

## 4 Christmases

*How I spent Christmas with my family and my patients; and had a Christmas more memorable than we had ever had.*

### **Covid Precautions**

When news of the pandemic hit in early 2020; as a nurse, all I could think was we have to protect our elderly parents and fragile patients from this. I instructed my kids, nephews, grandkids, etc. that no matter what, they had to wear a mask around their mamaw and papaw (my mom and dad) as they were both dealing with chronic illnesses, and not "spring chickens" to boot. I did not want them to get sick and I definitely did not want one of our offspring to live with the fact that they had made either of them sick. We were so very careful all year. Then The holidays started rolling around, what to do?

### **Christmas was going to have to be different this year**

I decided that the best course of action was, rather than the huge tribe party we would normally have (with 35+ family and friends aka "The Tribe"), we should break it down into smaller parties, wear masks, social distance, etc, etc. That's when I came up with the idea of 3 Christmases. Like many of you; I was scheduled to work Christmas day, as I have many times. So this was not that much of a stretch for the family of a 9-year veteran nurse. We would have Christmas on the three December Saturdays surrounding the actual holiday. Christmas number one was the teen party.



### **First Christmas**

First Christmas was on Saturday the 12th. My two teenagers invited their closest friends and we had a pizza party. They wore their masks extremely well; just as they had been at school since August. They were used to this, they did not even complain and only took them off to eat. We played games, exchanged secret Santa gifts, and had a blast! When I left them to take mom, dad, and my brother Bobby (their full-time caregiver) their pizza and gifts, the party was still going strong. I gave mom, dad, and Bobby their small First Christmas gifts and plates of pizza and we watched mom's favorite holiday movies. She was now more confused from Parkinson's dementia, a recurring UTI, and had a wound on her coccyx that I

could not get to heal no matter how hard I tried. We all knew she was declining. But, she ate with us and opened her present, with some help from dad. I hugged them all and left for the night. Next up, a week to recover and prepare for Christmas number 2.

## **Second Christmas**

Second Christmas was a small gathering of two of our sons, their spouses, and two of our grandsons. Again, we all wore masks and only took them off to eat; which we distanced ourselves for. This time Christmas dinner was a taco bar. I couldn't make Christmas dinner three weekends in a row! I got to love on my grandbabies a little bit and then set off to take mom, dad, and Bobby their Second Christmas. I gave each of them a new blanket and pillow which they opened and appreciated. We ate tacos and visited, just the four of us, like Christmases from long ago. I thought it was great, but my little momma (who was in church every time the doors were open and never smoked, drank, or said a bad word in her life) when I hugged her goodbye, in her tiny voice that Parkinson's had stolen, whispered: "Wendy, we ain't never half-a@%ed Christmas before! ". I couldn't help it, I burst out laughing and repeated it to dad and Bobby, then explained again to Mom why we couldn't have a big party like every other year because of Covid. She never really understood the exacts of the pandemic despite her 20+ years in the medical field. The dementia was too great at that point.

## **My family's turn for Hospice**

Now, mom was probably eligible for hospice for at least a year prior, but even though I had been a hospice nurse for 8 years; I could not bring myself to admit her to hospice. Every time we thought we were at that point she would rally and get better for a while. Besides, I was right there to take care of all of her medical needs. My brother was there to provide 24-hour care while I worked to pay the bills. Momma always said, "That's why I had two." We thought we had it all under control. But, the Tuesday before Christmas, December 22, 2020, I went to the doctor. He was my whole family's doctor. I told him during my appointment that I thought mom was ready for hospice. He said, "I have been waiting for you all to be ready, but she is definitely appropriate." so that night an amazing hospice nurse named Beth came and admitted her. Like so many families I had dealt with, we did not want to tell her she was being put on hospice. Just that Beth was going to come and check on her, and help me get the wound on her coccyx healed. It had begun to hurt her, and I was not going to let that happen! Beth got her comfort meds ordered. She had never taken any medication such as those so of course there was some getting used to, but she tolerated them well and was comfortable. And, we decided we were not going to do Christmas halfway since Mom was moving to Heaven anyway. The group text went out to the tribe informing them all of 3rd Christmas.

## The Christmas Gift

Just a few days after putting my mom on hospice and getting her comfortable was actually Christmas Day, but I'm getting ahead of myself. First, you must know about the crazy beautiful gift that God sent my momma for her last Christmas. I got to work at 7 am on Christmas Eve



and it had rained. By 4 pm it started to snow! Now, I don't know if you know how rare snow is here in East Tennessee but, according to WBIR.com's article entitled "*An East Tennessee White Christmas would really beat the odds!*" The last time we had snow for Christmas was 2.5 inches in 2010, and it has only happened 5 times in the last 121 years. So to say it was an unbelievable surprise is an understatement. By 5:05 pm Dec 24th, Everything was covered in at least a couple of inches of snow and still, snow was accumulating. I will always believe that snow was a gift for my mom. It was so beautiful; covering

everything, I will never forget it. By 6:30 pm, about time to come home, the drive was a little treacherous. My house manager even had to stay the night because our relief could not come in. I went to mom's that night, made sure she was comfortable, put one of her new soft nightgowns on her, and moved her bed over to the big picture window so she could see the snow. I hadn't seen her smile that big in years! I didn't even know she could still smile like that, as difficult as it was for her. I snuggled in beside her and we all watched "*The Star*." (If you have not seen this movie, I highly recommend it; although I am not affiliated with it in any way.) Then, I had to get home because I had all the preparations for Christmas 2 1/2.; Christmas with the boys.



## Christmas 2 1/2

With snow everywhere, I still made it home and back to work the next day. I even got to talk to my husband's siblings from all over the world on a video call before I went to work. I arrived at work on Christmas morning, complete with my Santa hat and Santa mask, bundled up, and carrying a big ole' sack of presents. One of the guys was awake as always, and Jackie, my house manager said when I came in, "Well, dressed like that, you better Ho, Ho, Ho," so I did. I let out a hearty

"Ho, Ho, Ho" that would have made the jolly man himself proud. My patient grinned from ear to ear. We had a wonderful day, we had a giant home-cooked breakfast courtesy of Jackie, they opened presents, we sang carols, made cookies for one to take to his mom's house later that day, played games they had gotten, and watched *"The Star"*, again. As the day drew on, everything at the house was settling down, and I was preparing for 3rd Christmas. We all knew this would be momma's last here with us on earth.

### 3rd Christmas

Saturday morning, December 26th, we got up together. My husband, my teenagers, and I got up, checked out our stockings, had breakfast; then, we all went to Mom and Dad's house. We celebrated 3rd Christmas as we had done pre-Covid. Our whole tribe was there, we exchanged gifts, Bobby made a Christmas dinner fit for a king, we had a prize ball to take turns unwrapping, ( I think the guys had as much fun building it as we had tearing it apart,) my bound-by-love brother Don who is a professional photographer was there and took amazing pictures.





It could not have been better. Mom got up and sat on the loveseat with dad during the party, the snow was there all day, and this time, the *little* kids watched "The Star". Ok, I'll admit, mom and I watched it again, too. Mom hadn't eaten much in days, but she ate a whole bowl of her sister Arlene's famous chicken and dumplings (her favorite). We could not have asked for a more wonderful Christmas with the tribe. I went back to work on Sunday, and mom slept all day.

### **Mom's last days here**

When I got home from work, my brother told me Mom had been sleeping all day, so I knew I could not leave anymore. I called my manager and informed her I would not be back until Momma was gone. She completely understood and gave me all the time I needed to take care of my family. I was able, with my experience as a hospice nurse, to explain all the steps in the process to my dad, my brother, our kids, mom's sisters, and everyone who was there. I was able to make sure she did not suffer for a second. I knew when her time of moving to Heaven was nearing and was able to prepare everyone as best I could. I stayed with mom day and night. At night I would snuggle in behind her in that hospital bed and hold her. I prayed over my family many times during those weeks that God would bring us peace like only He can; and not let her suffer.

### **Another miracle for us**

My daughter, who is my mom's namesake, turned 18 on January 4th. We were all still at Mom and Dad's house and had been for about two weeks at that point. Everyone was worried about me, so I came home for a little while to rest at about 12:30 am. I was literally falling asleep standing up in the kitchen so my teenagers put me to bed. I slept well, with no dreams or nightmares. My husband woke up abruptly at 4 am and asked if I was going to my mom's. I said, "Yes", got up, dressed, and left immediately. My son, brother, and dad heard me come in and got up as well. We were all surrounding her bed when momma opened her eyes for the first time in 10 days. She looked left and right, closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and was gone. It could not have been more peaceful. Now, I know from seeing it so many times, that your momma comes back for you when you pass. I don't know if you believe that or not, but I have been witness to many deaths and seen and heard people talk to their loved ones at the end. It is almost always their mom. My momma missed her mom every day until that morning. As much as I miss her now, I know she is finally with her mom and that brings me joy. I never knew the kind of pain she was experiencing most of my life, so I am happy for them, as much as it still hurts to have her gone.

## This Christmas



This Christmas will be much different for us. We all have a huge hole in our hearts. Parkinson's Disease robbed us of a lot of things, but it can not take those beautiful memories we all have of 3rd Christmas. We will have those forever. And we know that Momma is safe and free; enjoying this amazing Season of Joy with God, Jesus, her mom and family, and our loved ones who have gone before us. And, that we will get to be there someday too when our work here is done; In Jesus's Mighty Name.

Happy Birthday, Jesus!

