

CHRISTMAS, LOST AND FOUND

Without her mother, one mom thought the holiday season would never be the same. Her kids would prove her wrong.

December was magical when I was a child. There was the wooden winter village on the hutch, with its froth of cottony snow. A fresh wreath hung on the door. Just-for-show wrapped packages were placed in various nooks, next to Christmas bears and Christmas dolls. The tree, with baby's breath tucked into the branches, stood tall in the living room. We had so much cheer stuffed into our home that my mother had to box up her everyday knickknacks to make room for all the holiday trinkets.

And I loved all of it. I loved the decorations. I loved the music and the movies. I loved making holiday candies and delivering them to friends and neighbors. I loved the anticipation. And I loved the gifts. My mom had mastered the art of the perfect present. She'd take dolls out of the packaging, dress them in our own saved baby clothes, and leave special Santa-written notes on them. And when we were older, she made my sister and me laugh with silly gift tags from Madonna and George Michael.

But all that stopped when I was 19 and my mother died of cancer—and took the love-filled season with her. The first Christmas without her, there was no tree, no wreath, no celebration—just two baskets on the coffee table for my sister and me, filled with suntan-colored pantyhose, gum, and other drugstore purchases. Our dad had put them there before he went out for the evening.

I never expected my father to take the reins and re-create Christmas past. But I thought we might have a small family gathering and decorate with a few of Mom's favorite things. I thought some glimmer of the holiday might still exist. But it didn't. My dad loved his daughters, but he was in survival mode.

After that I tried hard to cobble together the holiday on my own, hauling oversized trees into small apartments, hosting tree-

trimming parties, and choosing special gifts for the important people in my life. Still, I never got that twist-in-the-belly it's-Christmastime feeling. Worse, I was sad. Being in the midst of everyone else's joy simply reminded me of what I'd once had.

Twelve years after my mother died, I thought my time had finally come. I was a new mom to a baby boy and the wife of a man whose family cut down their own Christmas tree. I was happy to get swept up in their traditions and start creating my own. I couldn't wait to stand in line to meet Santa, read *'Twas The Night Before Christmas*, and bake cookies. It would be amazing. And it was—sort of. But my little guy didn't care about my idyllic fantasy. He wanted noisy, plastic trains and cars. He ate Santa's cookies but didn't want to sit on his lap. He opened gifts carelessly. Nothing was quite right.

A few years later, something changed. There was an honest-to-goodness twinkle in my son's eye once December arrived.

He begged to pick out the tree. He wanted to listen to the holiday radio station. There was such excitement when he and his younger brother piled into the car to gawk at the over-the-top light displays in our neighborhood. And on Christmas Day, there were gasps of joy when Santa got the presents so right: "How did he know, Mama?"

Watching all this brought tears, different from the ones I'd shed in the past. I finally realized what I'd been missing. It wasn't the garland and the gifts. It was the feeling that someone in the world loved me so much she wanted to make the season magical just for me. I didn't need to wait for the magic any longer. My children taught me that it was their turn to feel that magic and that it was simply my job to deliver. Even when my boys are big and Santa is just a wonderful story, it will still be their turn—and will be until they take the reins for their own kids. And I'll be right there, sprinkling a little of my mom's Christmas magic on the season.

