed me, “Why would I give you a used candle with a bent cardboard ring around it?”

Although her reasoning sounded solid, no one else had keys to the office. She seemed sincere while continuing to deny giving it to me. Still, logic told me it had to have come from her; she must have meant it as an anonymous gift. Nevertheless, how could she have known how much it meant to me, especially this year?

We jokingly sparred about the mysterious gift during our shifts. Afterwards, I brought the small white candle—with its bent drip-guard—home with me.

The next day I phoned mom to wish her a Merry Christmas. She told me of her first candlelight service without Dad, which turned into a story I had not heard. “Last Christmas Eve your father put the flame out with his fingers, just as always, but he kept his candle! Instead of putting it in the basket as we left, he slipped it into his suit pocket! I told him, ‘We have to leave them here; they recycle them.’ But he whispered, ‘I’m going to need it someday.’”

Mom hesitated and then finished her story, “I remembered that candle after he died [nine months later] and wanted to return it to church. I looked all over for it. I checked the garage, his closet, his truck...everywhere. I never could figure out what happened to it—or why he needed one. We have plenty of candles, should the lights go out!”

Mom was simply relating a story of her last Christmas Eve with Dad, but instantly my mind started reeling. This was a lonely Christmas without him, for both of us. I looked over at the small white candle and smiled. Dad had always been my best “buddy.” Suddenly, I felt his strong gift of love, as if he were with me!

The weather prevented me from visiting mom until Easter time. It was then that I told her of the mysterious gift which suddenly appeared in my box at work on Christmas Eve—when only two of us had keys to the office! As proof, I laid the once-burned candle on the kitchen table. It gently rocked into place, and then came to rest on the slightly bent drip-guard.

Mom’s eyes widened as she gasped, “That’s his candle! He had to bend the drip-guard like that to get it into his pocket!”