

By Dr Tan Poh Kiang, Editorial Board Member



My First White Christmas

Even before I learned to speak grammatical English, I had memorised the lyrics of the Christmas carol *White Christmas* that was incessantly piped into the old shopping mall, Tay Buan Guan Shopping Centre in Katong. My parents had operated a retail shop in that once famous mall that was my playground in the 70s. The mental picture painted so vividly by words such as “tree tops glisten and children listen to hear sleigh bells in the snow” have always caused me to yearn for such an experience.



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FIRST SNOW

In the *SMA News* issue April 2004 Vol 36(4), I had shared about my godfather, Ken who died of cancer in August 2003 in Illinois. That year, my wife and I felt it necessary to spend our Christmas with our godmother, Bev so that the first Christmas without her life partner could be made less painful. It was to be a Christmas that we would remember for a long time.

Travelling to a winter place was tough on the packing. We discovered to our dismay that it was not possible to pack all the beautiful winter coats and jackets that our friends had enthusiastically lent us. All the air trapped within the fleece and the padding of winter wear took a lot of squeezing and pushing to expel. When we had put in everything we wanted to bring, we realised there were too many pieces of luggage. So it was back to taking out the items to repack and another exhausting round of eliminating air from the winter clothes.

Getting out of the passenger terminal of O’Hare International Airport in Chicago, we were greeted by a gush of cold and the light touch of snowfall. Having only known the familiarity of rain, it was a magical moment. We paused at the airport car park so as to tilt our faces up and allow the cotton-like flakes to gently brush our faces. I was thrilled and thankful for such a simple blessing.

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We arrived in Illinois late and reached our godmother's home close to midnight. Bev told us that we had brought the snow as her grandkids had been waiting for snowfall in vain in the preceding days before our arrival. And just like rain that comes after a dry spell, the snow fell in torrents throughout the first night of our stay.

WINTER WONDERLAND

What a spectacle it was when I drew apart the bedroom curtains the next morning. The view outside was a spread of white, gleaming and shimmering as the early morning sunbeams bounced off the fresh snow. The stark contrast between this picture and the view from my HDB bedroom window was further enhanced when a deer and her fawn trotted out from the ravine at the end of the backyard. Bev lived in a part of the suburb where the conservation effort had been richly rewarded by all kinds of fauna near the brook that ran through the nearby ravine. We had stayed with Ken and her previously in summer and fall and had witnessed the friendly intrusion of squirrels, raccoons, deer, hyenas and snakes. So you can imagine the emotional rapture of 'swa-ku' (vernacular for people who are not well-travelled) Singaporeans gawking at deer prancing in the snow. It was a 'Kodak' moment to be made into a postcard.

One of the must-do things when you have a backyard covered with a fresh coat of snow is sledding; not with the fancy equipment you would see in the Winter Olympics but an aluminum dish that looks like a giant wok with handles on the edge. Bev's oldest grandson, Colin demonstrated how sledding was done. He knelt in the middle of the sled, tilted slightly forward, and twisted his body side-to-side until gravity began to drag him down the slope. With skillful rocking of his body as he gripped the handles on the sides, he sped down the backyard like a graceful skier. His run to the bottom of the gradient was terminated by sliding the side of his body against the snow. How difficult could that be?

That question was answered with extreme hilarity as we spent an eternity just trying to balance on the sled and shaking clumsily to initiate some movement forward. Failing to move in the kneeling position as taught, we even innovated with sitting and squatting alternatives but in vain. Even though it was sub-zero temperature, our futile efforts caused us to perspire furiously beneath the winter wear.

It was late morning when we finally got it. Then we discovered another problem – painfully. We did not know how to halt. The alternative to banging into the trees near the ravine was throwing ourselves off the sled when it was time. We were bruised but exhilarated by this winter sport.

CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS

Preparing for Christmas celebration was more than putting together a sumptuous Christmas Eve dinner. Bev, a devout Christian, took pride in creating a nativity scene at the front of the house. She was very concerned that her grandsons would miss the core message of Christmas when they got overwhelmed with numerous lavish gifts. With a careful collection of recycled materials, figurines and a baby doll, the grandkids helped create the depiction of Baby Jesus born in a manger. The art project was enriched with a revision of the Christmas message by Bev, who painstakingly transferred oral history so that God's gift of His Son for the salvation of mankind was the key message that underpinned the Christmas festivity.

Christmas dinner was elaborate. Unlike what I was accustomed to back home where I would order some of the items from caterers, everything on the menu was prepared in the home kitchen. Freshly baked bread rolls, special garden salad, pork roast, mashed potatoes, beef stew, baked turkey, log cake and chocolate chip chewy cookies! I observed that a significant part of the family fun was when Bev's children got together in the kitchen to prepare the meal with her. The mouth-watering aromas combined with hearty laughter that arose from intimate conversations converted that kitchen into a magical space of love.

Bev drove us around the neighbourhood to enjoy the Christmas decorations that adorned some of the houses. The competitive spirit – not unlike some HDB estates in Singapore around Hari Raya – inspired some residents to transform the area into a degree of brightness resembling Michigan Avenue in downtown Chicago! Traditional light-up designs consisted mainly of the nativity scene. The less religious would have Santa Claus and his reindeers pulling his sleigh. The outlandish ones would have gigantic displays of Winnie the Pooh, Mickey Mouse and Frosty the Snowman. You can get an idea of how serious certain American neighbourhoods take their Christmas decorations if you read the hilarious satire, *Skipping Christmas* by John Grisham.



“THANK YOU.”

We also had to make an important visit: we visited my godfather, Ken, at the cemetery where he was buried. It was an extraordinary morning when the snow had stopped falling a few hours earlier and the sun was particularly strong. The air was crisp and it felt very good to breathe all of it in with greedy deep inspirations. It was only four months since his demise and we were worried that Bev would have a hard time at the grave.

The cemetery was a well-manicured garden. Surprisingly, the moment we got out of the car, I felt peace. It was perhaps the serenity of the surroundings. The predominant feeling I had was not that this place represented the end of life, but rather it portrayed the hope that there

is an even better life beyond death. After silently paying our last respects and praying, we hugged our godmother with tears. She mouthed the words “thank you” and her countenance told us she would be all right. When the sober moment had been observed, my father-in-law who had travelled with us decided to teach my three-year old daughter to make snowballs to throw. I learned that day that a compacted snowball felt no different from a rock when it was thrown onto your head.

When there is pleasure, time seems to travel faster. My first white Christmas went by quickly but not without teaching me an important truth. Just as Christmas is commemorating God’s gift of His Son Jesus, the best way to celebrate is to give ourselves to others. This gift of giving is what makes Christmas ‘merry and bright’. ■