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Whew. What a week. American bombs on Baghdad. Livingston resigns his House seat. Clinton is impeached. And Christmas.

I can't help but reflect on this holiday. This will be my fourth Christmas without my children. Shucks, at seventeen, the youngest is almost a grown man. I guess I can hardly call them children.

But it brings to mind all the parents out there who don't have their children due to false allegations of child abuse or nasty custody disputes. I have heard many weeping parents this past week who are in agony because they aren't allowed a Christmas visitation.

I know how the kiddies feel. I remember not seeing my father for many Christmases after my parents were divorced. The festivities were not as bright, tinged with blue melancholy. Something important was missing that detracted from the joy and cast a tangible pall over the day.

Those who have not had their children taken through a divorce or an intervention are truly blessed. To see the joy on children's faces as they open presents, not sitting alone wondering if they got the gifts you sent. This simple pleasure is such a treasure to parents who are denied it.

And yes, the kids argue and fight, and yell, and get sick from eating too much candy. How many of us wish we could soothe a fevered brow and clean up our child's vomit, because it would mean our child was with us? Even the distasteful tasks are held as treasured memories of when they needed us, when we could reach out and touch them whenever we wanted. Touches we took for granted.

I don't look at pictures of past Christmases. They're too painful with their smiling faces. Children's faces. Faces that have changed over the years, and I've missed those changes. Faces that must now be adult faces. Strangers' faces with the look of something familiar. . . something like "don't I know you from somewhere?" Faces that bear the imprint of familial familiarity. My family. Their father's family. A melding of genes that matures into distinctiveness.

I haven't had a Christmas tree since they left either. We always had the boys do most of the tree trimming. We'd talk about my collection of German ornaments as we hung them, exclaiming over forgotten favorites. I purchased them overseas while they were babies and discarded the shiny glass balls in favor of wooden toys and elves, unicorns and apples, lighted candles and kitties.

Reminiscing over past trees and past Christmases. John Denver and the Muppets playing on the stereo in honor of tradition that existed since Hamal fell in love with Bert and Ernie on Sesame Street as a toddler. Even at thirteen, he clung with sentimental affection to our Christmas tradition, not ashamed to admit he enjoyed it.

I don't brood on these thoughts, but, as in my childhood, they cast a shadow over the glitter of the season. I worry more about other parents who haven't fared as well as I. At least my boys can call me.

As we celebrate the birth of a Child, let us remember the lost children, and pray for them to return home to their loving parents. I hope you all, dear readers, have a blessed and happy holiday. I hope you bask in the glow of love and joy and treasure the precious gift of family. God bless us every one.