

Making It Through ...

*T*his morning, January 2, 2017, presents steely grey skies, windless, with fields dun colored. Christmas is dismantled, its ornaments wrapped in tissue. The miniature Fraser fir waits to burn at the fire pit. Red bows and angels are tucked neatly into plastic bins. The deck swept clean. Some of the poinsettias are as fresh and bold as they were in early December, and the carol books still stand open on the piano, waiting for one last run through of my favorites. This morning I play and I sing and I cry. I am letting go of Christmas. I am letting go of a beautiful and poignant and sad and joyful time—Christmas, 2016. The saddest Christmas of my life, but possibly one of the most meaningful. There is a clarity, a richness in feeling one's feelings deeply, in acknowledging the juxtaposition of sorrow and joy. All music has deepened now that Bob has died. Whatever the genre, I imagine he is experiencing the choruses and orchestrations and melodies and lyrics that only Heaven can create. Prayers are offered by children and friends. Texts arrive—example, from Meredith: "I know how much you love the first snow. Thinking about you today. I love you." The FACT of snow. So lovely. All the world turned pure.

I made it through the Christmas services, with tears, yes. We all have the "crying gene." We cried for the fact that Papa was not sitting in the favorite row and not there to counsel Jack on how to get candle wax off his pants at the candle lighting as he did last year, and not there to hug us in his strong arms to say, "I love you," at Willowcreek. He was not there to

close his eyes to the wonder of his favorite song, *O Holy Night*. And, he was not there on Christmas morning to haul in the logs to make the perfect fire.

What do widows need, especially that first Christmas? They need places to be and people to ask them to “come along.” They need to be hugged. They need to hear, “I love you.” They need to hear stories about their loved one, how others loved him too. They need people to plug the gaps, to build the fire, to carry the heavy potluck dishes to the car, to go along to pick out the tree, to shovel the walk if they didn’t get to the last few inches. They need to be asked how they are doing and to be able to handle the tears that are always too ready to fall. They need to know that laughter and self-deprecating remarks and one-liners are still welcome and that irony is not lost on them. They need to be included. They need to be open about their own lives, yes, but widows want to share others’ life sorrows and challenges and joys, too, and know that it is not “all about” their own particular scene.

How did I make it through the first Christmas? I received all of the above, in spades. With immense gratitude for all who loved me and understood and shared the sorrow and relished the joy, I greet 2017 with hope. Oh yes, there is pain, still. Kind of a crazy thought of “Babe, you were here in 2016, and you will never share 2017 here on earth with me.” But it is not a debilitating thought. It’s just one of the many waves that hit at unexpected moments when I drive, pass couples in restaurant windows, hear a song, have a moment of complete disbelief that he is not here, and then catch a vivid

memory-sight of my strong and loving and good-humored
favorite person coming in off the back patio, logs in hand,
cheeks winter-pink, smile ready saying, "How 'bout I make
grilled cheese for lunch?" 🍃