

Christmas Memories

by Lori Palermo

In Memory of Nan

Memories...What are *Memories*? They are bits and pieces of your life scattered throughout your mind. I am sure there are many times during your day in which a beautiful song, a picture of a loved one, a conversation with a friend, something you may have read, or a special holiday coming up may trigger a memory of a very special time in your life.

For me, as this spiritual and emotional time of year arrives when we begin to observe the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, memories of my childhood come pouring back into my mind during this magical Christmas Season. My home was in Palmer Township, a small suburb in Easton, Pennsylvania. I grew up in a loving, caring and happy family atmosphere; my dad and mom, Wayne and Lee; my sister, Erika; and my grandmother, Marguerite, "Nan," as we called her.

Nan was exactly what you might imagine a grandmother to be, with grey-white hair, perfectly in place, and a soft, peaceful voice. Soft, except of course, when she and Dad watched football, each rooting for their favorite team! Nan was a warm, compassionate person – a second mother to me. I remember crossing the street to her house to spend time to sit on her lap in her favorite rocking chair. We would talk and sing songs and rock and rock. My grandma was so perfect to cuddle up with, her arms so warm and snuggly. When I was with her I felt safe and secure. One thing I remember so clearly is when we would sit and rock I would play with her diamond wedding ring, admiring its brilliance and thinking about what it must have meant to her.

Nan was always there for me, at my high school graduation, as I left home for college, and crying at my wedding as I prepared to move onto a new life in a new town. When I gave birth to my son, Brian, Nan stayed with me, and later she rocked the grandson she adored, just as she used to rock me. When I went through surgery for my hip replacement Nan was there to help me. She would call me almost every day to talk about many things, but always asked if I was eating enough and if was my home warm enough.

Dad, Mom and Nan instilled in Erika and me the spirit of the Christmas season: To be giving of yourself – with love and actions – to family, friends and others less fortunate. Of course, as young children, all my sister and I thought of was the mystery of Santa Claus and the presents he would bring us. But as we grew older, we learned that the birth of Jesus Christ and the love of family and our fellow man was the true meaning of Christmas.

Christmas activities at our house began in early December, with decorating the inside and outside of our home and Nan's. Some of my family's most favorite and memorable decorations were those passed down through the generations. Candles were placed in the windows. Santa's, snowmen, angels and musical figurines, and of course our homemade red and green construction paper chains were placed with care all around the house. The sacred manger scene with Mary and Joseph and little baby Jesus lying in his cradle was very special to us as we lit the shining bulb reflecting on the birth of Jesus.

Then it was time to go out into the cold to decorate outside. Dad had every color light bulb there was. He hung strings of brightly colored lights on the trees and lamppost, the red and green spotlights shining upon the house added the final touch. After the work on our house was complete,

we would go across the street and decorate Nan's house. The two houses looked like a picture postcard by the time we were finished, two loving homes, exquisitely decorated, reflecting the beauty of the Christmas Season against the pure white snow. Still today, I can close my eyes and see the beautiful snow-covered trees with the lights sparkling through. Everything in the world seemed perfect to me. I couldn't have asked for a better life. I had my loving family around me. I thought my life would be this perfect forever.

As my sister and I grew up it seemed like everything was done as a family. Baking Christmas cookies with Mom and Nan was a Sunday afternoon tradition. On those icy winter days we could feel the warmth of the oven as we baked our favorite cookies. I remember the comforting aroma of chocolate chip cookies filling the kitchen. Our mouths watered as we awaited our treats, fresh from the oven with gooey chocolate that we'd lick off the top. We also loved to make cutout cookies and decorate them with all of the little candy toppings. As we baked, Dad had his albums on the turntable playing all of the traditional Christmas carols that we sang along with. And there was Dad, dancing around and singing, "*It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas!*"

I can remember as little girls we looked forward to Christmas shopping with Dad. Every year, Dad, Erika and I would go shopping for Mom's presents. While shopping we would stop at a favorite place to eat, Dunderbak's, a little German restaurant. After we were finished we would go to Nan's house and wrap Mom's gifts. The ribbons were vivid and with the bright wrapping paper in red, green, blue, gold, or silver made a sparkling package. Nan was always perfect at the ribbons and bows. She would take her scissors and curl the ribbons...*zzzipppp!* We didn't want to open them because they were so pretty – a dazzling memory.

About a week before Christmas our train platform was ready to be set up. Dad had built the platform and would add on to it every year. It was huge and took up a big portion of the living room. It was so much fun; we placed houses, churches, stores, train stations and a haunted house (which we built ourselves), each in just the right spot, along with cars, people, animals and trees. Finally, our favorite trains were put on the tracks. Mine was a little yellow "puffer" that had some type of liquid that was put into the smoke stack and as the train went around the track... puffs of smoke would come out.

Dad, Mom, Nan, Erika, and I all went to the Christmas Eve Candlelight service. It was a glorious service. We sang all of the blessed Christmas carols, verse after verse. The Christmas tree in the sanctuary touched the ceiling and was decorated in all white lights with white and gold ornaments. Brilliant red Poinsettias adorned the chancel. As the service came to a close, the lights of the church were dimmed and each person lit the candle they had received as they entered the church. The whole congregation sang *Silent Night* by candlelight. It was a very moving and emotional experience, feeling the Holy Spirit with us.

By the time we got home from church it was usually about 1:30 in the morning. Erika and I would be so excited to get to bed and then wake up to all of the presents from Santa. We hung our stockings in our rooms and put cookies and milk out for Santa, and of course a carrot for Rudolph!!!

You might be wondering why I haven't said anything about putting up our Christmas tree. And that's because that job was for Santa Claus late on Christmas Eve. After church Dad, Mom and Nan, set the Christmas tree up, decorated it and placed it up on the train platform. Dad put on old-fashioned ornaments from his childhood, a variety of rare strings of lights and silver reflectors behind the brilliant colored bulbs. The tree was then sprayed with artificial snow. But there was one thing missing: the Angel that was placed on the top of the tree. Once it was in place, the tree was complete, that is always how dad had to have it, just perfect! All of the presents that had been hidden at Nan's house were brought over and put out around the train platform, just waiting for my sister and me to tear into them.

Christmas morning finally arrived. At 6:00 a.m. Erika and I awoke and went through our stockings, finding all kinds of goodies. Then we woke up Dad and Mom who had gotten to bed just two hours earlier!!! Every year, as Erika and I walked down the hallway and into the living room, Dad would take our picture as we saw the presents, so abundant that they had to be piled on top of each other. Looking at these pictures over the years it was neat to see how much we had grown.

Nan would come to the house and we all started opening our gifts. As I think back, the rest of the day we reminisced with thanks on the gifts God had given to us throughout the year. We were blessed to have a healthy, loving and caring family, all of us together.

In November 1995, Nan began not feeling well. She did not feel like eating and was having a lot of back pain. In the first week of December Nan went to her doctor for tests. On December 8, 1995, we received the test results revealing that Nan had clusters of tumors on her lungs. *Lung Cancer*. I was numb. How could this be? She was my Nan – she was supposed to live forever! The doctors gave her three months. She did not want any chemo or radiation – she just wanted to be home. The day before Christmas, Nan, in her partially conscious state asked my dad what day it was. He told her it was the 24th, Christmas Eve. Nan knew what was happening to her and in keeping with our belief in the Birth of Jesus Christ on Christmas Day, she waited until after Christmas to join her God. On December 30, 1995 at approximately 1:00 pm Nan passed away at the age of 85. God took her peacefully home. I didn't know at that time that she had told my dad to give me her diamond wedding ring after she passed away. I have worn it on my finger since that day and I treasure it, a memory of Nan and our special bond, more than anything I possess.

On Christmas Day 2003, as my dad lay dying of emphysema, we were afraid to even speak about Christmas. Not sure whether he could hear us or not, we did not want to upset him. Like his mother, Dad held on and passed away after Christmas, on Dec. 26th to join his mother in heaven.

The book of Ecclesiastes says, **“To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.** At Dad's funeral service, I read the complete passage, Ecclesiastes, chapter 3, verses 1-22. This is a beautiful passage with so much meaning. If you ever feel you need comfort and inspiration, please pick up a Bible and read this.

One night, not long after Nan passed away, I had a dream. I don't remember what it was about, but I awoke the next morning, singing, *“Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas, Let your heart be light, Next year all our troubles will be out of sight.”* That song gave me a sense of peace that Nan was not really gone, but still with me and always would be, especially throughout the Christmas Season, which was so very special to her... and my dad.

I believe with all my heart that Nan and Dad are my shining stars in the heavens. I know that they are guiding me in my mission to help patients and families with lung disease.

*“Through the years, we all will be together
If the fates allow.
Until then, we'll have to muddle through somehow
So have yourself a merry little Christmas now.*

from “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” by Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane, 1943