

A Year of Memories

-By Bettie V. Steelman

While I was delivering mail on my route today, I saw a teenager who looked like you. When I saw him, I cried. I came home and looked at your website pictures again. You were seventeen when you left, and you've been gone almost four years now.

Many occasions throughout each year remind me of you. In January I think of you when snow falls. You loved playing in the snow - riding sleds, participating in snowball fights, making snowmen, cutting circles in a vehicle with your friend or brother or dad.

February brings Valentine's Day and the memory of the many times I heard you say the Valentine words, "I love you." Sometimes you would leave me sticky notes on the kitchen counter, and they always ended with "Love you, Samuel."

March is the month of your birthday. You were the fifth child born on the fifth day of the month. I've heard many Bible scholars and preachers say that the number five is God's number of grace. You were definitely my child of grace. You asked me a couple of times in your short life if you were an accident. I told you that you were an unexpected blessing. You always grinned when I said that.

April brings memories of your prom four years ago. That was your finest hour and I didn't know it. I was

so blessed by God to be at your date's home when you arrived to pick her up and to be able to take pictures. You were so beautiful (I hope you forgive my mother talk. I'm sure you'd rather be called handsome or "cool" or a "hottie"). As your mom, it was a breathtaking experience to watch you walk across the yard to her door that evening. As I watched a strange, unexplained feeling overtook me, but I wasn't sure what the feeling meant. Maybe that's how you might look on your wedding day in a few years, I thought.

That same feeling returned when you put your arm around me that night to take our photo together. Little did I know those very pictures would be placed in a memorial display at the visitation before your funeral. One would also be placed on your headstone. But I thank God so much for allowing me to be there that day in your presence. It is my own personal memorial video that I can replay in my mind anytime.

On sunny, warm May afternoons, the sight and scent of honeysuckle blooms bring back precious memories of you. When you were two, I picked you up and carried you around our honeysuckle-covered backyard fence. I showed you how to enjoy the sweet fragrance and to pull the little center out of the honeysuckle bloom to get a drop of nectar for your tongue.

May is Mother's Day month, and naturally my Mother's Day is bittersweet now that you're gone. Although your one brother and three sisters always manage to brighten my day, there's one portion of my heart that only you can fill. After church this past Mother's Day, I rode to your grave site and brushed the grass off the base of your tombstone. Not my preferred choice of ways to spend Mother's Day afternoon. I'd rather receive a hug from you and an "I love you, Mama."

On Memorial Day, within a few weeks of your accident, you and your sister went with your dad to the graveyard where your paternal grandparents are buried. While walking through the graveyard, you were amazed at all the different ages of people buried there. You saw a tombstone with the deceased person's picture on it. You told your sister that you wanted your picture on your tombstone when you died. Unbeknownst to you, that request would all too soon be honored. More really great photos were made of you on that Memorial Day. How precious pictures become after someone passes away.

I guess June is the saddest month. One beautiful sunny and hot June morning, you went with your brother-in-law and a friend to wade and fish in the river. You never returned home. You stepped off into a sinkhole and the current pulled you under. They tried their best to find you before it was too late. But that was not to be.

July reminds me of you because you loved celebrating the Fourth. You would always ask me to take you to buy fireworks. As a teenage boy, setting off fireworks was a Fourth of July tradition for you and your friends.

August and September bring school memories and buses full of teenagers and children of all ages. But one student is missing from the crowd. You were still in high school at the time of your death. The September

after your death, we set up a small memorial for you at a riverside park. It contained poems about your death with religious tracts attached. Your picture was also on the front of the little memorial stand. Over three hundred of these poems were taken from the memorial.

October and November remind me of you because of hunting season. You loved hunting and shooting your own rifle. On the last Thanksgiving that you lived you shot your first and last buck deer. It was an 8-pointer and you were so proud. You took it to have it mounted. The November after you died I went to the taxidermist to pick it up. After he heard your story, he wouldn't charge me anything for his services.

December is my birthday month and Christmas. We had some good family pictures made that last Christmas before you left us. I have a last Christmas picture of you sitting on my living room floor. You look so alive in that picture. But you have on the sweater you wore in the casket.

On holiday occasions we expect to be visited by memories. But sometimes memories are like uninvited visitors. We never know when they will arrive. They come at unexpected moments and catch us off guard.

But I am so thankful for all the memories of you, Samuel; even if they make me cry sometimes. I am eternally grateful for all the good memories you and I made together. So many more good than bad. Thank you, Samuel. I love you, and I can't wait to see you again in heaven.

Thank you, Lord, for unexpected blessings. Samuel was surely one of those. ~

Bettie V. Steelman s son Samuel Theon Steelman was 17 years old when he died in a drowning accident. She is a rural mail carrier in Lewisville, NC, and a beginning freelance writer.