Child Winner - A Holiday to Remember

by Tyler Hartman, 11
Stoneybrook West

Some might think the passing of a loved one is sad, but it fills my heart each holiday season with joyful emotion that overflows like a waterfall cascading down the side of a mountain.

My story begins when I am 5 years old. Our family always travels to Maryland to visit our large, and sometimes loud, Italian family. I looked forward to the 900-mile journey, as my mom, dad, brother, sister and I pile into our red Montero SUV. The journey is filled with video games, movies, constant stops at Cracker Barrel to pick up candy and junk food and, my personal favorite, fast food. Cheeseburgers from Wendy's are the best. They are scrumptious and definitely a special treat, since my mom believes we always should eat healthy.

The truck is stuffed with presents covered in shiny, colorful Christmas wrapping paper; luggage; pillows; and blankets, making it difficult to move around. My brother, Jacob, and sister, Jordan, and I feel like packed sardines in a can as we make the long pilgrimage from Florida to Maryland. As my dad drives further north, I notice a gradual change in temperature, which always begins to heighten our holiday spirit.

Upon arriving at Grandpa Paul's farm, which is decked with Christmas lights adorning the white picket fences that shelter the horses, and wreaths hanging over the garage and top arch of the horse stable, we immediately spot Grandpa in the window. Excited, Father stops the car, and my brother, sister and I jump out and race each other up the driveway to the front door into Grandpa's awaiting arms.

Today is Christmas Eve. We greet our aunts, uncles and cousins. The house is filled with joyous laughter and my cousin Rachel playing Christmas carols on the baby grand piano. I look forward to seeing my 84-year-old grandpa, whom I love and adore immensely. He always tells me great stories about his childhood and gives me money and says, "Don't tell your mother."

As the night wears on, we enjoy eating our traditional Italian Feast of the Seven Fishes, followed by an array of cookies, cakes and pies.

I know my great grandfather's favorite cookie is a pizzella, and I grab a couple to bring to him as a special treat. I search the house from room to room and can't locate him, but then I notice him through the window sitting outside on the porch swing. I grab my jacket and the cookies and go out into the cold to sit next to him. He thanks me for bringing him his favorite treats and tussles my hair, just as the first snowfall of the season begins falling to the ground. Great Grandpa begins telling me stories about his childhood in Italy and Christmases past, and I sit mesmerized, listening to him and his tales of wisdom.

He finally stands up, takes my hand and leads me into the warmth of the house. Great Grandpa takes a seat by the crackling fireplace while I play video games with my cousins. It is the perfect Christmas Eve.

The family leaves that evening to return to their homes, while Mom tucks my brother, sister and I into our beds at Grandpa's house. We wake up early on Christmas morning and are amazed by the abundance of presents Santa has left us under the beautiful twinkling tree. Jacob, Jordan and I dive into the mound of presents and frantically begin tearing into our gifts. It is a great Christmas morning.

The news comes a few hours later that Great Grandpa had gone to bed the previous night, but he did not wake up. My mom tells us he is now in heaven.

Every year, my family continues to make the trek from Florida to Maryland to spend Christmas with the family. When I see the first snowfall of the year, I can't help but remember that Christmas Eve, when I sat on the front porch, swinging with Great Grandpa and eating pizzellas, while watching the white snow flurries drift gently to the ground. When I see snow, I quickly
think of Great Grandpa and know that he is smiling down on me from heaven.

Honorable Mention - A Christmas With the Coristines
by Cole Coristine, 11
Southwest Orlando

Every family has their own traditions during Christmas, and they are each special in their own way. Some families go Christmas caroling, while others bake cookies or drink eggnog. Traditions can be passed from one generation to another or made within the family.

Every year, my mom starts the Christmas season by buying each one of my two brothers and me our own Advent calendars. As far back as I can remember, my brothers and I anxiously awoke each day to find out what candy or gift we received from our calendar. So, every day was like Christmas morning.

We also have the Gingerbread House Challenge. This is where we take all of our leftover Halloween candy that we have kept in the freezer and use it to transform our gingerbread houses into outrageous creations. Each gingerbread house is judged for best design, best use of material, and most creative. In the end, we select one winner, but we are each awarded our own gingerbread house to devour.

Every Christmas, without fail, we watch classic Christmas movies. We also pop all sorts of different popcorns, such as Parmesan, salted, caramel and garlic. On cold nights we gather around the fire and enjoy each other's company while watching It's a Wonderful Life, A Christmas Story, How the Grinch Stole Christmas, and A Charlie Brown Christmas.

Of all our Christmas traditions, the one I enjoy the most is picking out the tree and decorating. We always buy a real tree, and sometimes it takes hours to find the perfect one. After we get it home and in the door, we fill the stand with water and start decorating. The lights are always in a tangle, and sometimes there are broken bulbs. I really like our assortment of ornaments. Some are old, some new, some passed down and some homemade by my brothers and me. The homemade ones are my mom's favorites, because they're the most personal.

On Christmas morning, we have the oldest continuing tradition, where my family members take turns unwrapping presents. As you can see, every family has their own traditions, but these are the ones that make my Christmas special.

Honorable Mention - The Christmas Card
by Sandra Roman, adult
The Willows

It makes me smile when my dad's friends call him Slugger. Dad resembles that remark. He plays hardball in every sense. I was 12 when I watched Dad hit a ball so hard it flew out of the park and struck a small dog that just happened to be walking by, killing it instantly. I remember the grief-stricken owner carrying the dog away. I did my best to hold back the tears.

Dad, on the other hand, dropped his bat, shrugged his shoulders, mumbled something about dogs running around without a leash, and ran the bases.

Dad is tough, and he wanted my sisters and me to be tough, too. He coached our Little League teams, and he wouldn't let us miss practice, much less a game. Because of his undying dedication to the sport and tireless hours of coaching us, I became the best player in the league. I could hit, run, catch, and I was a killer first baseman.

By the time I got to high school, it was pretty clear that I would be going off to college on a baseball scholarship. I was the fastest, most dynamic ballplayer in the school. Dad had honed me well, and we shared a passion for the game that was unparalleled. When it came to baseball, I was a chip off the old block; but that is where our similarities began and ended. I was dramatically different than Dad in another arena of life. Feeling different was what caused the subsequent panic attacks that beleaguered me through high school.

I was 16 when I realized that I didn't share the same crazy enthusiasm for girls that my buddies did. I did think girls were pretty, and I had many as friends. One night, I agreed to a double date. In spite of having had a really good time, late that evening I had my first-ever panic attack. The double date started a path of self-awareness and confusion that left me nerved-out. I suffered through a night of fear, anxiety, nausea and a heart beating so fast I thought I was dying from a heart attack. Unable to withstand it, I called on my mother. She found me in a pool of sweat, half-crazed and shaking uncontrollably. She stayed with me until I calmed down. She kept asking me what was wrong, and I couldn't really formulate an answer. I was so emotionally disjointed and bewildered.

The panic attacks that followed happened unexpectedly and were not triggered by any common denominator. My mother became increasingly worried about my emotional state. She and Dad were divorced, but spoke regularly. When they discussed what was happening to me, Dad always maintained that I was just going through growing pains. He said I was tough and would find my own way out. My mom didn't agree. She suggested I seek counseling. Reluctantly, I went.

My first session was awkward and uncomfortable. I sat in front of a woman who was a complete stranger. She asked why I was there. I didn't know how to begin. I couldn't define my feelings. Out of the blue, I started stammering about baseball. I talked the whole hour about nothing but baseball. Baseball was my safety shield. It was the only thing that wasn't muddled in my mind. It grounded me. In retrospect, I realized that talking about baseball that session is what actually helped me recover. My counselor, as if on cue, suggested that every time I saw myself going down that dark tunnel of anxiety, I was to picture myself at the plate. I was to see my anxiety as the ball coming at me, and I was to hit the ball so hard that I shattered my bat and heard the crowd cheering.

Three years went by after my first therapy session, and, as hoped, I graduated from high school, was playing ball as a college freshman, and the panic attacks had subsided. I had realized my dilemma and had shared it with my mother, sisters and close friends. Anyone and everyone who needed to know, knew, except for Dad.

I was coming home for Christmas to be with Dad. He seemed so happy and proud of me. In his eyes, I could do no wrong. Knowing this, how could I ever tell him? I was so worried about how he would react. Would he be so disappointed that he would scream at me, disown me or, worse, feel guilty, as though he may have been somehow responsible?

As with every Christmas morning, the presents were under the tree. Dad got my sisters and me the usual gifts — new sporting equipment. The girls got tennis rackets. I got an awesome new 2011 Louisville Slugger bat made of scandium alloy.

After opening presents, I had a moment alone with Dad. I had decided to man-up and tell him, worse he should hear it from someone else.

I pulled him aside and said, “Dad, we need to talk.”

He said, “Son, wait one second. Here, this is for you.”

He then handed me a Christmas card. He said, “Open it son, I had this card specially designed for you.”

I slowly opened the card. On the cover was a picture of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer pulling Santa’s sled full of baseballs and wooden bats. On the inside was a picture of all the reindeers dressed in Red Sox gear playing baseball, with Rudolph at bat. The handwritten caption read: Some reindeers are different, but that doesn’t mean they can’t hit home runs. I love you, Slugger! Merry Christmas, Dad.

I stood with my heart overflowing. Dad had brilliantly and gracefully let me know he knew and accepted me. He did it in a way that honored us both.

There was nothing left to say except, “I love you, too, Dad.”

Honorable Mention - Unto You a Child Is Born
by Col. Corbin Sarchet, adult
Lake Fischer Estates

For once, a calm reigned over a shellshot landscape, long ago that Christmas Eve, 1951, on the frontlines, somewhere in Korea.

It was bitter cold. He was crouched down but alert in his listing-post firing position. He gazed upward at the clear, starlit sky. He looked westward, but the planet Venus was the only bright star. He wondered how much brighter was the star the Magi saw and followed from their eastern realms.

He heard a subdued signal from his sound-powered phone, which linked him backward to the outpost.

“Hey, Sarge, this is Tom, you two are being relieved. When you get back, go to company headquarters. The Cap wants to see you,” came the whisper.

“What’s up?”

“Don’t know, but I could tell he was smiling when he told me.”

Sgt. Davidson edged over to the two-man position, separated by a short connecting camouflaged and covered crawl way.

“Mark, heads up. We have company coming to relieve us.”

“So soon? We still have a couple of hours to go.”

“Well, maybe we’re getting an early Christmas gift.”

“I was told never to look a gift horse in the mouth, but I am not about to turn down a hot snack and few more hours of sack time.”

“Me either, but I think it is because Tom told me the Cap wants to see me for some reason.”

Sgt. Davidson hoped it wasn’t about his wife, Mary. They were expecting their firstborn in about a month, almost nine months since he and his unit shipped out from Fort Polk, La. His Oklahoma Army National Guard Division, the famed 45th Infantry Division Thunderbirds, had been mobilized for the “peace action” in September 1950, shortly after the North Koreans had invaded South Korea.

Hailing from Bethany, near Oklahoma City, he was a member of the 179th Infantry, 1st Battalion, Company A. Back home, he was a homebuilder, carpenter. A number of his fellow guardsmen, including their captain, wore the blue-and-silver Combat Infantryman Badge earned from the not-too-distant World War II. They served with the Thunderbirds from Sicily to Anzio to Rome, into Southern France, and then Germany.

Once again, they had answered the call of duty for their country. Sgt. Davidson however, ironically enough, had served with the 2nd Calvary Division, the unit the Thunderbirds relieved. While the guardsmen were considered weekend warriors, the mobilized Thunderbirds actually had more combat experience than the 2nd Calvary, mostly manned by draftees in the last months of the war. Their veterans had taken their discharges and were gone. The unit was ill-equipped, having languished in occupation duty in Japan with duties that did not include war training, thought not to be important now that the war-to-endall-wars had ended.

After Sarge and Mark had been relieved and grabbed some hot java from the outpost, the sergeant made his way back to see the captain.

He was worried about his wife. She had been staying with her aunt, Elizabeth, but now was at home under the watchful eye of her mother, Martha Lord. But, he reassured himself, their neighbors and friends were also watching out, especially Jerry and Joan Shepard, who lived next door and were members of the same Bethany First Presbyterian Church he and his wife attended.

He also knew that the pastor's wife, Angel King, and her grown daughter, Ruth, were busy organizing a baby shower for Mary and would be hovering over her also. The three Kings were good friends of his and Mary.

Arriving back at the bunkered headquarter's hutch, he was greeted by a grinning top kick and the captain.

"Got a message for you, Sarge," said Capt. Johnson.

Sarge opened the "flimsy" relayed through the Red Cross. He read:
Sergeant Joseph Davidson,
For unto you this night, a Child is Born,
And his name shall be called,
Daniel Lord Davidson.
The babe came early.
Born 11:30 p.m. CST, in the Holy
Manger Hospital, Bethany, Okla.
Mom and babe are doing well.
Daniel came into the world at 8 pounds,
5 ounces.
Congratulations and best wishes,
Harold Angel, M.D.

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