

## The First Christmas

When Chaplain John asked me to write an article for this issue of “(newsletter name)”, I was flattered.. I asked John about the topic and he suggested to write something personal about my mother who had been in a nursing home for almost 5 years. This was perfect for me; I do my best writing based on personal experience.

As I started to mentally re-play those five years, I wondered what specifically I could share with you. Then it dawned on me: **Christmas**. This will be the first Christmas without mom who died in April and I’ve given it a lot of thought recently; wondering how I’ll get through the tinsel, glitter, merriment, shopping, baking, decorating, etc. So it seems appropriate to share with you some holiday memories of a very special lady, my mother, Ida.

My mother loved to cook and bake and Christmas was no exception. She would always use her best china on Christmas and make the most delicious dinner: roasted turkey that she would put in the oven at sunrise, oyster dressing, gravy, creamy mashed potatoes, green jelled salad, cranberries, pumpkin pie and *dozens* of her special Christmas cookies. After long days of working in her own business, she would begin her annual Christmas baking in early November. Each family member had their personal favorite of biscotti, pizzella, scolidi, butter balls, boozy bourbon balls, Santa Claus cookies, and belly buttons.

As I had my own family, Mother’s holiday visits to our home revolved around her baking Christmas cookies in my unfamiliar kitchen with 2 little boys, 7 and 3 ½, sitting on the counter next to her mixing bowl, cracking eggs, adding sugar, stirring, and everybody’s favorite, licking the beaters and the bowl!! Making a huge mess with all the batter, utensils, colored sugars and sprinkles never bothered Mom. She knew the boys would soon tire and she would take over. I don’t know who had more fun: Mother or Garrett and Spencer!

The last time Mother made Christmas cookies was in 1993 when I moved her from a nursing home in Bradenton to be closer to us in Jacksonville. We “checked” her out of Avante and brought her to our home. She had recently lost (or given up) the ability to walk so Robert carefully got her out of the car, into her wheelchair and into the house. I had the pizzella batter ready, put the iron maker on the table so we could scoot her up real close, and gave her the spoon to start allocating just the right amount of batter to the beautiful star shapes on the iron maker. Spencer and I were standing by ready to help. She had taught Spencer well so he was prepared to step in at any time.

You see, those once very busy and talented hands that knitted, embroidered, styled hair, cooked, hugged, tickled, and baked delicious Christmas cookies, had knotted and twisted in response to the atrocity and pain of arthritis. It was hard for Mother to physically manage the pizzella making process; harder still for her to accept her nemesis and impossible for me to understand the “why” of this cruel fate.

Pizzella’s are my family’s favorite and we will soon begin to bake them as part of our holiday celebration. Mother won’t be here to help or enjoy them with a glass of egg nog as we decorate the tree. That will be difficult. I’ll muster up inner strength that she gave me, wipe away my tears, and thank God for the wonderful Mother He gave me and the multitude of blessings she gave me and my family. I love you, Mother, and wish you peace and an eternal life free of pain.

Christmas, 1996