

Open Season by CARMEN HON

The greatest Xmas gift ever

Left in a children's home as a child, I finally had the chance to be part of a loving family.



TO most people Christmas may be about the gifts, gingerbread, turkey or another public holiday to look forward to – but not for me.

It means more than all that. Why?

Every year, I will make a pilgrimage of sorts, a journey of 6,360km to Australia where there is a “family” waiting for me with warmth, love and a sense of belonging.

They are my Australian foster family with my dad, mum, brothers Billy and Seth and lovely sister Daisy.

I was hardly a year old when my parents divorced and I was placed in a children's home in Subang Jaya at the age of five.

I wondered what I had done wrong to deserve such punishment and felt the world had abandoned me.

A miracle happened when a lady named Pascale appeared in my life.

She visited the home when I was six, and somehow, my little frame and my innocent eyes peering up at her giant figure caught her attention.

There was an instant connection as I walked up to her, hopped onto her lap and said, “Please love me”.

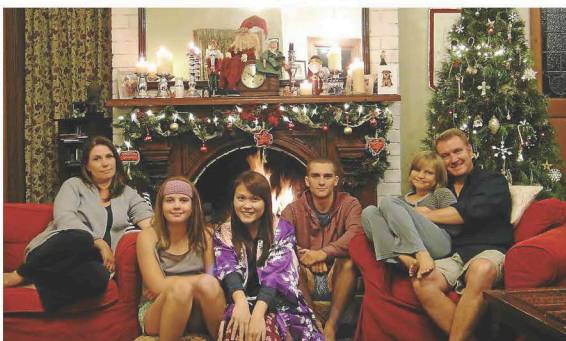
She then wrapped her warm arms around me and I felt the bond that would turn my life around.

My story starts from here.

I felt that God had given a second chance to an abandoned child, so I could receive the love that all children deserve.

When my foster dad Philip was posted to the Philippines a few years later, the parting broke my heart as I was just 10 years old and still struggling to come to grips with life.

When my biological mum refused



Togetherness: The writer spending time with her foster family on Christmas Day last year.

their request to adopt me, it shattered our worlds but made me realise that I had to be strong and accept the fact that they had to go.

However, we made a promise to reunite again every Christmas – wherever they may be.

This is why Christmas is so precious to me.

So, for the past 10 years, I have travelled home to the Philippines, Singapore or Australia for this special occasion, although the goodbyes never felt less devastating.

Before I left the Philippines after Christmas in 2004, my foster mum laid a gentle kiss on my palm and said: “Whenever you miss me, just place your palm on your cheek and

that would be my kisses to you while we are apart.”

With tears in both of my eyes, she then watched me walk through Immigration and back to my life in Malaysia.

I told myself that I have to be resilient and continue with life – to strive and to make the best out of it.

It has been 15 years now since my foster family brought sunshine into my life and gave me the strength to stand on my own two feet.

If not for them, I'm pretty sure I would have ended up on the wrong side of the tracks.

With less than a year to go, I hope to graduate with a full honours degree in linguistics.

My dearest wish is that my foster family will be there when I receive my academic scroll of achievement.

I also feel that in a way, I have somehow found my way back to *The Star* as this newspaper has played a role in helping me remember my childhood.

By this, I mean that I was featured in *The Star* and was interviewed by Agatha Rica Matayon 13 years ago, when my foster mum took all of us (in the children's home) to an elephant sanctuary because she was sad that we had never seen an elephant before.

When I found the article and photographs in the archives last month, I felt as though I was transported

back into the past for a brief moment.

So, I had decided to meet Agatha, who now holds the rank of *Sunday Star* Editor. She was really surprised to see me in person after all these years.

Then last year, while I was doing my internship with a brand building and retail distribution firm, I was coincidentally assigned to man the counter at *The Star's* cafeteria to sell our company products.

With all of these “signs”, I was determined to intern for *The Star* and I was absolutely thrilled to have gotten in.

These past two months in the News Desk section have been incredibly challenging and fulfilling beyond my expectations.

I was blessed with kind and nice colleagues who have helped me in so many ways as well as editors who gave me valuable guidance, encouragement and motivation.

As I am writing this piece in my last internship week with *The Star*, I feel so thankful that I have learned so much in so short a time.

Looking back, I now see that my past, although one that I would not wish on anyone else, has given me strength, hope and motivation in life.

To others out there who face similar predicaments, don't give up when you're knocked down as these temporary setbacks will make you a stronger person.

Remember, it is never the end of the road but you need to believe in yourself and your dreams.

As you read this, I'm already on my journey back home into the arms of my family – the greatest Christmas present I could ever wish for.

Merry Christmas.