



by Sarah Bender

The greatest memories I have of the holidays were created when I was age 4 and 5. I had many adventures during those couple of years, and I remember many tastes, sights and smells. When winter rounded the corner, as soon as the first snow would come, I would strap on my green "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle" snow boots, grab my saucer sled and hit the slopes. Once, my parents built me an igloo out of snow in the front yard. Inside, I piled up a mound of snow and pretended it was a cooked turkey for Thanksgiving dinner. I remember my mother spending hours in the kitchen preparing a great, Thanksgiving feast (much more tasty than my pile of ice). During Christmastime, she would make homemade chocolate covered cherries, macaroons, chocolate covered macadamia nuts, little cookies with green and red sprinkles, and several other tasty treats. I remember the sound of my dad shoveling the ashes out of the fireplace and then crumpling newspapers to kindle the freshly-chopped firewood.

For Christmas, Dad would hang up lights outside the house, along the trim and encircling the trees in the yard. Mother and I would

decorate the Christmas tree, and laughed a lot while doing so. She would string it with colored lights, and I would rummage through the box of ornaments to pick out my favorite ones. One of those favorites was a plush Sebastian from the movie "The Little Mermaid." Mom would hold me up to hang the ornaments wherever I chose and we would finish our masterpiece off with silver tinsel, candy canes, and a beautiful angel on top. She had golden hair, a white-lace dress, and held a candle with both hands, which lit up with the rest of the lights on the tree.

I remember reaching deep into the box of ornaments and decorations to find a beautiful snow globe that was given to my mother by a dear friend of hers. It had a cottage inside with a few pine trees around it and a little snowman near the front door. It played the tune of "Silent Night" with the crank of the lever on the bottom. I was so mesmerized by its beauty; I didn't want to let it go. It was far better in the palms of my hands than sitting up on the piano where I would not be able to see it. Mom was very apprehensive of my carrying it around, but I promised her I would be very careful. I paraded it around the house, continually playing its tune and turning it about so the

snow would swirl around inside. I cradled it while walking down the stairs to the basement... and dropped it on the unfinished, cement floor as soon as I reached the bottom. The glass shattered and the water spilled out everywhere, carrying the little specks of fake snow all over the place. I cried, because I had ruined the beauty of this wonderful piece and because I failed to keep my word to my mother. I feared she would be very angry with me, but she held me instead, wiping away my tears saying, "It's okay. I know you tried. It was just a snow globe anyway."

I am so thankful my mother taught me of forgiveness.

It seemed every day there would be more and more gifts under the tree. Some would come as packages in the mail, some dropped off by neighbors, some passed on to my parents from their workplaces, and of course, some from Santa. On Christmas Eve, mother and I would leave a tall glass of milk and a small plate of cookies sitting on the dining room table for Santa to eat when he was to visit some time during the night - while I was sleeping, of course. I would wake up no later than 3am to rush in to my parent's bedroom and wake my mom for her to come with me to see what Santa left under the tree. I was always amazed to find the glass of milk empty and only a few cookie crumbs speckled

on the plate. I was allowed to open only one gift from Santa and the rest would be opened when all three of us awoke at a more reasonable hour. One year, this gift was a scented "Playdough" set with gadgets that would make beautiful flowers out of the dough. I sat at the dining room table by the light of the Christmas tree making flowers of all sorts of colors and shapes while my mother went back to bed. I'd follow, when I could no longer hold my eyes open.

Unfortunately, I was always a snooper and my belief in Santa ended as soon as I discovered the stash of packages in the closet of my father's office with "For: Sarah, From: Santa" neatly written on the tags. But, I never told my parents of my discovery; I wasn't about to forfeit the extra presents. As another part of my snooping habit, I would sneak under the tree when no one was looking, carefully peel the tape from the corner of a gift addressed to me, and take a peek. Once I was satisfied with my guess of what was inside the wrapping (or once I heard someone coming), I'd tape the corner back just the way it was - or so I

thought. It really was quite obvious where my not-so-nimble fingers had been.

So many sweet memories with my parents were created in just those couple of years. But, in the summer of '91, when I was 6 years old, my



father and mother were in a fatal car accident. My father survived, but my mother passed. As soon as I was able to grasp what death meant, I understood that things were not going to be quite the same. My dad and I spent the holidays together that year, just the two of us. We traveled to see different family members who always brought some cheer, but it took a long while to get past the absence of the precious presence of my mom.

About a year later, my dad remarried, and brand new memories were created with brand new stepbrothers, step aunts and uncles, step grandparents and cousins. They were very different memories than the ones my father, mother and I had shared, but I was still grateful to be surrounded by family, cheerful voices, comforting smells from the kitchen, and hugs.

There are times in life when everything seems just right, and it would seem that nothing could ruin the happiness and perceived perfection of those times. But, it usually happens that a different season comes for a while when things are not so easy. Sometimes those seasons come in the form of tragedy. Since the age of

six I've learned that whatever is encountered in the journey of life, whether beautiful or tragic, that *nothing* is waste. Though our own understanding often cannot find the answers to the "whys" and the "hows", we're somehow brought through to the other side with greater strength and a greater knowledge of God's ability to make the best out of everything we face – that is, if we've allowed Him to.

Many of you reading this have a family to spend the holidays with and are in a season of your life that is beautiful and complete. Some of you may not be able to be with your families and friends this year, whether it's because of distance or loss. And some of you may be going through the hardest time of your life. No matter where you find yourself, know that you are taken care of and greatly loved. I know even the closest people to me let me down, move away, or pass on to eternity. But, I am in my Heavenly Father's hands, and there is no safer place to be when my world begins to crumble. He is the cure for loneliness, strife and sorrow and He is the restorer of joy and hope, when our hearts are heavy-laden.

Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; you are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior... (Isaiah 43:1-3)

