

[Home](#)

[Summer 2007](#)

[Spring 2007](#)

[Winter 2007](#)

[Autumn 2006](#)

[Summer 2006](#)

[Spring 2006](#)

[Winter 2006](#)

[Fall 2005](#)

[Summer 2005](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[SNR's Writers](#)

[Contact](#)

HANUKKAH CANDLES

BY DEBORAH ROCHEFORD-KELLERMAN

(COPYRIGHT 2007)

Someone had to keep watch.

She pulled the fuzzy brown wrap off of the arm of the couch and tucked the chewed off end around her feet, tucking the rest of the blanket around her legs and thighs as she worked it up towards her chest and over her heart.

Once settled, she focused her attention on the two menorahs that stood side by side on the mantle just below the print of the Ark. She had purchased the traditional metal menorah from a synagogue when Jason was barely old enough to walk. She would never forget stepping out of a furious snow storm into the quiet warmth of the temple carrying Jason on her hip. She had wrapped the baby in blankets from head to toe to protect him from the weather and bundled herself in a heavy coat and scarf. To her embarrassment she had practically knocked the Rabbi over when she entered the temple, but he had just smiled kindly and quoted a passage from the Old Testament about a mother and child before escorting her to the temple store. She had never been in a temple before.

The second menorah, a more recent acquisition, was made of blown glass and had a sensuous fluid shape that was meant to represent the tree of life. David had bought it in a little art gallery while on vacation in Arizona. He had paid a pretty penny for it, but her husband was always willing to spend money on art.

It was the eighth night, and the burning candles cast soft shadows that made the battered wood of the fireplace mantle seem beautiful. Eight perfect golden lights in each of the menorahs surrounded the raised flame of the *Shamash*; even the lights of the Christmas tree seemed subdued in deference to this last night. Usually the kids lit the candles, taking turns so that the prized final night fell to a different child each year. This year Anne, the youngest, lit the candles on the first three nights. David had done the honors himself for the other five. She had never been asked to participate. But then, it wasn't really her holiday.

Careful not to disturb her blanket, she reached over and grabbed a pillow off of the rocker to shove behind her head. She scooted down into the comfort of the couch cushions, determined to watch each blue and white candle expand to fill the room as tangible solid turned to smoke and vapor, vanishing into a memory. But after a time she found it difficult for the candles to command her entire attention and although she did not mean it to, her gaze began to wander taking in the familiar trinkets that filled the room.

The overcrowded bookshelves had everything from wooden carvings to sea shells collected on family vacations displayed on their dusty tops. Enlarged pictures of her husband and the kids were scattered around the room; all sporting big smiles for the camera. No doubt a visitor would think a happy family lived here. Her eyes roamed lazily over each picture, savoring the beauty of her children. Picture after picture seemed to fill the empty places in the room, each with David and a different combination of the kids. She paused and scanned the pictures once more, a discordant

thought tugging at the hidden corners of her mind. She was in only one of the pictures; a picture of the five of them taken years ago when the kids were small.

As if remembering the sacredness of her task, she forced her eyes back to the candles fearful they might have slipped into nothingness while she wandered. But the wax was good and the candles burned slowly. The gentle warmth of the light was soothing and the quiet of the room, peaceful. She floated in a sea of contentment so rare that the steel rod that normally kept her standing began to soften, ever so slightly, and her eyelids fluttered over exhausted eyes.

No. She could not sleep, not yet, not until the candles were gone.

She refocused her gaze and assessed the status of the lights. The candles burned steady and bright but had barely begun to diminish. She gave herself permission to glance at the Christmas tree. The tree stood tall and silent, glittering like a distant star in the reflected candlelight. She sighed. Had there really been a time when Christmas was her favorite holiday? She and the kids had carried through the tradition of driving out to a Christmas tree farm and buying a fresh tree. The day had not been as cold as it could have been for December and they had spent a good two hours tramping through the snow, looking over every variety of fir and pine growing on the farm. The day had been fun, full of laughter and closeness with her sons wrestling in the snow and her daughter hiding among the trees. They had spent time debating the merits of the different types of trees only to buy a Douglas fir just like they did every year. The only disappointment to the day was the lack of hot apple cider at the farm store to warm them up while the tree was being loaded. The owners had decided it was too messy to provide cider because the younger children tended to spill it and so discontinued the tradition. Of course it would have been nice if David had decided to come, but he had refused.

The day was almost gone when they brought the tree home. Everyone had something else to do and she had been afraid to suggest decorating the tree in the face of David's mood. So she had struggled with the tree on her own until she managed to get it up and stable then added enough water in the basin to keep it fresh. She had dusted off the quilted tree skirt and used it to hide the plastic stand that held the tree upright. She picked the pine needles out of the rug. Finally she turned out the lights and left the tree dark and silent in the family room, with only the sweet scent of pine to proclaim its sacrifice.

The tree sat for a full week and still no decorations adorned its branches. So one Saturday night shortly before Christmas she put some apple cider in the crock pot. She added a few cinnamon sticks and threw in a small handful of cloves, letting the aroma fill the kitchen while she went about gathering her family to decorate the tree. Philip and Anne joined her in the family room. Each had a box, taped and labeled, filled with tissue wrapped ornaments; treasures chosen on Christmas Eve for each Christmas since their birth. She had her own box of ornaments filled with various renditions of Saint Nicholas. She turned on the gas fireplace and the three of them hung their ornaments.

The hour they spent was bittersweet. They spoke in soft voices about the times and places when many of the ornaments were chosen. There was an occasional chuckle over an ornament picked long ago. After the ornaments were hung she poured the kids a cup of hot cider. Much to her disappointment, they each took their cup of cider back to their respective bedrooms to be enjoyed alone.

David's box of ornaments remained on the brick hearth until after the kids went to bed. Matthew's sat there still, unopened and forlorn. She could not help the silent tear that trickled unbidden down her cheek. Matthew, her sweet gentle child with the eye of an artist and the heart of a poet, had refused to even buy his ornament this year.

She yanked her eyes away from the offending white box and returned her gaze to the candles, willing the peace and gentleness of the lights to flow over and through her. They were starting to diminish in size. How strange that the candles in the glass menorah always seemed to burn faster than the candles in the metal one. All of the candles were of the same manufacturer and lit at pretty much the same time yet they were beginning to look uneven. She was sure there was a reason behind this phenomenon but she could not imagine what it might be. She stared at the flames, trying hard to vanquish all thoughts but those of the present; to watch and record the disappearance of the candles on the fireplace mantle.

But like a persistent fly, her thoughts would not leave her in peace. The golden color of the flame matched the golden color of Matthew's hair and her thoughts were carried back to Christmas Eve.

She had wandered through the shops with Philip and Anne and David, trying hard to ignore the aching in her chest while the four of them inspected ornaments hanging on racks and dressing up plastic trees. They each searched for the perfect ornament to sum up their mind and heart for the passing year. Philip and Anne each chose an angel. David decided he could not find one that he liked and she chose a Santa carved out of a birch tree branch. It was a simple thing, rough hewn and lacking in the usual sparkle, but somehow it captured her heart; in some way it just seemed more real to her than the others. Matthew had abstained.

Through the blur of her vision she noticed that a few of the candles had finally vanished. She felt anxiety wash through her. Where had they gone? She had been here, watching, but she could not seem to remember the moment they had vanished. She needed to watch more closely, she could not let the rest simply slip away without her knowing. But she was just so tired.

Copyright 2007, Deborah Rochford-Kellerman. © This work is protected under the U.S. copyright laws. It may not be reproduced, reprinted, reused, or altered without the expressed written permission of the author.

Deborah Rochford-Kellerman teaches chemistry, geology, biology and astronomy. This is her first piece to be published.