

ANOTHER CHEESY FAMILY NEWSLETTER

ELIZABETH SILVA

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ANOTHER CHEESY
FAMILY NEWSLETTER

Introduction



I ALWAYS WONDER WHEN I GET my friends' and family's annual holiday newsletters what *really happened in the writers' families*. What *titillating tidbits* are they leaving out? Each letter brims with holiday cheer, naturally. But when I read them, I ponder -- Did that breathtaking view of the canyon sunset come at the expense of a bitter family argument about whether to relax on a cruise or backpack in the Grand Canyon? Did that warm and memorable family reunion result in siblings refusing to speak to each other ever again? Did that precious little schnauzer puppy chew up someone's \$300 pair of Jimmy Chu's? C'mon, are your kids really rockets scientists, future presidents, or entertainers of the year? And you didn't mention Junior this year...what the hell happened to him?

Of course, I am, myself, a purveyor of euphemisms. My letters have always painted a much brighter picture of our previous year than my family actually experienced. A lot of "stuff" is always left out intentionally because

- It's boring...even to me.
- Nobody wants to hear you whine.
- Some of this stuff is just embarrassing.

- The fact that my family has struggled with mental illness and addiction for as long as I can remember is not something other people want to hear. They want to hear good news. It's the holidays, for God's sake. We all hear enough bad news the rest of the year!

I really don't know when I started writing Christmas newsletters. I don't even know why I did, but I THINK I started writing them because I received so many cards that contained little more than a "Happy Holidays from the Blumenthals," not even hand written. While I appreciated that the senders cared enough to slap a stamp and address on an envelope and keep the lines of communication open, I wondered how they were getting along. Any births, weddings, deaths, surgeries, vacations, or other major life events? Thus, I truly appreciated the few holiday letters our acquaintances and loved ones took the time to write. Their letters made me feel I had had a glimpse into their year. Yes, some of them were obviously a bit "braggy" - nobody has that good a year or such extraordinary kids and pets! Nevertheless, I love them still, especially the ones from the people I rarely see or hear from.

Facebook, *Twitter*, and all the other social media outlets didn't exist when I first started exchanging these letters, so the holidays were usually the only time of year most of my correspondents touched base. And though I do treasure the relationships I've re-established and maintained on *Facebook*, I'm always thrilled and surprised to open the mailbox and find among the bills and frills, a palpable letter or card with real ink and a real person's handwriting, directed especially to me. They become rarer every year.

Before my mother died in May of 2008, she gave me a list of names and addresses of old friends whom she never saw anymore, but with whom she always exchanged a card and letter at Christmas. She asked me to send those friends her obituary and a few words about her having had cancer for such a short time. She didn't want them to send

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unwitting greetings the next Christmas that would open a new wound in my stepdad's heart, and she didn't want him to have to send them the sad news in return. Because he would have felt obligated to. And so, I carried out her wish...and every one of them sent me a letter in return, expressing their gratitude for thinking of them, and telling me how much my mother's friendship had meant to them. Occasionally I run across those letters in a shoebox in my closet and read them again. You can't easily do that with a *Facebook* post - read treasured words over and over for years. And you can't hold words from cyberspace in your hands, unless you want to take the time to print them out - and who does that? Most of the time, holiday greetings conveyed in social media are written one day, forgotten the next.

When I helped clean out my mother's things after she died, I ran across most of my old family holiday letters stashed in a large envelope, buried in a drawer of mementos. Bless her soul, I think she kept every card and letter she ever received. I was thrilled to see them. Unfortunately, I never thought of keeping hard copies of my annual letters and lost them forever each time a laptop crashed. (I'm very negligent at backing up.) But, rereading those letters that covered so many years, I was struck with how much of our lives was left out of each letter, how little our friends with whom we only communicated at Christmas really knew about our family. So, I decided to write a memoir. My memoir follows a timeline of approximately 20 years, linked together by my chirpy holiday family newsletters. Following each letter is a narration, as best I can remember, of what REALLY happened in our family each year, along with some flashbacks to illuminate the narrative.

The focus of my story is on twenty years, 1997 to 2017, the years my daughter first became addicted to heroin, then to methadone, to the present. I hope if other families shaken by addiction and mental illness read it, they will gain a sense of kinship. None of us wants to advertise the pain disrupting our family's stability, and because we keep so many things secret or sugarcoat them for public consumption, we

feel isolated and alone. It's a loneliness we seldom share because only families in similar circumstances would truly understand. I remember as a high school counselor, when distraught parents reached out to me for help, dealing with their child's mental health and/or addiction issue, I could read the tension and fear in their faces as they revealed their family secret, usually expressing that they didn't know where to turn. When I shared my own experiences, though, I could see them become visibly relaxed, as if to say, "You, too? I would never have guessed it." It was more likely, then, that they would trust my words of advice and empathy. I had been there.

Ironically, although most people are touched by addiction and/or mental illness in some personal way, many don't seek help, preferring to keep their family secrets strictly in the family. And, let's face it, a lot of the professional help out there is ineffective or so expensive it can't be accessed. So, for whatever reason, many parents' and spouses' efforts to "help" their loved one who is abusing alcohol and/or drugs just make matters worse. Because they don't exactly know how to handle their afflicted loved ones, for whom they care so deeply, they make mistakes, not maliciously, but out of love and fear. They become enablers:

According to the *Urban Dictionary* there are two types of "enablers":

1. Tacit Enabler - Supports another's bad habits by staying silent.
2. Overt Enabler - Supports another's bad habits by providing assistance such as money, transportation, approval, etc...

A person who supports another person's bad or dangerous habits.

Enablers tend to fear calling others on their destructive habits because these 'others' tend to be friends, family or others close to the enabler."

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I am an “overt enabler.” Over the course of 20 years, I have made multiple mistakes in the name of “helping” our firstborn. I regret not heading straight to Al Anon or a similar no-nonsense organization as soon as I discovered my child was an addict. Sounds like the obvious “fix” now, but it’s not quite that simple. I’ve come to realize that my enabling behavior was learned from my mother who put up with a bipolar alcoholic husband for 19 years. She finally understood she’d never save him, but by that point, I was an adult, and the damage was done, the life lessons learned. I applied my learned behavior to the rearing of my own children. Instead of confronting disturbing issues in my family, it has always been my habit to rescue my loved ones rather than force them to save themselves. For my daughter, the result has been disastrous. She still feels helpless, depending on others just to exist, and, sadly, is unable to raise her three children, one of whom has special needs, on her own. Their care and support has been turned over to us, her parents. Looking back on my choices with her, I recognize that on many occasions I could have done things differently. Would it have made a difference in her favor? There’s no way to know. I do know, though, that I rescued her too many times to count, not for her, but for me. I didn’t want to suffer lifelong guilt if things went bad because I didn’t intervene.

A lot of important people in my life are de-emphasized in my story for a reason: Michelle, my second daughter, and her husband, Rick, and their children, Ivy and Rick, Jr. My best friend, Darlene, who has been like a sister to me since we met the first day I arrived at Central Texas University. They, too, know every detail of this story intimately and have been caught up in the drama that addiction and mental illness have injected into the narrative, especially Michelle. But because they haven’t lived in my house, day-to-day, since this story begins, I have purposely left them in the background. However, without their continual love and support, especially in the darkest times, I don’t know how my husband, Matthew, and I could have made it through with our sanity intact. In strong contrast to my cheery holiday letters, I have emphasized the

struggles we kept hidden. But there have been parties, birthdays, and many, many celebrations of life as the years have gone by, and to this day I have remained an optimist and maintained my sense of humor.

Aside from my own personal story, the strongest focus is on Kristine, our firstborn child, who has battled addiction for half her life. Our relationship has been fragile on its best days, and I suspect if she chose to write the story from her perspective, I would be featured as the primary antagonist. But, of course, I had to write it from my perspective. And I hope someday she understands that, despite our differences, I see her as an exceptionally strong woman. The fact that she has been able to beat both heroin and methadone alone exhibits tremendous strength. She denies that mental illness has played a part in her poor life choices, but I'm convinced there is a genetic link to mental illness in our family that goes back through multiple generations. Furthermore, I see addiction as an illness, not a character disorder, and I hope she knows that I take my share of the blame for the disappointments life has dealt her. But, ultimately, she is the engineer of her own life, as are we all. My hope, as I have told her many times, is that she will stop seeing herself as a victim, blaming everybody but herself for her problems, and that she will take her destiny in her own hands. Only she can do that.

Chapter 1

DECEMBER 2002

Dear Family and Friends...

No we haven't dropped off the face of the earth, and we hope you haven't deleted us from your Christmas card list. Christmas of 2000 and 2001 just snuck up on us, and cards and letters were not sent. If you hate cheesy family newsletters, you're welcome to toss this. Otherwise, here goes...

As some of you will see for the first time, there is a third addition to our garden of grandchildren. Chase is 15 months old and in constant motion, big sister Nikki is almost 9 and is a scholar, artist and entertainer, and Ivy, now 4, is the athlete and comedian of the lot. These kids bring us perpetual joy and have definitely brought a whole new meaning to Christmas. Those of you who are grandparents know how blessed we are. As for the rest of the family, things haven't changed all that much. I'm still a counselor at Elm Creek High School and probably will be for many years more. Matthew has again been the victim of downsizing, as have many here in our metropolitan area and I guess everywhere else, and job prospects really don't look promising right now, but we're managing O.K. Justin is going to our local community college, with nary a major in sight, Kristine is still trying to decide what to do career wise, and Michelle and her husband have bought a house in a nearby suburb.

Elizabeth Silva

With our belts tightened, we haven't done very many exciting things in the last couple of years, but we did go to New Orleans this year again to see CTU play in the New Orleans Bowl. We went last year, with my best friend Darlene, of course, and had a great time, but this year was even better - we actually won. See, you thought all those years of slavish fandom were for naught! I have turned into a cautious fair-weather fan and have passed the baton on to my granddaughters, who are members of the Junior Raging Raptors Club. Matthew, however, still spends countless hours online with the other three or four CTU fans, discussing who knows what.

Well, I won't bore you with further prattle. However, I am including our email address, so we can touch base from time to time. Here's hoping that this holiday season brings you happiness and creates fond memories. Hope to hear from you this year! Love... The Silvas

HOW MUCH WAS LEFT UNSAID

Re-reading this bland cottage cheesy family newsletter, I have to snicker at how much was left unsaid, and though I didn't blatantly lie about what was going on in my life, I failed to mention a FEW things, such as...

... Matthew, my husband, in his late 50's, with a vast store of wisdom and experience, had decided he was never going to climb the corporate ladder again, nor for that matter, collect a monthly paycheck that in itself would support his family. He had accepted that he was the victim of ageism, the dirty little secret that most businesses everywhere deny, but continue to practice with lack of restraint. He had found, while job searching, that his humble demeanor, gray, thinning hair, and slight limp from an injury a few years back, just couldn't compete with the slick young hucksters who promised to save the world. They were obviously a better "fit" for the "team" they aspired to become a part of. Now, after a career in one company for almost 30 years, another

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for a few years, then another for even fewer years...all companies that were circling the drain...he was pounded flat. After months of searches, sending out resumes and cover letters, phone calls and follow-up phone calls, emails and follow-up emails, the answers were disheartening. The very rare interviews were obviously concluded the moment he walked in the door. They might as well have said, "You're not young, handsome, and energetic. We do not value your vast experience. You are not full of glib chatter and false promises. Go home." So, he had finally decided to label himself "semi-retired" and accept his status, a very difficult thing to do when so much of your life the last three and a half decades had been consumed by work.

... Justin, our youngest child and only son, who had graduated from high school the previous year, had been motivated to go to community college only because WE wanted him to. He had no direction. At age 20, going on 12, he had not even a vague idea of what he wanted to do with his life. Going to college had been my idea, and he only enrolled because he didn't have a better plan. However, deep into the first semester of the fall term of 2001, I had come home from work in the middle of the day to find him sitting at the computer, probably playing some kind of video game, the only activity he seemed to be interested in. The conversation went like this:

Me: "Why aren't you in school? It's the middle of the day."

Him: "I kinda quit going."

Me: "Dammit to hell, Justin. How long ago was that? And why didn't you bother to tell me?"

Him: "I don't know...I was really doing bad in that remedial math class, so I just quit going. I didn't tell you because I knew you'd be mad."

(I questioned whether he had ever even attended class.)

Me: "I'd be mad? No kidding! Did you even bother to officially withdraw from your classes?"

Him: "No, I just quit going."

Me: "Great!! So now you have a friggin' 0.0 grade point average! Do you realize you'll be trying to raise that for several semesters...IF they let you come back?"

Him: "No I didn't know that...I'll go back next semester, I promise."

What did I do then? What I always did best. I immediately set about trying to fix it. I found out how he could get back in school and then set up an interview with special services to see if there was any kind of guidance, tutoring, or other steps toward salvation available to a dumbass clueless college student. (I was later to learn when I taught community college myself that he was NOT the exception. Going to college sounds like a pretty good idea until you discover you must study.) What I should have done: Told him to get a job and move out within the month.

... I was in bigtime denial that Kristine, our eldest, had decided on a "career" that embarrassed and appalled Matthew and me - the exotic entertainment and "massage" business (i.e. prostitution). She was on methadone maintenance to keep from doing heroin again, after an addiction that had lasted for years that had seemed like decades. To me, the methadone, at that time, was a good thing. A couple of years before this letter was written, I had believed the end to her heroin addiction

could only be death or jail. But one day, when she once more had convinced us she wasn't using anymore, I had found her "works" hidden in her car. Her father and I, worn completely down and sick with endless anxiety, confronted her with my find and ordered her to leave the house. While we argued, our precious granddaughter, Nikki, only six, was glued to her mother's lap, clinging to her and sobbing, begging her not to go away again. I remember pleading with Kristine to go to the nearest methadone clinic and get off this deadly road to hell. "Look at your sobbing child, Kristine," I beseeched, "How can you do this to her? She's an innocent child, and she loves you. If you don't care about yourself, please, care about her. She needs you."

For some reason I'll never know, that incident flipped a switch in Kristine, after so many other crises had not. The next day she drove to the methadone clinic and began a maintenance course of methadone. We were elated. Though still as addictive and even potentially lethal, at least methadone was controlled. At least we could be assured she wouldn't kill herself with the poison she bought off the streets. Naturally, none of my holiday letters ever mentioned Kristine's addiction, nor did I say, in this one, that her beautiful porcelain skinned, golden curled baby, Chase, had to be weaned off methadone in his first weeks of life. I didn't reveal that when she brought him home from the hospital, he didn't seem to bond with those of us who loved him. Something wasn't right. As he grew, I had noticed more and more that he had other little quirks, like rocking back and forth on his elbows to try to get himself to sleep. Most distressing, though, was that he just couldn't seem to slow down. I hadn't mentioned in my letter that his delusional, pathologically lying, scumbag father had run off to Alabama when Chase was only six months old because he had finally realized Kristine really didn't give a rat's ass about him. She obviously would never marry him.

... I was troubled about my second child, Michelle, and her husband Robert. Michelle was our only child of three who had prepared herself for a career while still in high school. She had dyslexia and had no intention

of going to college, but she had a cosmetology license within months of graduation. She had done everything right. She decided she wanted a career in movie, TV, and photography makeup. So, she researched schools where she could learn that trade, and within a year of graduation, set out in her convertible, accompanied by her adventurous best friend, to The City of Angels. She lived there for three months and attended a school that specialized in camera-ready make-up. A perfect career for an exquisite beauty with a flair for art. Michelle was my independent child who knew what she wanted. But soon after returning from California and beginning to work on movies and commercials, she met Robert. Theirs was a short romance. When she learned she was pregnant, Robert proposed, and they flew to Las Vegas for a quick wedding. Ivy, my second granddaughter, was born exactly two weeks before her mother's twentieth birthday. Robert finished his degree, they bought a house, and all seemed well. But, after five years of marriage I had begun to see cracks in the façade they had built around themselves. I had noticed a lack of that connection between Michelle and Robert one usually observes in young, happily married couples. He did his thing with his friends; she did her thing with her friends. Something was missing, and it nagged at me.

... Finally, I hadn't sent season's greetings the previous two years because there really wasn't much to say that I would have wanted people to know...life certainly wasn't working out the way I had envisioned so many years before. Back then, my kids were little, cute, and smart, and my husband and I both had satisfying careers, a home, and most of the amenities of America's rising middle class. But I was now in my fifties, middle aged, and disillusioned that our "typical American family" had become anything but typical. I was also dreading that my time with my beloved, supportive parents was going to come to an end probably within a decade or so, and that I could very well be taking care of them, along with my granddaughter, of whom I had gained custody.

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I had not yet realized, then, that I couldn't save my children from making bad decisions, no matter how very hard I tried. That realization would come much, much later.