

Christmas miracle igloo

CHARLES PINNING

My father was hopping mad on Christmas Day. Our refrigerator had broken down beyond repair. He was faced with buying a new one on a day when he couldn't, and just when he and my mother had carefully budgeted and bought our presents.

This was before credit cards, so you either had the money to buy a new fridge, or you didn't. And the idea of buying on time, and paying interest, was anathema to my father.

My brother and I got out of the house. It was quiet and serene on the porch. I couldn't do anything with my new bike because of the snow, and John couldn't do anything with his new .22 rifle until my father took him to the range.

"I've got an idea," said John. He grabbed the snow shovel and cut a chunk of snow, and a few more, then stacked them on each other. "Look," he said. "We can build an igloo."

Within an hour, we were halfway up the walls of a substantial igloo, and by lunchtime it stood about five feet high and big enough that four people could fit in.

My father came out of the house with a sour expression on his face. He didn't care for the cold, and now with the refrigerator broken he would've been happy to abandon ship and take off for parts unknown.

"Look, Dad!" I said.

He glanced toward the igloo as my mother stepped out onto the porch behind him. She pointed to the igloo and smiled. "There's our refrigerator," she said.

My father's expression turned from sour to sudden interest. He crawled inside, and when he came out he exclaimed, "We're in business!"

After the food had been transferred in, my father looked up at the sunny sky. I could feel him gauging how long our new refrigerator might last. That afternoon, he did a very ingenious thing: He hooked up the garden hose and sprayed down the entire igloo. That night, the temperature dropped below freezing, and in the morning our igloo was encased in a fine glaze of ice.

We did that every day for the next week until we had a rock-hard layer of ice over the entire igloo a good couple of inches thick.

It was soon after the first of the year that my father got his next paycheck and went out and bought a new refrigerator, but we kept on spraying the igloo. It had gotten to be a routine and my father didn't stop us. We were all captivated by how thick the ice was getting — it was beginning to give the igloo a bluish cast — and we all wondered how long it would last.

The igloo didn't start melting until late March. In April, it



was pretty drippy, and by early May, all that was left was a chunk about the size of a soccer ball. When I got home from school one day and saw all that remained was no bigger than a baseball, I brought it in the house and stuck it in the freezer.

The igloo, or what was left of it, lived like a relic in the back of the freezer compartment of the "new" refrigerator for five years, until my parents moved to Virginia, at which point I packed it in an ice chest that coincidentally had the name "Igloo" printed on the side.

It then lived in the Virginia freezer until my parents moved to Florida. Then I transferred it to my Baltimore freezer, and then to my New York City freezer after I graduated from college in Baltimore and moved to Manhattan.

It was touch-and-go that first summer in Manhattan when we had a brown-out that became a black-out, and the igloo was reduced to the size of a Ping-Pong ball. But when power was restored, it still lived, next to the frozen peas and broccoli.

That same summer, a friend came over. The weather was hot, her shorts were short and she came waltzing into the living room with a glass of iced tea. I didn't pay it much attention, until the ice clinked in her glass. I started, because I knew I'd just filled the ice cube trays with water.

I rushed into the kitchen and opened the freezer door. It was gone! The Igloo was gone! I raced back into the living room and was about to take the glass from her, but she looked at me with such innocent eyes, I stopped.

I watched her sip from the glass and I asked for a sip myself. She moved to kiss me, but instead rubbed her nose against mine.

"Too hot to kiss," she said. "We'll just rub noses, like the Eskimos."

I didn't say a word about it, but I knew our secret bond was sealed, the miracle of the Christmas Igloo complete.