Holiday Miracle

In January 2022, my collegiate alma mater, the University of Georgia, hoisted their first National Championship football trophy since 1980. By late December, the Georgia Bulldogs had crushed every opponent during the regular season and were gearing up to play the Ohio State Buckeyes. Georgia fans across the world were hoping for another miracle during the CFB playoff game.

Like the UGA Bulldogs, my family had seen our share of ups and downs. Marianne, my “birthday sister” – born on the same day but in different years – was also a Georgia alumnae. Her two children and my three were close in age and spent a lot of time together. She worked for over a decade with the college’s entomology department, often teaching Bulldog athletes. Her children were involved in outreach activities as often as possible before her tragic passing in 2019. After her death, I was overwhelmed by grief. My substitute teaching position gifted me with time to heal my heart, but it was a slow and agonizing process. By the summer of 2022, the flow of my life felt solid enough for me to consider leaving the sadness behind and forging ahead. Fortunately, I found a full time teaching position that kept my thoughts occupied and focused. When the school district’s winter break rolled around, I was exhausted from absorbing an enormous amount of new information, but in a good way. At long last, my season of grief and despair was ending.

The Winter Solstice was my first full day of vacation and I spent it doing little more than reflecting on the past year and the moments – good, bad, and ugly – that had taken my breath away. And I wondered, what did my lost birthday sister know of these earthly things? From her otherworldly perch, did she see our family’s continued suffering and pain? Did she rejoice in our triumphs? I so dearly wanted a sign that her boundless love and her boisterous joy were still accessible to those of us who missed her so greatly.

With Christmas just days away, it was time to arrange our travel plans for the holiday season. The next morning, December 22nd, I jotted down a Plan of Action, a POA as we call it in our family. Its enactment was halted by a phone call from my nephew, Marianne’s oldest child. A former football player who had found his passion in the culinary arts, Paul was well known as his mother’s “gentle giant”. Perhaps Paul, who was working as the head chef at an UGA fraternity, wanted to talk about two of my favorite subjects, food and football?

The young man who responded to my opening salvo “How’s my sweet baby Paul today?” did not sound like my nephew. I could hear his breath rattle and his body shudder as tears fell against his phone. Holidays can be torturous for those who are missing loved ones, which I knew firsthand. And he was getting over a nasty cold, he said. His sister, Nora, was staying with my parents for the holiday, so I encouraged Paul to pack a bag so he could celebrate with them. “I’ll come to Apalachee for New Year’s Eve. I’ll bring the tailgating goodies and we can watch the playoff together, OK?”

Mere hours later, it was my father who broke the news to me. Nora had taken Paul to the local hospital. Numerous tests and procedures were done, but to no avail. There was nothing more the doctors could have done to treat his advanced pneumonia. My birthday sister’s baby boy, the 6’9” chef who loved all things Red & Black, was gone at the tender age of 21 years and 19 days.

I recall little of what came next. Christmas Day wasn’t just subdued at our house – it was nonexistent. My youngest sister, Ayla, along with a multitude of family and friends, planned Paul’s memorial service. Nora thought it most befitting to hold the Celebration of Life service on New Year’s Eve - the same day that the Bulldogs would take on the Ohio State Buckeyes for a spot in the National Championship game. Her decision could not have been more perfect way to honor Paul’s influence in our family.

Returning home after the service, I was still in shock and numb to my core. I just wanted to do something normal with my family, like watch college football. I desperately wanted something normal for my grown children too. They had lost an aunt and now a cherished cousin. We parked ourselves on the sofas, each one of us hoping for a holiday miracle – for our Georgia Bulldogs and for ourselves.

That New Year’s Eve ballgame was one for the ages. I kept picking up my phone, wanting to text Paul. We had often communicated during ball games. The score went back and forth and back again. Paul would have been thrilled with the drama! 2023 was waiting with baited breath when the final seconds of the game clock began their downward spiral. The Dawgs were ahead by a single point, but Ohio State lined up for a play that would put the Buckeyes on victory’s stage. One single kick through the uprights would end the Bulldog’s season and crush the hopes of a back to back Championship title for Georgia. I couldn’t watch, so I closed my eyes and pictured my nephew’s handsome face before whispering to the cosmos: “Paul, help our Bulldogs, if you can.”

Then I heard “Uh oh” from my oldest daughter. I heard “It’s going sideways!” from my youngest daughter. I lifted my tear stained face and watched that pigskin drift left of the goal posts. My son, a soccer aficionado, cried out “What just happened?” Sheer pandemonium broke out in my house as the referees signaled the kick was no good. More tears gathered in my eyes as stunned Georgia players stormed the field after their win was deemed official. The floors beneath my children were protesting because all three were jumping up and down, shouting, “That was Paul! That was Aunt Marianne! They did that! Paul pushed that ball out of the way! Aunt Mari helped Georgia win!”

I once asked for a sign that Love never forgets, that it never fails. As clocks along the East Coast were striking midnight on New Year’s Day 2023, my requested sign was delivered in sensational fashion, in a way that my family will never forget.