I met my husband, Darren, in January 2014. My mother talked me into signing up for a three-month subscription to Christian Mingle for the new year, and Darren was the first and only man that I talked to on it. He messaged me, and I immediately thought that he was cute and sweet, and I loved that he was also a Christian. I gave him my phone number, and we exchanged texts for a week before he asked me out on our first date. We went out for dinner and karaoke, and it felt like we’d known each other forever instead of just nine days. I didn’t even bother looking at any other profiles after that; I cancelled my subscription and never looked back.

My husband had a heart of gold. I know a lot of people say that, but, in Darren’s case, it was completely true. He was kind, caring, and outgoing. He was the type of person that could walk into a room full of strangers and, after five minutes, everyone there would be his friend. As an introverted bookworm, he balanced me out perfectly. Even more importantly, he was the most understanding person I’d ever met.

I was born with a heart condition and was paralyzed from the waist down as a child in a case of medical negligence. As a woman in a wheelchair, I’d always struggled with dating. Men just never seemed to be able to look past my wheelchair, but Darren did. While we communicated over the dating app, I told him that I was in a wheelchair, and his only response was, “So what?” This response blew my mind, since a guy that I’d asked out in college had literally told me that he would date me, if it wasn’t for my wheelchair.

Darren was also able to see past my “parent problem.” Being in a wheelchair, it’s difficult for me to do certain things, like cooking. Because of this, and because neither my parents nor I could afford to live on our own down here in Florida, they still lived with me in a house I’d purchased the year before. Any man I wanted to be with would have to be willing to accept my parents, too. That’s a hard sell for any guy, but my husband didn’t even flinch when I mentioned it.

He'd been living with his elderly mother when we met, helping to take care of her, and he completely understood why I wouldn’t want to leave my parents to fend for themselves in a city that was much more expensive to live in than the small Illinois town we’d come from. My husband insisted that it wasn’t a problem. We’d have our own bedroom and bathroom in the house, and he didn’t mind if my parents continued to live with us. We would have more hands-on deck to help with yard work, housework, and paying the bills. And he told me he’d feel better having someone at home with me while he worked the occasional late night as a computer tech.

After a whirlwind six months of dating, Darren proposed on the Fourth of July during a fireworks display over the Caloosahatchee River. He moved in with us two months after he proposed, and, just over a year later, we were married in a ceremony at our church. It was easily the happiest day of my life. I wore a gorgeous white dress with lace detailing that made me feel like a princess. And, in his rented tux, Darren looked like the fairy tale prince that I’d hoped for as a little girl.

We quickly settled into a life I’d always dreamed of. I worked as an attorney during the week, trying to repay my student loans and pay off as much of the mortgage as I could before my condition got too bad, and Darren worked hard in IT. On the weekends, he showed me beautiful places in Southwest Florida that I’d never seen before. We spent time with my parents and had dinner with Darren’s mother and stepfather every Friday night. I even had a sibling! My brother-in-law and his wife became a very important part of our lives, and we saw them on holidays. I was unbelievably happy to have the big family I’d wished for as an only child.

Just like any other couple, we had our disagreements. Darren had diabetes type one and was hospitalized a few times. We also each lost a job over the years due to our health issues, so money was a little tight at times. But, overall, we had the perfect life. I had the job I’d studied for seven years to get. I owned a nice little house in a quiet subdivision just half an hour from the beach, where I lived with my dear parents and Darren, the love of my life. I was happier than I’d ever dreamed possible.

We enjoyed six of the greatest years together, until February 2020. My parents, Darren, and I all came down with the worst flu-like symptoms we’d ever had that month. My husband got so sick that he had to be hospitalized in mid- March. He was able to text me from his isolation room for two days until his oxygen levels got so bad that they had to intubate him. He called me beforehand and told me he loved me, and I told him I loved him and reassured him that he would be ok.

I was able to see him through a wall of glass in the hospital two days after he was intubated. The hospital closed to visitors after that, and all I could do was call to get updates. The only thing they could ever tell me was that he had COVID and was in “critical condition.” After a week on the vent, the hospital called to tell me that Darren’s heart had stopped and that he was gone. I’d never understood what people meant when they said that their world went black, but that was the perfect way to describe how I felt. My world was suddenly devoid of all color, joy, and meaning.

The hospital sent his body to the Fort Myers Memorial Gardens, where I got to see him in a body bag from six feet away before they cremated him. We couldn’t hold a memorial because of the virus, so we just buried some of his remains near his father’s grave with my parents and in laws present.

Back at home, my parents and I tried to get over COVID. Even after I was no longer sick, I felt like my dog, who sat by the front door for six weeks after my husband passed, just waiting for him to come home. I cried myself to sleep for months. I felt lost and hopeless. I slept as much as possible to avoid having to think about how empty the house (and my heart) felt without my soulmate.

Living with a heart condition and elderly parents, I didn’t want to be exposed to the virus again. The three of us ended up self- quarantining for almost a year, until we got the vaccine. In the meantime, I felt like I was barely keeping my head above water. Everyone kept telling me that Darren would want me to be happy again, but I didn’t know how to do that without him. Honestly, I didn’t even think it was possible.

I watched TV, read a book, and colored. But nothing made me feel anything close to “happy.” In 2021, I went back to church. I started teaching Sunday school again, going out for dinner once a week with my parents and my in laws. I even went to Universal Studios on a girls’ trip with my mom. One day, surprisingly, I found myself laughing! It caught me off guard, but it also felt kind of nice. It was refreshing to know that I could enjoy something again.

I soon discovered that even this “happiness” was coupled with sadness: I was having fun, but, God, how I wished Darren could have been there to experience it with me. That’s when I realized: maybe I shouldn’t strive for “happy.” Maybe I should just aim for “happy…ish.” Unbridled happiness like I had felt with my husband just wasn’t possible anymore. But I could still try to make him proud of me by taking care of our parents, our home, and our cats. I could still enjoy a nice vacation or a funny movie. I could still look forward to holidays and birthdays with our families.

When people started telling me that I seemed happier, I would agree that I was feeling better. I may never get back to being blissfully happy like I was before, but I finally got back to “happy- ish.” It’s the least I can do for Darren. And, maybe, until I’m reunited with him one day, happy-ish is good enough.