

Gone but Not Forgotten

My mother is long gone. She died following a debilitating stroke more than two decades ago. It was an unexpected event that robbed her of her voice, her mobility and her joy of life. As far as parents go, she was almost ideal and pretty much the exact opposite of my dad. Where he was critical and pessimistic, she was encouraging and optimistic. Her smile, along with her boisterous laugh, could electrify a room. She had an amazing ability to rise above the mediocre life and obstacles that were thrown her way. And, she had an innate ability to turn our cluttered 900-square-foot house into a Christmas wonderland.

I lived at home until I graduated from college. As soon as I received my degree I was gone, leaving the one decent bedroom to my mom. Now, finally she could be comfortable and sleep in a bed other than the sleeper sofa. Unfortunately, that wouldn't last long because my sister soon returned home with no money and no place to live claiming the bedroom for herself. But that is another story...

Two years after I graduated, I was promoted to Las Vegas with a national nonprofit organization. Then, a year after that I was promoted to Dallas. Great job, stimulating work, but I was only making it home once a year at Christmas time. I wasn't married at the time so there was no argument about whether or not we were going to my parents or his for Christmas. I could do whatever I wanted as long as the winter weather didn't impede my travel plans.

I couldn't stay at my former home, my cousin always offered me a room at her place. Luckily it was within 10 minutes of my parent's house, and if the snowstorms became too intense I could still inch my way along the surface streets and find my way home.

After all, my mom was counting on me to assist with her annual rituals – mailing out dozens of holiday cards and making the popular Italian treat known as strufoli. There was no question that I would help. We were a team, and while it wasn't easy working around the clutter on the kitchen table and counters we got it done.

The process was as follows: I would arrive during Christmas week, laden with presents, eager to see my family and friends. I would schedule appointments with as many people as I could accommodate in two weeks. At the top of the list was getting together with my mom, perhaps to drive her to the store or assist her at home before we tackled the two main events... mailing out the last of the cards and preparing the Christmas dessert.

Back then, it seemed like I was always sick. I still have my tonsils so invariably I would arrive with a sore throat or a cold. It didn't matter, though, if I wasn't feeling well. There was work to be done, and my mom was counting on me. I couldn't let her down.

While mom kept me alert with mugs of hot tea, I sat at the kitchen table licking stamps and placing jolly Santa stickers on the back of envelopes.

"Oh, did I forget to sign the card?" she would sometimes ask with a giggle. It didn't matter if she did forget because I was fast and had already sealed the envelope. The return sticker would identify the sender, and her friends would know that Millie was thinking of them, even if she did forget to sign her name.

After the cards were stacked in a pile, it was time for the main event. My mother wasn't much of a baker but strufoli was something she could tackle. The dessert requires eggs, flour, lard, sugar, and oil or lard for frying. The dough can be rolled into small balls or it can be cut into manageable strips or shapes. Yep, basically it's fried dough but with a twist. While mom placed the pieces of dough in the hot oil, I stood ready with my ladle at the honey pot. This is what makes strufoli so good. Once the nuggets turned a golden brown, it was my job to plunge them into the honey. After turning them over a few times, I placed them into a decorative bowl and sprinkled them with colored dots.

It wasn't long before we were devouring the honeyed treats as we stood at the stove.

"More tea?" mom would ask.

"Absolutely!"