

The season of memories

The other evening, driving home from a day of holiday shopping with burning feet and aching bones, I was glad that I had made a dent in my list of errands.

I had worked on my 60+ cards the week before, ordered gifts online for stuff that I found at terrific prices, and had just finished my "toy run," which I had the most fun doing since all of us are really kids at heart.

It had been a very rewarding day to find just the right Barbie and low priced Spiderman action figure.

But as I turned the corner into my driveway and turned off the ignition, my happiness was suddenly dashed, much like a glass of spilled red wine as it seeps into a white carpet.

Every year, I had struggled with buying a gift for my mother-in-law, Mabel, but this year there would be no searching the Internet, the clothing racks at crowded department stores, or the back recesses of my mind trying to find something that might bring a smile to the 89-year-old woman's face who had lived a solid lifetime of holidays.



Generations

Peg DeMarco

Mabel had passed away in March and this would be our first Christmas holiday without her.

This got me thinking that, like us, so many other people will be dealing with the death of a loved one and the pangs of regret that one has especially during a holiday that is tantamount to pure love.

For the few years that I had the privilege to know her, Mabel was a woman who had amazed me with all she had been through and all she had accomplished. Raised in an orphanage until she was 18, working hard in a cotton mill, bravely migrating to New York City and eventually marrying and living in a third floor walkup with no elevator, she was familiar with hardship.

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But Mabel was a fighter, a survivor and she had become a successful wife and mother with enormous love for her family.

On my visits with her, she spoke often about adjusting to married life, learning how to fit in with an Italian family and cook intricate Italian dishes and how she and her hard-working baker husband retired and traveled back to North Carolina where they lived out their final years.

One recollection that stands out when I think about Mabel was that she was a Coca-Cola fanatic and usually drank five to 10 sodas a day — but only if the soft drink came in a glass bottle. Yes, she refused to drink her Coca-Cola out of a can or a plastic container. Only the "original" would do for a truly original woman, and it was up to her family to scour the supermarket shelves to keep her well supplied. We did.

After my own mother passed away, five years after my father and around six years ago, my sister called me during that first holiday she was gone and we cried together missing both of our parents. But, toward the end of the call, we came to the conclusion that the best way to cope with a loved one's passing, especially a parent, is to remember all the good times that were had and to share them openly with someone special whether it's a sibling, spouse, significant other, child or a really good friend.

I thought that for this column it might be comforting to remember all the things that made life so special when we were growing up and that perhaps those memories of loved ones no longer with us would become stronger as we took a trip down memory lane. So, think about where you were, what you were doing, and see if these items don't bring you back to some very joyful times.

Let's start with candy cigarettes. Remember that red box of Kings and the pink tips that somehow made you feel superior that they were lit and you were looking as cool as James Dean?

How about those tons of green plastic army men that every kid seemed to have? My brother and I played with them for hours, and we both ran for cover when my father accidentally tripped over them and a tirade of words we weren't supposed to know filled the living room.

Wax Coke-shaped bottles with colored sugar water inside were really popular, although most of it was wax that we all swallowed. I have a feeling we had several candles growing in our stomachs during our youth.

Soda pop machines that dispensed glass bottles (again, the lure of Mabel's glass Coke bottles), coffee shops with tableside jukeboxes or pizza joints where all the A-list kids hung out after school filled our days and frustrated our parents who would have preferred to see us at the dining

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GENERATIONS: Mabel and her Coke

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room table working on our homework.

Remember Blackjack, Clove and Teaberry chewing gum? And how our mother gasped when she saw a mouth filled with black gums and teeth? Or how about home milk delivery in glass bottles with cardboard stoppers? My mother told me she would put a clean milk bottle in my playpen with wooden wash pins and I'd play for hours trying to get the pins into the bottle. Ah ... if only life could have remained as simple as pins in a bottle.

It was a time devoid of cell phones, but there were telephone numbers with word prefixes such as Raymond 4-601 and party lines. PF Flyers sneakers, 45 RPM records with yellow plastic spindles and S & H Green Stamps could also be found (yes, I remember helping my mother moisten those hundreds of stamps with a sponge and sticking them in books to get a new toaster). Metal ice cube trays with levers and wash tub wringers were also household staples you don't find today. Thank goodness.

As kids, we enjoyed Beanie & Cecil 12-cent comic books, roller skate keys and cork pop guns, and drive in movies. We always begged my father to get us food during intermission, but often we brought our own to save money and drooled at the pictures of sizzling hot dogs that filled the screen. Then there were five cent packs of baseball cards (a Mickey Mantle was worth its weight in gold) and holidays filled with Tinker Toys, Erector Sets and Lincoln Logs. If you check out these toys on line, you'll see the price for these "nostalgic toys" has tripled! Apparently, there will always be a huge price tag attached to nostalgia.

Think about trips to McDonald's with your family when the Golden Arches offered 15-cent hamburgers or when a microwave oven wasn't used anywhere and Jiffy Pop popcorn was the highlight of your night in front of the television. I re-

member my father shaking that Jiffy Pop as fast as he could and occasionally once again offering us a few choice words when it burned anyway.

It was a time of 30-cent-gallon gasoline, five-cent stamps, Speedy Alka Seltzer and TV test patterns. And Saturday night television was reserved exclusively to Lawrence Welk, Gunsmoke and Sea Hunt. When Matt Dillon drew his gun, we settled down for some serious television and were glued to the set until commercial time.

"The Ten Commandments" and "West Side Story" are two movies that stick most in my mind as firsts. I remember that the price of getting into the theater was thirty cents, but my girlfriend and I only had 45 cents. We dressed her up in a frilly dress, pigtails and Mary Jane shoes and tried to get her into "West Side Story" at a child's half-price rate. It worked. We sat through "Maria" 12 times.

Holidays have come a long way, too. Hard to believe, but there was once a popular holiday billboard with a cigarette smoking Santa and trendy aluminum holiday trees. And, yes, I'm guilty of falling into the trap of an aluminum tree. One year I nixed the idea of a live tree and brought home a white aluminum one covered with blue bulbs. The "pine" aerosol air freshener and fake snow didn't help. My children didn't speak to me until after New Year's.

If you remember some of these or all of these items of American pop culture, pour yourself a glass of wine or a cup of hot tea and open up one of those dusty family photo albums that are taking up space on your bookshelf. Treasure those keepsakes and remember those times with love in your heart this holiday season.

It's what my husband and I plan to do this year when we think about Mabel.

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