

## Is it last orders for the boozy Midnight Masses? Kevin Maher



**M**idnight Mass. Is there any event or any ritual whatsoever that better articulates the mind-body duality, the tensions between the soul and the flesh and the sheer ludicrousness of trying to generate a mood of solemn internal reflection just hours before one of the most inconceivably carnal and cross-eyed orgies of consumption known to man? And to do it directly after last orders? Are they serious? Oh come all ye faithful ... and sway dramatically throughout the liturgy, then collapse and barf all over my chasuble.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a recent survey of churches across the country has found that Midnight Mass is under threat from the combined forces of drunken congregants, drunken partygoers on the streets outside and, my particular favourite, in one instance only, a real live stalker (and it's probably a safe bet to suggest that there was alcohol involved there too). The churches are apparently reacting to the onslaught by shifting their services to earlier in the evening, by cancelling them altogether or, in some extreme cases, by keeping the service but employing bouncers at the church door ("Sorry mate, no trainers, no jeans or no blatantly detectable scepticism concerning the finer points of transubstantiation.")

As someone who has been to nearly 20 years of Christmas masses —

and now I have it — sheer, stultifying, terror. Yes, a study at Kyoto University, involving over 1,400 people, found a correlation between an inability to stand easily on one leg and the development of poor brain health, possibly

strokes and dementia. Great. Now, as something of an occasional hypochondriac myself, I have no idea whether or not I can easily stand on one leg, but after this do you think I'm going to try to find out? No way. What happens

if I try to fall over? Do I call an ambulance? Do I book myself into a nursing home? So no, I am officially from now on spending the rest of my days on two feet. And if the kids ask me to play hopscotch? Forget it.



sometimes midnight, sometimes the hungover version — I fear that the efforts of the clergy will be to no avail. For the services are notoriously shaky in their daytime iteration: the kids are screaming, "Presents! Presents! We want more presents!" while the mums are picking pieces of brussels sprouts from underneath their fingernails and reminding the dads, through gritted teeth, that sharpening the carving knife does not constitute a 50-50 share of domestic yuletide chores.

Midnight Mass itself, though, is mostly closer to a complete sham — in whatever form you encounter it — and is about as spiritually edifying as being forced to sit, stand and lip-synch for 50 or 60 woozy minutes until the next glass of Christmas bubbly or the next fistful of Quality Street comes along.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit ... *God, I really should've gone to the loo after that last pint. Bursting.*

Eternal God, who made this most holy night ... *I see Sarah from number 46 is here. Back from the States. Looking very fine indeed. Fine with a capital Phwoor!*

Then an angel of the Lord stood before the shepherds ... *I bet she does Pilates. Definitely no carbs.*

I'd like to speak tonight about the true meaning of Christmas ... *Oh, Lord. Father, in this holy night your Son, our saviour, was born of human flesh. Bursting, bursting, bursting.*

Pray, my brothers and sisters that our sacrifice may be acceptable ... *Catch the end of Moonraker when I get back. The space-sex scene. He's a fierce man for the ladies, Bond.*

And the word became flesh and lived among us ... *Don't think I can wait much longer. Pee. Drink. Chocolate. Bond. And in that order.*

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. *Oh, thank God. Wasn't too bad all the same. And good to have the bit of religion. At this time of year.*

## Fork out this Xmas

**Nice to see that the Oxford professor of psychology Charles Spence has come up with the ideal sensory combination for the perfect Christmas lunch. The smell of pine trees and the sound of classical music are apparently surefire guarantees that your mealtime extravaganza will be perceived as classy and "Christmassy".**

**And although the professor ignores the pivotal emotional component of every Christmas lunch (from mismatched relatives to the creeping sense of anticlimax that is the yuletide season's secret alter-ego), I can't help but admire his greatest discovery, namely that heavy cutlery makes the food taste more expensive.**

**Yep. You can serve them up Turkey Twizzlers and a bucket of slop from the action end of a compost bin, but as long as they eat it with iron-plated cutlery they'll be cooing every time: "Oooh, ambassador, with these chewy turnip skins and stringy onion ends you are spoiling us."**

# 'This Christmas

## Victoria Milligan is determined to create happy new memories with her children this year, despite losing her husband and a daughter in the Padstow speedboat accident

**In May last year Victoria Milligan, her husband Nick and their four children were thrown off their speedboat near their holiday home in Cornwall. As the boat careered out of control, Nick, known as Nicko to his family, and their eight-year-old daughter Emily were killed. Victoria's lower left leg was partially severed and had to be amputated, while her son Kit's leg was saved after 12 operations. Victoria and her children, Amber, Olivia and Kit, live in southwest London and this is their second Christmas since the tragedy. Here Victoria describes how they are all coping.**

What if you don't feel any comfort or joy this Christmas? What if you feel out of step with the rest of the country at what is meant to be the happiest time of the year? For people like me who have suffered a loss, Christmas emphasises our feelings of loneliness and unhappiness.

This is the second Christmas without my beloved husband Nicko and beautiful daughter Emily, who died in a speedboat accident last year. I miss them every day but even more so at this time of year when all I see on TV is happy "perfect" families, smiling and laughing, giving presents to each other and full of cheer.

Even though I know there is no such thing as a "perfect" family, it makes me feel desperately sad, emphasising what I am missing. Every carol concert I go to, I feel empty as I sing, just wanting Nicko by my side, and I feel so sorry for him that he is not here to see his children singing their hearts out, one year older. He adored his children and never missed a carol concert, and as for little Em, how do I watch her friends sing their carols without looking for her among them? I always found the children's carol concerts emotional before the accident, but now they are almost unbearable.

People tell me: "It will be better than the first Christmas"; "You must make it special for your other children." So now not only am I missing Nicko and Emily more than ever, I feel an enormous responsibility to Amber, Olivia and Kit to still make Christmases special. I feel I must make up for their



loss by making the house look even more festive, the tree even bigger, buy them more presents than last year, when the thing they want most I cannot give them.

Everything I do makes me realise what I have lost. There is so much family tradition around Christmas that each act triggers another memory. As a family we would always buy our tree from our local garden centre on the first weekend of December. I would normally like the first one I saw, but Nicko would say it was not tall enough or full enough, so we would see tree after tree, which in my eyes looked exactly the same, until invariably settling on the first one we saw.

I remember one year going through the same rigmarole, but by the time we had decided to go back to our first choice another dad was packaging up the same tree. There then ensued a comic farce of swapping this man's tree for another as he turned his back to choose a wreath. We laughed all the way home with the children shouting out, "He's behind you!" as if they were in a scene from a pantomime. Another memory that makes me smile is of the time when Nicko had chosen a tree that Amber, who was 5 at the time, didn't approve of. The tree was bagged and he was attempting to strap it to the top of the car with this tiny tot lying prostrate on the floor, pounding her fists shouting: "But, Daddy,

# there will be tears, but also laughter'

COVER AND BELOW: TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER, DAVID REBER



it's just not big enough!" After the choosing of the tree comes the ceremonial mounting in the stand and the putting-on of lights.

This was always Nicko and Emily's job. Having four children meant it was much easier to give them each a role, trying to prevent the arguing and sulking, which happened one year over who was going to put the angel on top.

To add a little background music to this festive scene, I used to attempt to play Christmas carols on the piano from my grade 3 piano book from

with the children attaching baubles wherever they could reach.

I couldn't even contemplate getting a tree last year and the thought of it this year, decorating it without Nicko and Emily, was almost unbearable. But somehow it seemed even sadder not having a tree: it was almost admitting to giving up on Christmas. This is where friends become invaluable, since each small task at this time seems enormous. A friend offered to get the tree and bring it over and my nephew, the children and I began the job of decorating it. Like most things since the accident, I have learnt that the thought of doing something is invariably worse than the actual event. We talked about Nicko and Emily while we were randomly attaching decorations, laughing about how he would be strongly "advising" us where to put them.

Somehow, without forcing it, this became a happy event and it felt like they were there with us. We could almost hear Nicko giving orders and little Em sitting on top of the ladder reaching to put the angel on top of the tree. I am so thankful it was her turn to do it the Christmas before she died. We chatted away about funny memories, like the time we came down one morning having decorated the tree beautifully and the dogs had pulled it over. About the time Nicko had become fixated with attaching an illuminated reindeer to a high wall outside the house and it became like a scene from *Mission: Impossible*, with him shimmying up the drainpipe with a Swiss army knife in his mouth.

Happy memories of Christmases

past, but it made me realise that they are memories and life does go on without them, unimaginable as it is, and how we must create new memories. I don't have big expectations for Christmas this year; I am just going to try to enjoy each joyful moment that comes about. I am going to live in the present and hug and adore my children. I cannot make up for what they have lost with material possessions, but I can give them comfort, security and love.

So how can you help someone at Christmas who has lost a loved one? Grief is completely individual but it really helps me to know that I am not coping on my own. A quick text or email or a little card from a friend is lovely and gives me a great feeling of love and support. I don't want people's pity for that is not helpful, neither is it helpful to say: "Please let me know if there is anything I can do." Instead try to take one thing off their to-do list, whether it is taking over supper, looking after their child for the afternoon, going to the supermarket for them or taking the dogs for a walk. Do not feel awkward talking about the loved one who has died. I like people talking about Nicko and Emily, it makes them feel present and means they are not forgotten.

How can you help yourself this Christmas if you have lost a loved one? Don't try to be too strong: it is sad what has happened and you miss them. It is appropriate to feel like this, especially at this time when grief triggers are everywhere and there is so much emphasis on family. Don't feel you need to say yes to every invitation;

**Victoria Milligan, whose husband Nick and daughter Emily died in a speedboat accident, at home in London with her children Olivia, Amber and Kit. Left: a family portrait taken before the tragedy. Emily and Nick are on the left**

remember you are in control, so don't feel any pressure from family or friends. I only go to parties or events where I know I will feel comfortable.

On the other hand don't be afraid to let plans change: we don't know how we are going to feel from one day to the next. If you have arranged to go to a party but the thought of being in a crowd of people feels overwhelming, make your apologies and stay in: your family and friends will understand.

A great piece of advice my grief counsellor gave me was that I was in control of the conversation. If you are out at a party, having a good time and the conversation is making you sad, change it. I am not scared to say: "I'm so sorry, but do you mind if we don't talk about Nicko and Emily tonight or my Christmas plans because it will make me upset?" It felt so liberating the first time I said that, like a night off from grief, and the other person will appreciate your honesty.

Please try to look after yourself, try to get enough sleep, eat regular, healthy meals and don't drink too much. The last is tricky at Christmas time. I know, but a hangover combined with lack of sleep is not conducive to coping with grief. Try to be prepared: the more organised you are the more in control you will feel. The children and I have sat down and discussed together what we feel is the right plan for Christmas.

We will be with Nicko's family on Christmas day. There will be many tears but also laughter and the start of new traditions. We are not leaving them in Christmases past, we are bringing them with us for they are a part of us all. He would be so proud to see little Kit being able to hang a bauble a little higher on the tree with Amber and Olivia looking after him and helping me too. We need to create our own new traditions around Christmas while keeping the precious memories alive. Christmas will never be the same again, but without trying to make it "perfect" it can still be full of joy, and that is what Nicko and Emily would want it to be.

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