

A LESS TRAUMATIC YEAR

BY STEPHANIE DOUGLAS

My introduction to writing for *The Cadre*: “We need Christmas stories,” says Kent as he looks around the table, “any type of Christmas stories as long as they’re about Christmas.” Sounds like a simple enough first assignment. If only he knew that I would rather have been assigned a story where I had to interview a mortician and take pictures of dead bodies or write a 10,000 word essay on the value of snow rather than trying to bring forth a measly 500 words on Christmas. What little I know of Kent, I think he would have trouble stifling back his laughter.

What could be easier than writing about Christmas? It’s a time of coloured lights arrayed in fetching patterns and shapes, a time for laughter, of spending time with friends and loved ones, of eating too much and drinking too deeply. Christmas is that time we take delight in complaining about the commercialism of it all while we walk by store windows entranced at the variety of goodies assaulting our eyes. Or we grumble about the incessant Christmas carols assaulting our ears from every store’s loud speaker as we walk down the street, all the while humming them under our breaths and taking great enjoyment in bellowing them out while showering.

Christmas is a time for self-indulgence and indulging others. It’s a time for watching the eyes of young and old alike, light up with joy at seeing us arrive at their door, arms loaded with presents. It’s a time for dreamy nostalgia as families engage in time-honoured traditions or for creating new ones as children leave parental homes to start their own families, their own lives, their own traditions.

However, for some of us, for people like me, Christmas is a time of great pain. It’s a silent pain, difficult to share in this time of laughter and joy. Not because we begrudge other’s enjoying themselves, on the contrary, but because we have difficulty joining in and even greater difficulty in deflecting questions about what we are doing for the holidays or explaining why we just don’t have it in us to get into the “holiday spirit.”

It’s not that we want to be evasive but we know from experience that people don’t really want to hear about pain, death and loss at a time like Christmas, what a drag!

For me and people like me who have lost a loved one and are approaching this first major holiday without them, we face; I face this holiday season with trepidation. I should know the drill by now, six years ago my eldest sister died a couple of months before Christmas, that first Christmas was hard, her birthday, Christmas Eve, the hardest of all. I was lucky enough to have good friends, who didn’t try and cheer me up, but allowed me to experience Christmas in whatever way I needed to. They welcomed me into their hearts and into their family and I spent that Christmas with my daughter surrounded by friends and their families, engulfed with their laughter and their joy. I couldn’t participate fully, there was too much pain, but I was and will ever be grateful for that experience of being wanted without the pressure of having to be ‘happy’ or ‘okay,’ or ‘having fun.’

This year is different altogether. On this Christmas day, I will relive last year’s when I was told my mother was in hospital. This New Year’s Eve, I will revisit the experience of flying out to BC hoping beyond hope I would reach Victoria in time. On New Year’s Day, it will be impossible for me not to remember watching my mother die, and as the holidays get closer, the reality that I am an orphan is starting to sink in.

I don’t feel much like celebrating, but I do want to be surrounded by other’s having the time of their lives. I want to hear tacky Christmas carols, and be blinded by gaudy, blinking lights, most of all, I want it to be okay with my friends that my tears are mixed in with my laughter. This New Year’s Eve, I want to raise a bottle, (not a glass) of Champagne. With the first great swig of bubbly booze, I want to honour the memory of my mother and with the rest of the bottle, I want to ring in a new, and hopefully less traumatic year.