



The Wishbone

Our first Thanksgiving, November 1981. It had been only three months since Richards funeral, and six months since he disappeared. I still really couldn't believe he was gone. I struggled with depression, anxiety and overwhelming guilt. If only I had been a better Mother...

I decided to make Thanksgiving dinner. I wanted everything to be as "normal" as possible. I wanted to give my other children the holiday they deserved. Richard loved holidays.

I went shopping. I cried as I turned down each aisle. People stared at me crying in the store. I didn't care. I was on a mission. I got up early in the morning. I worked all day long, preparing a full holiday dinner. I cooked. I cried. The kids played with their friends. I cried. I set the holiday table; one less plate and an empty chair. I cried. I called everyone in for dinner. They were hungry but reluctant. I began to pray, thankful for what we still had. But my prayer soon turned to tears, then sobs. Missing him was just too much. Everyone began to cry. One by one we all left the table, the food untouched.

When I returned to put the food away for later, I found that the family dog had enjoyed a wonderful meal...ours! Paw prints in the mashed potatoes, drips of gravy everywhere. The Turkey carved by our four legged love. I cried again. At least the dog left the wishbone. My boys always took turns making a wish and breaking the wishbone. I asked them who wanted to make the wish this year. None of them wanted to. We decided to save it for Richard.

Christmas was just around the corner, another holiday dread. This time I remembered what I learned from Thanksgiving. I realized that I couldn't make things "normal". I had to create a new "normal". Old traditions were

too painful. I had to make new traditions. I had to face the reality of Richard not being with us. I found the wishbone I had been saving. I painted it with red nail polish and sprinkled it with glitter. When we decorated our Christmas tree, I hung Richard's Wishbone near the top. This began our new tradition. Every Thanksgiving we save the Turkey wishbone for Richard. Each year we decorate our Christmas tree with these wishbones.

One year, that pesky family dog chewed up all the wishbones on the bottom half of the Christmas tree. I was devastated. I asked my friends to help me replace them. Many people saved their Thanksgiving wishbones for me. This began yet another tradition.

Two years after Richard died; I met a new survivor, Gloria Fritz and her family. Her 7 year old daughter, Cathy, was brutally murdered on October 1st, 1983. Gloria soon became my new best friend. Gloria and I spent much time together over the years, sipping tea and smoking cigarettes, talking about our murdered children and hoping for justice. Gloria always loved Thanksgiving; she was a very loving, giving person. She had often held large Thanksgiving gatherings at her home. She said once the group was so large they had to move the tables outside, where they lined the entire driveway. The year after Cathy died, she just wanted family, but she invited our family to share Thanksgiving at her home. This began yet another "new tradition" for both of our families.

The Fritz and Leland families shared Thanksgiving together for many years, until October 11, 2000, when my very best friend Gloria Fritz died from Lung Cancer. That Thanksgiving we still gathered at Gloria's home to share all the wonderful memories. We saved the wishbone for Richard.

Just two years later, I too, was diagnosed with stage 1V terminal lung cancer. Most patients with this type and stage of lung cancer have a life expectancy of 6 to 9 months. I have been blessed with a miracle of living far beyond expectations. With the support of family, friends, faith, wonderful volunteers and dedicated doctors, I have been able to continue living and working. Now that my boys are grown, I would like to pass on this wishbone tradition to them. Now, more than ever before, I need more wishbones.

One year I wrote this same wishbone article for the Homicide Survivors newsletter, asking friends to save their wishbones for me. Several friends gave me wishbones. Some were large, some small, some painted, some with glitter and ribbons, and one that was especially beautiful, decorated as an angel, wings, halo and all.

Then one day a special person, I have never met, sent me something I will cherish forever. I received a small package in the mail, addressed to “Richard’s Mother”. Inside were two wishbones and a note. The note read:

“Dear Richard’s Mother,

Your letter in the newsletter brought tears to my eyes. My daughter was stalked and murdered in 1987. We made wishes on wishbones almost all of her life. At her funeral, I put a bag of wishbones in her pocket, and when I die, I will have my own bag of wishbones in my pocket. When we’re together again, we’ll play our game. My heart goes out to you. With Love, Irene’s Mother”

It has been 27 years now. I have been blessed in so many ways. Even through I meet most new friends because of the tragedies of our loved one’s murders, I feel blessed to have been able to experience the unique bond with fellow survivors. And I feel comforted to know that Richard and I will have friends in heaven to play the wishbone game.

This year, I again ask if you would save your Turkey Wishbone for me. Please help me decorate my Christmas tree with wishbones and help my family carry on our new tradition.

My wish for you is that you, too, will find new traditions that bring you comfort and joy in remembrance of your loved ones.

With great love,

Gail Leland

