

I'll Be Home for Christmas... But They Won't.

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

Monday, 02 December 2019 16:28 - Last Updated Wednesday, 22 January 2020 07:51



Last Saturday, I took part in a writers' conference in Summerville sponsored by the Pat Conroy Literary Center. I was officially an "instructor," but I learned more than I taught. Love it when that happens! The "faculty" was made up of contributors to *Our Prince of Scribes: Writers Remember Pat Conroy*,¹ and we ended the day with a panel discussion during which we... well, remembered Pat Conroy.

A late arrival on the scene, there only for the panel, was former Chief Judge of the SC Court of Appeals, and retired President of the College of Charleston, Alex Sanders. Judge Sanders has that thing they call "presence," and he has it in spades. At age 80, with a cumulus cloud of hair floating over his face, he walks with a cane and a shuffle. Physically speaking, his most robust days are behind him. But his mind is razor sharp and his wit dazzles. The stories he told about his friendship with Pat Conroy had us all laughing and crying, then laughing again... then crying again ...

If this writers' conference had happened *last* fall, I'd have called my dad the very next day to tell him all about meeting the great Alex Sanders. In fact, Alex Sanders reminded me of my dad. Same age, same cottony hair, similar Carolina accent, calls himself "Eleck" (my dad called his old college friend Alex "Eleck"), same keen legal mind and wry humor. Dad would have been so tickled to hear I'd sat on a panel with this remarkable and accomplished man... just a couple of colleagues, swapping Conroy stories. He'd have been proud of me, I think.

But, of course, I didn't get to make that phone call. My dad's gone. He died last April.

So here it comes. *That* Christmas. The one I've been dreading since childhood. The one where somebody's missing. "Through the years we all will be together, if the fates allow" is the holiday lyric that has always sent shivers up my spine.

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This was the year the fates finally failed us.

So there will be no Dad in Dad's comfy chair. No Dad in Dad's study. No Dad to greet us with a grin, his 6' 4" frame filling the doorway, when we arrive in Alabama after a long drive from South Carolina. There will be no Dad singing Silent Night beside me, passing candlelight, at the Methodist Church on Christmas Eve, and no Dad to watch the Kennedy Center Honors with a few nights later. We will have to take turns playing Handel's Messiah and Amy Grant's Christmas album at ridiculous levels of volume all week, because there will be no Dad there to do it.

And as if that weren't bad enough, my only child will be thousands of miles away, spending Christmas in the Czech Republic. As a Rotary Youth Exchange student, she's not allowed to come home for the holidays – something about “total cultural immersion” that we all signed off on months ago, while she was still here under our roof, being a teenager. It sounded okay at the time. What were we thinking?

As I was writing this column the day before Thanksgiving, around the crack of dawn, my phone buzzed and I knew it was Amelia. She's six hours ahead, and tends to call me late morning her time – when she has a break at her Czech high school. Though her exchange experience has been mostly wonderful, this particular morning she was feeling terribly blue. All her Beaufort friends were home from college for Thanksgiving, and there she was stuck in a strange, cold city near the Polish border where they don't even *have* Thanksgiving. We had a long heart-to-heart, and I think she felt better when we hung up, but I'm not sure I did.

By the time you read this, Thanksgiving will have come and gone, and we'll be racing headlong toward Christmas. There will be shopping to do, trees to decorate, parties and parades and Night on the Town. All the annual mayhem and magic is about to unfurl.

And yet, for some of us, it won't be the same this year. For some of us, there will be somebody – or maybe even *somebodies* – missing.

I serve on the Mental Health Awareness Committee at my church, and one of our annual events is a service called Blue Christmas. It's a simple service – scripture readings and music, prayers and candle lighting – for anybody who struggles this time of year, whether grieving a

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loss, missing somebody far away, or just feeling anxious, stressed or sad for any reason. After a certain age, my guess is that most of us fall into one of those categories at some point during the holidays.

Recently, our committee was pondering strategies for spreading the word about this service – it's for the whole community, not just our church – and it suddenly dawned on me: *Hey, wait... Blue Christmas is actually for ME this year!*

I've attended in years past, but always in a "supporting role," there to prop up friends who were suffering for various reasons. It's always a meaningful experience, a welcome respite from the hustle and bustle, but I always felt I was there to help... not to

be

helped.

Of course, if I've learned anything over the years, it's that when you help others, you help yourself even more, and so it has always been with this service. But again, this year will be different.

Dear reader, I'm not very good at accepting help, and I'm downright terrible at asking for it. I'd always rather be the helper than the helpee. So humor me, if you will. Are you – or anybody you love – struggling with grief or sorrow or plain old holiday angst this year? If so, please consider yourself invited to our Blue Christmas service at First Presbyterian Church on Tuesday, December 10 at 6 pm. Come let us help you through this sensitive season.

The truth is, it would really help me to see you there.