

Teacups hold warm memories

Cindy Hval/SR

Blowing dust off the top of the cardboard box, I opened it to find a stash of treasures, carefully wrapped in newspapers – my teacup collection.

Two years ago, I'd packed them away when Derek remodeled our living room. The fragile collection had hung suspended from hooks, perched on

shelves and clustered on top of the piano.

Now, his latest DIY project (a walk-in closet), has caused me to go through bins and boxes I'd squirreled away in our spare room.

Cradling a rose-patterned Royal Doulton cup and its matching saucer brought back memories of how hard I'd tried to stake out bits of feminine beauty in a boy-filled home. And it reminded me of the many casualties my collection had endured. Closing my eyes, I can still hear the startling sound of china hitting a tile floor in one of the most memorable catastrophes.

The crash was spectacular.

Not an ordinary slip and drop, but a sweeping, sailing smashing of Scandinavian porcelain. I gazed in dismay at the jagged pieces of what had been a beautiful ivory-colored teacup.

Four pairs of eyes stared at me – staring at the shattered cup.

“It was just an accident, Mom,” whispered Ethan.

“But it was Daddy’s Norwegian grandma’s cup!” Alex said.

“I think she’s gonna cry,” said Zack, his own eyes welling with tears.

“I hug you!” said 2-year-old Sam.

As I looked at the latest casualty of my teacup collection, I couldn't imagine what had possessed me, the mother of four sons, to fill my home with such fragile, feminine things.

Of course, I wasn't the mother of four sons when I began collecting them.

It started with a delicate hand-painted Noritake rosebud cup and saucer I found at a thrift store. I was 18 and had what my dad referred to as a “hopeless chest” to fill. The cup was beautiful and only 50 cents. I bought it and nestled it in the chest, among my grandmother’s tea towels and my mom’s old Tupperware. Thus a collection was born.

I scoured yard sales, estate sales and thrift stores for china treasures, only buying those patterned with roses. I married and started a family, and as my family grew, so did my teacup collection. With each pregnancy, I dreamed of tea parties and lace skirts and floppy straw hats. What I got was soccer balls, Legos, GI Joes – and broken teacups.

I've been amazed at the many ways cups can be smashed. Like the time Alex ran through the house with a pair of swimming noodles and knocked two teacups off two shelves with one glancing blow.

Teacups became collateral damage during wrestling matches and indoor football games.

Fragile things and little boys rarely mix without some breakage, yet I chose to display the cups and not pack them away, until the children were grown and gone. I've watched them fall and shatter. I've swept up the pieces and rearranged teacups to fill the empty spaces.

I displayed them because they are feminine and beautiful. I wanted to remind my rough and tumble crowd that sometimes people, like teacups, can be fragile, and that gentleness can be manly, too.

The cups weren't purely decorative. At least once a month, I'd steep tea leaves and brew a pot of tea in one of my porcelain teapots. I'd place a lace doily on a silver tray, fill one of my favorite cups with fragrant brew, grab a novel and announce, "It's tea time!"

I'd take the tray to my room and shut the door and pray I'd have enough peace and quiet to finish the pot and a chapter in my book.

I chose beauty with the risk of breakage, and when a toddler broke the first cup so many years ago, I made myself a promise. I promised I would not scream or scold because a child broke a cup. Teacups are replaceable – little boys are not. It hasn't been easy to hold my tongue.

The true test was the Norwegian teacup – the only thing we have that belonged to my husband's grandmother. I blinked back tears, and gazed into all those blue eyes looking so anxiously into mine.

"I guess it's Mama's turn to break something," I said, sniffing. "I was sweeping and the broom handle caught the cup and knocked it down."

"It's OK, Mom," Ethan said. "It was just an accident."

"Maybe Dad can fix it," offered Alex.

"I know it was special Mama, but it's just a cup, please don't cry," said Zack, his eyes teary.

"I hug you!" said Sam, wrapping his chubby arms around my legs.

So, I dried my eyes and gathered the pieces, grateful for irreplaceable boys.

The memories, like the cups, bring tears and smiles. Now, with just two sons at home, 15 and 20, my teacups are as safe from breakage as they ever will be, yet I wrapped the cup and saucer back in their newspaper cocoon and closed the flaps on the box.

I made my point years ago – that boys and fragile beauty can coexist. That children matter more than things. I'm just not sure I'm ready to part with any of them – the boys or the teacups.

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