

Boulevard of Broken Bulbs

by BROCK WEIR

Unless it's a deliberate and conscious part of your celebration or observance, you never really want to hear the sound of broken glass.

If it happens in the kitchen, those primal instincts of self-preservation kick in and you contort yourself into a pretzel to survey the situation without moving your feet.

If anyone were to sit down and take an up-to-date ranking of the most unwelcome sound to waft past your ear drums, I'd wager a raucous shatter might be close to the top of the list along with nails on a chalkboard or the sound of a utensil scraping against a ceramic plate.

This holiday season I was surprised ? and not in a necessarily unwelcome way ? that what bubbled up after hearing that potent sound close to my bare feet on Saturday afternoon was, at first, simple resignation.

An early Christmas gift from a family member to our household meant a bit of retooling was in order. To accommodate the new living room feature, a few things had to move around. A Christmas scene was dismantled to make way, things were coming and going from a nearby cabinet to make sure the new tableau was just right ? the only problem was the cabinet in question was perilously close to our Christmas tree.

The rearrangement was nearly complete before I had to take one final trip to the cabinet. I soon heard a shatter, muffled by carpet, just a few centimetres from where I stood.

A Christmas ball had hit the deck.

Those of us who celebrate Christmas and put up a tree accordingly have all experienced the disappointment of a broken bulb. When it happens, some might mourn the aesthetic value that was lost, or the demise of a cherished family heirloom. The bulb I accidentally broke over the weekend had, in my opinion, little aesthetic value, but had more than its share of memories.

While I do generally like the colour pink, the particular shade that was painted on the late ball never really took my fancy. Pepto Bismol pink, at least to me, has never been a hue that screams ?holidays? but they evidently appealed to my grandmother when she decided in the early 1990s that a real tree was no longer for her.

A new artificial tree, in her view, was worthy of some new ornaments so packed away were the pieces that had taken pride of place for generations and bought just for the occasion were a new set of sparkly white glass pinecones, clear bulbs filled with some mysterious kind of crumpled iridescent film, the above-mentioned pink ones with a lacy pattern etched with even more glitter, and, to symbolize her love of the sport, a hollow golf ball dangling from a hook.

They wouldn't have been my first choices, yet they hold very special memories.

That artificial tree that was so new in the 1990s came into our family's life at a challenging time. Christmases at my grandmother's Etobicoke home were a welcome respite and a source of stability when this kid of divorced parents was still learning the ropes dealing with two sets of everything: holidays, birthdays, dynamics, you name it.

These ornaments, for better or worse, became somewhat emblematic of those Christmases I still hold so dear and, in that light, I take great pleasure in hanging up every year.

But this particular bulb's days were apparently numbered and as soon as I saw it fall off its plastic bough out of the corner of my eye,

I anticipated a wave of sadness, and even frustration, at my own clumsiness. Yet, that didn't happen.

Instead, I was reminded of the Christmases of yore and buoyed by the realization that although the bulb was a tangible representation of a particular feeling, the memories were as strong, vivid and potent as every before.

And the memories are what it's all about, isn't it? It's probably why so many of us revisit the same five or ten 'holiday' movies year in and year out. It's certainly not to find out what's going to happen next to Kevin McAllister or if Kris Kringle will ultimately get satisfaction against the brass at Macy's Department Store.

As much as gift-giving is part and parcel of our collective holiday experience, when I reflect back on my last 36 Christmas, presents are rarely the first things that come to mind when strolling down memory lane. Instead, it's the experience, the feeling, the fellowship.

Don't get me wrong, I have been fortunate to have received beautiful and meaningful gifts from my family and friends over the last 37 years, which I continue to cherish and look back fondly on these days, but they stand on their own merits rather than being emblematic of the season.

For me, the holidays are the smells coming from the kitchen, the sound of an unmistakable crackle coming from a fireplace, whether bricks and mortar or streamed to a device; the hustle and bustle of going from place to place, party to party, family to family; the conversation around the dinner table; the smell of winter in the air; and even the feeling of gift-giving when what you've lovingly picked out for someone else was clearly just what the doctor ordered.

As a kid, I remember the sleepless nights that were inextricably part of the Christmas experience, just waiting to see what Santa might have left under that showroom-new artificial tree of which my grandmother was so proud (Santa, of course, receiving my forwarding Christmas address well in advance through that trusty postal code of HOH OH0).

The excitement, and the people who made that happen, is the enduring memory.

They are the memories of forging new and enduring traditions with a single parent that still stand the test of time; they're the memories of dinners that, for one reason or another, have hilariously turned into culinary disasters; of reconnecting with family members you often only see at the holidays; of reminiscing and raising a toast to family and friends who used to have a seat at the table but are sadly no longer with us; of welcoming new members into the fold; of the feel of crunchy snow underfoot while taking a post-meal or post-gift constitutional; and even of the feeling of satisfaction when it's all done and the anticipation of downtime to recharge one's batteries.

Even the infinite possibilities that each year affords us to make new memories.

As I was starting to feel the stress of the season, that broken pink bulb was a gentle reminder of what the holiday season is really all about, what's important, and, what it should be.

In this home stretch before December 25, I hope each of you have the opportunity to take stock, take a step back if the stresses are getting to you to restore perspective, and really think about what will truly be remembered in Christmases yet to come.

As far as walking on broken glass goes, Annie Lennox may have had the inside track, but once it's swept up, the resulting path, as it turns out, can bring about a worthwhile journey.