

My Fifth Christmas Without Him

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On January 19, 2006, my son Micheal fell three stories from a roof on a construction site, while not wearing his safety harness and safety lifeline rope. He was “just running to the top of the ladder for a second,” but a second was all it took for him to slip and fall, with his head striking the ground first. He sustained severe brain injuries and succumbed to his injuries on January 25, 2006.



Next to the anniversary of Micheal’s death, I think I have found Christmas to be the most difficult time of the year. As it approaches, I find myself reflecting on how much I have changed, and on how our Christmas has changed.

I loved the shopping and decorating, the cooking and days spent doing Christmas baking with the kids, the visitors and get-togethers ... all of it. When Darryl’s mom and Micheal were both alive, we always had Christmas at our home and literally had a house full of people from Christmas Eve ‘till Boxing Day or even the day after. The family room in the basement was wall-to-wall with air mattresses and sleeping bags for three days and every bed in the house was full. Things changed a bit after Darryl’s mom died, it got quieter, but we still had big family gatherings at Christmas – my family and my daughter Krystal’s fiancé’s family on Christmas Eve, and then we’d go over to Darryl’s Dad’s for Christmas Day. And then friends would come over on Boxing Day.

Micheal’s death changed all that.

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The first Christmas, everyone understood that we just wanted to be at home alone and so the four of us, Darryl, Krystal, Jasmine (my other daughter) and I planned a quiet Christmas. I did all of my Christmas shopping in October because I couldn’t face shopping while the Christmas Carols played over the speaker systems, and lights twinkled, and blonde little boys sat on Santa’s lap. And I did the majority of it by catalogue or Internet – simple, impersonal and somewhat painless (comparatively).

I only put up the tree that year for Jasmine. I was so afraid of the memories of family tree-trimming days-gone-by: unpacking the plaster ornaments that the kids and I had

painted, seeing all of the tacky decorations that only a mother could love which Micheal had made me over the years at school (remembering him making me turn around and close my eyes while he “snuck” them in the house and hid them in his room, and proudly watching as I unwrapped them on Christmas morning) and then putting the lighted angel on top.

I managed to get through it without one tear to ruin it for Jasmine. Later in the afternoon, we pulled out the miniature tree that the kids used to put up in the rec room downstairs, and I was just going to pack it back away when I wondered if I could decorate it with just his mementos. His army cadet regimental and rank badges and his brass hat, the little photo key-chains that came with portrait packages, his necklace and other special things. I spent the rest of the afternoon scouring the house for miniature reminders of Micheal’s life to adorn “the Micheal tree.” And that evening as I sat by myself decorating that little tree, the tears came. It was beautiful and it broke my heart to decorate it. But was and still is worth every ounce of emotion that it takes to decorate it.

Then came Christmas Day...We sunned by the pool and went for a walk along the beach. But “it” was still there.

We got up Christmas morning, lit a candle in front of Micheal’s photo and opened our gifts quietly – although not without appreciation – with little joy. We went to the cemetery to hang a card on the plaque of Micheal’s wall niche. When we got back home Krystal left almost immediately to spend the day at a friend’s. Jasmine disappeared into her bedroom to watch movies. Darryl disappeared to the basement to play video games. And I put the turkey in the oven and went to my bedroom to spend the day curled up in Micheal’s comforter crying. But we got through it.

Our second Christmas, I managed using the avoidance tactic. My parents were taking Jasmine to Newfoundland for a week with them on Boxing Day, so Darryl and I decided to book a trip to Mexico while she was gone. I guess the anticipation and excitement (we had never travelled before) kept me from dwelling on Christmas day because that Christmas seemed to go fairly well. We still went to the cemetery, I still cried a lot, we had our little Christmas dinner and then we went to bed early to get some sleep for early flights on Boxing Day.

But for the most part it worked.

On the third Christmas we tried our old “traditions.” Jasmine and I spent a Saturday doing Christmas baking, trimming the tree and we went Christmas shopping. Krystal’s fiancé’s family and my parents came over on Christmas Eve, and Christmas Day we went to Darryl’s father’s home to spend the day with his family, just like we used to. It was a dismal failure. There was tension throughout the entire family, I was exhausted from wearing my mask of normalcy and pretending, and *nobody outside of our immediate little family would talk about Micheal*. That was more painful than anything. No candles lit in front of Micheal’s photo like in previous years; if I brought up his name or started talking about a memory, someone was always quick to change the subject. It was as if he had never been. I was hurt, disappointed and so angry. But we got through it.

Last year was our fourth Christmas without Micheal and we decided to try an entirely different approach. We would pretty much skip Christmas and go to Mexico! There was a little grumbling from some family members who just didn’t get it – after all, Micheal had been gone almost four years now: shouldn’t we be over it? Krystal couldn’t come so we booked an all-inclusive trip for three to Mexico. We made plans to go to Chichen Itza, shopping in Cancun and to do lots of relaxing by the pool. Even the Christmas Carols (many of them in Spanish) and Christmas trees were okay. No snow, no relatives with expectations, just sun, friendly people and a beautiful ocean view.

Then came Christmas Day. I woke up and gave Jasmine her Christmas card and we went down to breakfast. We sunned by the pool and went for a walk along the beach. But “it” was still there. We had all been pretty quiet throughout the day, and Jasmine had been downright cranky. As we headed back to our room to get ready to go for Christmas dinner Jasmine and I had our first ever real fight. I stormed off in tears and Darryl stayed with Jasmine, knowing that I needed time alone.

On the balcony of our room, overlooking a ludicrously beautiful blue ocean, darkening into sunset, I cried my heart out. I was angry at Jasmine for not seeming grateful for this wonderful trip. I was angry at Krystal for not coming with us. I was angry at Micheal for dying. And I was angry at myself for thinking that this trip would make Christmas “go away.” Eventually Jasmine came back to the room and apologized for being so miserable all day – she missed Micheal, she missed her sister and “it” was still there for her too.

We went on to enjoy the rest of our trip together, but I learned a valuable lesson last year. No matter how far you run,



Micheal Fisher in his Christmas Play

Christmas still comes on December 25th. And no matter where I am on that day, Micheal will still be gone.

And so for me as I move toward our fifth Christmas without him, the options are to fight that pain every year fooling myself into thinking that someday I will find something that will make it not happen ... or to accept that no matter what I do, I’m going to miss Micheal. It’s going to hurt. My memories will haunt me. But I think I have decided to choose to embrace those memories. It will always, always hurt that he is gone. I will never, ever stop missing him – at Christmas, or any other day of the year. But there are so many good memories to cling to. Memories that will make me laugh and memories that will make me cry.

So this year I’m going to try the acceptance strategy. Cry when I need to, laugh when I need to, let people know that I expect them to include memories of Micheal in our celebrations, and see how it goes.

This journey – the grief journey – is just like the journey of life. For me, in great part, it’s about taking and appreciating what I have with love and gratitude, and accepting what I no longer have and being thankful that I had it.