



*Kirsty Eccles*

# *Advent Calendar*

Opening all the doors for Advent  
And reader beware, there are skeletons in these closets.

All my Christmasses

### **1st – Bah Humbug**

It must be over thirty years since I had an advent calendar. I haven't thought about them in years. I haven't 'done' Christmas in a couple of decades. What? Back the truck up? You don't 'do' Christmas? Does not compute. How can that be? That's the response I still face this time of year, the time of year when we've all lately recovered from the increasingly commercialised nonsense that Halloween has become, which seems to be just a prelude to the Christmas madness people feel it necessary to engage with every December. Despite the fact that millions of people around the world aren't Christian, you're still considered somehow strange if you don't buy into the whole festive cheer thing. And every year come Advent, I tuck my head in and try to hide till Epiphany, or Twelfth Night, or what you will. But this year I'm coming out fighting. I'm going to tell you why it is I don't celebrate Christmas.

I always said I had three good reasons: I don't believe in God, I don't believe in capitalism and I know from personal experience that Christmas can be the most awful time of year. What's to celebrate in that? But this year, I'm taking myself, and you if you dare to come with me, on an Advent journey through all my Christmases past. Maybe it will lay Marley's ghost at last? Maybe it will give me closure and you understanding. Or maybe it's just another way to pass the time.

And so that's how I re-engaged with the concept of the Advent Calendar. I thought that with 24 days to cover, it would be a nice little conceit to get hold of an Advent calendar, open a door every day and at least give you something 'special' to look forward to – the sense of wonder at the unknown which is what advent calendar's used to bring for me as a very small child.

So I went shopping. Something I try to avoid doing these days after about the middle of October. It used to be the middle of November but Halloween is now crowding out the stores in the same glitzy glamour that Christmas does and it turns out I'm just as allergic to commercialised spookery as I am to commercialised festivity. The only thing to do is to avoid the shops. But I went. I went looking for an advent calendar. Like when I was a kid.

Back that truck right up. I know I should have realised advent calendars, like everything else, have moved on, evolved, become more extreme. All I could find were Star Wars and Disneyfication and branded chocolate bars hiding themselves behind the façade of an advent calendar. Forgive my cynicism but what exactly does franchising have to do with the advent story? Has the baby Jesus been completely pushed out of the picture since I stopped paying attention? I remember learning ‘We will rock you,’ in nursery school, and I don’t mean the Queen anthem, I mean that other song ‘Baby Jesus, sweetly sleep, do not stir, we will fetch a coat of fur’ – I may be paraphrasing slightly, but it’s scary how those early songs stay with you. I haven’t thought of that song in decades but I could still get up and sing it on stage in front of an audience of dotting parents if I had to. And if the dotting parents still existed.

As I said, everything changes and maybe it was foolish of me to think Christmas would be any different. I’m not the target market any more, after all, am I? Christmas is for children. And today children love bright, shiny, expensive, consumer crap. And they are a powerful market force to be reckoned with. They have pester power and nowhere is this exploited more than at Advent. The new must have toys hit the screens and the shops and parents are unable to resist. They must, after all, do the best for their offspring. And doing the best, once Children in Need is out of the way, means buying the best, doesn’t it? But I’m not a parent, so the Christmas spirit can’t even get me that way. Like I said, I’m an oddity. I don’t fit into polite society. And nowhere is that more obvious than at advent.

I’m just left with my imagination to open advent doors for you each day. No chocolates. No pictures. Just my words. I looked online for advent calendars – well, today if you can’t find something you just google, right. I exited quickly when I discovered that to buy an advent calendar can cost you up to £85. Yes, that’s right. You can get one that’s a tree and instead of opening a door each day, the kid gets a hand puppet. 24 hand puppets in a month. That’s beyond my wildest childhood dreams. The excitement for me was in what lay behind the door and as a child that was good enough. More than enough on occasions, as you’ll find out if you come back each day. Like I said, children have evolved. Christmas has clearly evolved and I’ll not be splashing out £8 for an advent calendar with a few bits of chocolate attached to cardboard any more than I’ll be paying £85 for puppets. So you’re stuck with a new story a day for twenty four days. And they won’t all be happy stories. But they will all open a door on an aspect of Christmas – some may be familiar, and I hope that many of them won’t be. But they are all real. They all make up my life.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Traipsing round for Santa**

Let’s start with a happy memory. I found the photograph recently, of me sitting on Santa’s knee. It was in a shop in Dundee. I’m dressed in school uniform which confirms that it was my first year at primary school. The socks were as rumpled as usual, the blazer sized to grow into about primary three. Looking at the photograph I can see a somewhat bemused look on my face. And I can remember the grin on my brother’s face as he stood out of picture, relieved that he hadn’t had to suffer the indignity of sitting on Santa’s knee – he was nearly eight after all, that’s too old for a boy to sit on a strange man’s knee isn’t it? Even if he is the purveyor of all the Christmas goodies. And he’d also escaped the indignity of the photograph.

The photograph seemed important to my mother. All important you might say. Which seemed strange to me even at the time. It was like she was trying to prove that Santa existed by getting a picture of me sitting on his knee.

I don't remember which shop it was. But I do remember we went traipsing round all the shops in Dundee looking for 'the best' Santa. And that neither my mum, nor I saw the irony in that. My brother did. He was early into irony. He was going to prove to me that Santa didn't exist. But for that year he let me be in my ignorance. He just smirked on the sidelines.

I was always a gullible child. I clearly remember going round more than four Santa's before we came to the one who was going to get our picture. To be 'the' Santa. And I knew, all children do, that there was only ONE Santa Claus. However, I didn't question the bizarre fact that we were doing the rounds looking for the 'best' one. I didn't think they were all the same, in different locations, I didn't question any of it. I suppose I may have still been so blinded by the power of someone to be able to deliver me my dreams 'if I was good' that I just bought into any old nonsense wholesale.

It's lucky I've never had children. I wouldn't have been able to do the Santa myth with them. Bah –humbug alert coming up. I've never been able to square the fact that we tell this lie to children and then spend the rest of the time teaching them *not* to tell lies. I've heard all the ends justify the means arguments and I'm afraid I'm still not convinced. Why would you tell a child that there's this man with so much money and power and magic that if they write him a letter or shout up a chimney, he's going to bring them what they want? It seems doomed to failure. And the pressure it puts on parents is immense.

Just to see the smile on their face on Christmas morning.

But why does it have to be Santa? Why can't the parents own up to being the giver of gifts? Children, in my experience, are ungrateful about most of what their parents do for them, even at birthdays, but surely there's nothing wrong in being honest. Why don't they just explain: It's a time of year when people give gifts to each other (then fill in with the appropriate religious story) and so we've got you this wonderful thing that you wanted to make you happy for a day.

Ah, but there's the magic? In what way does the existence of Santa (yes, I know he's derived from Saint Nicholas, but he was hijacked by Coca-cola long ago) coming down a chimney (even if you don't have one) make any of this more magical?

It's not about getting something for nothing, because you have to be good for the trade to hold good. Beyond that, it breaks all the rules about not taking things from strangers, which suggests that just because a man has a white beard, a red cape and a string of reindeer he's not a danger stranger. That's a pretty confusing concept for a child. There is good and bad in this world. You can trust Santa because he comes bearing gifts, eats the mince pie, drinks the sherry and feeds the carrots to his reindeer. But that nice lady in the post office who offered you sweets while you were getting bored in the queue. No. Don't take sweets from her. There's an army of adults out there just waiting to abduct you. All except Santa.

I suppose Santa is part of a fantasy which connects adults with their own happy childhood memories and so they want to perpetuate it. But what if your memories of childhood aren't happy? What if you didn't get a month off the pain for Christmas? What if Advent was one long, eternal trip towards domestic violence or feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness? What if it represents death, loss and devastation? What then? Why then as a parent you're expected to put your own feelings aside and keep up the myth. Keep telling the kids that for this one day everything can be perfect. Prepare them for that other 'perfect' day – the wedding – the

only day that tops Christmas for wanton, pointless extravagance. I've nothing against marriage – it's the 'big day' wedding mentality that worries me.

A dog is not just for Christmas. A marriage is not just a wedding. Telling lies and calling them cultural myths doesn't help make for well balanced people. It just makes life hard.

So there I am, in the photo, sitting on Santa's knee. Asking him for something. And telling him I've been a good girl. Not sure whether I'm lying or not. Not really happy with the present he's given me. Correction, with the present my mum has bought for me as part of the experience of visiting Santa in Dundee's premier department store. A present from the pink pile because I'm a girl. A present, even though I can't remember it now, I can be sure I didn't even want. I didn't do pink, even as a girl. There you go. Perhaps my inability to engage with Christmas shows some early sign of the complete renegade I later became. Or maybe it was the whole farce of Christmas and Santa that sowed the seeds within me.

It's all a question of who to blame. Because though I still remember that the baby Jesus was born in a stable and came to save the world from sin by taking it all upon himself – thanks Jesus, that's the best Christmas present ever, no? Yes, despite all that, I still can't shift the feeling that the whole Christmas story is part of a guilt culture gone mad. And that's me trying to be positive about it all!

### **3<sup>rd</sup> – Santa is real – how did they do that?**

I was lucky. In my early years Christmas was good. I have to thank my parents for that, I know. I wish I'd known at the time. They gave me a good couple of years before it all turned to ashes. Some kids don't even have that. And I do have some happy memories, some almost unadulteratedly happy ones, though they are all mediated with the memory that I always, always had 'issues' with Santa. Even when I believed in him I couldn't understand why. And what I wanted, more than presents, was to understand the world.

In my first year at primary – the same year we did the 'best' Santa recce – I was picked to read at the whole school Christmas assembly. I'm not sure if it was because I was the youngest, the smallest, the best reader or if I was picked at random, but it was a huge honour and one I was determined to live up to.

I practiced for weeks. My bit was 'and in those days there went out a decree that all the world should be taxed.' I can't say I understood it and I certainly didn't engage with it as readily as I did with Christmas carols. I loved to sing. And even though I felt I'd outgrown rocking the Baby Jesus by the time I went to 'big' school, I could get lost in the story of Good King Wenceslas 'gathering winter fuel.' I loved the picture of him and a boy wandering through the snow picking up kindling. It's still an enduring happy memory today. I still love gathering winter fuel. Though it's not wise to leave it till the snows fall as it's the devil to light a fire with damp kindling. And early on we learned O Come all ye faithful, and the descants sent chills down my spine. I couldn't wait to be old enough to have the soprano voice to take part fully. And a decade later, I did, in the original Latin. Even though by then Christmas wasn't something to look forward to, the carols kept me coming back. I suspect it's like that for lots of people.

Santa and midnight mass make liars of us all.

We love to sing. We love to believe. We want life to be glittery and sparkly and call it peace on earth good will to all men. Even as we know it isn't. We are told that we deserve to forget the truth for just a day. And we want to believe.

And that year I did believe. And I had evidence. Here it is. I had written my letter to Santa. I had posted it – in the post box because we didn't have a chimney – I was told that Santa would park the sleigh on the roof, and come in through the back door which was to be left on the sneck. Why he couldn't just park in the garden I don't know. But we were all prepared with buckets of water and carrots for the reindeer and sherry and mince pies for Santa. And come Christmas morning the mince pies would be crumbs, the carrots vanished and the bucket of water half drunk, the sherry glass empty.

This might have convinced me as a four year old, but now that I was at school and nearly six it was circumstantial evidence. I needed something stronger. Especially with an older brother who was muttering 'things' about Santa not being real.

As I said, the letter had been sent. I'd said what I wanted. I hoped I'd get it. I couldn't know if I'd been good enough. What child ever knows if they've really been good for a day never mind for a whole year. Santa must have to undertake some pretty fancy statistical analysis to work that one out.

Back to the story: I was out with my parents. We went past a toy shop. In the window was something I'd never seen before. And I wanted it more than anything I'd ever wanted before. But I hadn't told Santa. I hadn't known it existed when I wrote my letter. So I knew I wouldn't get it. But I wanted it so badly. I pulled my parents back – 'Look at that – it's the soldiers from Pippin Fort' I said, in hushed tones. They could obviously tell that this was special to me, but they didn't pull out the usual 'you'll have to ask Santa,' because they had posted the letter for me, so they knew I couldn't go back on the deal. I'd set out my demands to Santa. I would just have to be disappointed. I pressed my nose to the window for as long as I could, and on we went.

I didn't forget about it, but I didn't have an expectation that I would get the soldiers from Pippin Fort. And then the magic happened. When I awoke on Christmas morning, I felt down the bed to my stocking and it was large and lumpy. Nothing different there. I switched the light on. I could see it was only four thirty because I could tell the time and I had a clock in my room. I knew I shouldn't be up till six o'clock, even on Christmas morning. But Santa had been. I had to peek.

And there, filling the top of the stocking were The soldiers from Pippin Fort. Never have twelve little plastic men done so much to bolster belief in the incredible. I hadn't looked closely enough in the shop, but what they were was a set of plastic skittles (plastic was the new must have textile for children's toys in my day). Twelve of them, six inches high. They made me believe. I had been with my parents all the time we were outside the shop. They couldn't have bought it. I hadn't told Santa. I'd just wished. And Santa had made my wish come true.

I still don't know how my parents did it. It was Christmas Eve when we went past that shop. Unless one of them carried out the mother of all distractions on me while I was at the shop

window and sneaked in, or went back while we were preparing to leave the car park – no, I still can't work out how they did it. But they did. It's enough to make you believe in the magic of Christmas. I still have a couple of the plastic soldiers – no matter how bad Christmases have been since, I can cling onto the wonder of childhood and the possibility of magic when I look at them. And sometimes you need something positive to cling on to. Especially at Advent.

#### **4<sup>th</sup> The stocking at the end of the bed**

It's time to talk stockings. The Christmas kind. I don't know what kind of stocking you had as a kid – I'm hoping it's something you did leave behind in childhood, because I'm kind of shocked by the knowledge that some adults still play the Christmas stocking game. I know it's part of the whole joyful extravaganza, but I still find the thought of grown adults choosing this way to express themselves rather distasteful. If Christmas has to be at all, then yes, it is for children.

We used to have an old pair of my mum's denier tights, cut in two to give us one stocking each. The sort of stocking you would traditionally use as a robbers' mask – and we did employ them to such effect before we placed them on the end of our bed in hopeful anticipation. I don't mean that we went out robbing – just that, like all good packaging material, the stocking had its place in the whole gift giving process.

Other children I knew had pillow cases – that seemed excessively greedy and I always hoped Santa wouldn't fill them – but yet others put up knitted socks and actually hung them from mantle pieces in their sitting room. The spectrum of Santa gift receptacle sizing was important to me as a five year old. Before you went to school, family tradition was all. But that first Christmas after starting school, you looked at everything slightly differently. You'd discovered that not all Christmases are the same and it's natural to compare.

That first school Christmas was also my first experience of a Christmas party. We went to a children's Christmas party held at a hall at my dad's place of work. We dressed up for it. I was in a purple velvet dress with patent leather shoes, I won't say proudly because I hated the outfit, but I was proud of my accessory. I had a beautiful white fur hand muff. It might have been fake fur, most probably was, but it felt wonderful and I was incredibly proud of it. Of course when we arrived at the party we had to take off our coats, and leave them in a room – along with the muff. That's the last I ever saw of it. Someone (but I doubt they were wearing a stocking mask) robbed my muff from my first Christmas Party. That might indeed have been a warning to me of Christmases to come! But at the time it was just an isolated incident which more than ruined the event for me. I went home, understandably, in tears. I knew it wasn't my fault but I also knew Santa wouldn't be replacing it for me.

So other people and Christmases didn't mix. It was best to stay with the family for the duration. Don't compare. Don't share. Stay safe. At least at that time I was safe in my family. That gift was to be robbed from me along with the muff all too soon.

But for that Christmas at least, we went through our family ritual. We put out the goodies for Santa. We hung our stockings at the end of the bed. They lay there looking thin and pointless. Having been the victim of a crime there was no longer any joy in pulling mine over my head. And then we went to bed.

Christmas Eve is when you first learn about insomnia. About how hard it can be just to get to sleep. And about how, miraculously, you can't control sleep; it comes when it wants – and when it is least wanted. Somehow, I always fell asleep eventually, just after the moment when I was convinced I was never going to fall asleep, could hear Santa on the roof, and was about to lose the chance of presents because 'good girls' would be asleep and since, by definition, I wasn't asleep, I must not be a 'good girl.'

For years I wondered how it was that my parents managed to fill my stocking without waking me. It was much later that I realised they pulled a switch on us. My mum cut up two pairs of tights and while were tossing and turning, waiting for sleep, they were downstairs filling the stockings to bursting point. Then all they had to do was creep in, switch the stockings and all would be fine.

It must have been tense though, in the dark, hoping we'd not hidden the empty stocking. But then I suppose they had previous with the tooth fairy. An no child with any wit would hide their stocking under their pillow – they want to make things easy for Santa after all! Is it comforting to know people can sneak into your room while you're asleep? Not really. There came a time when that was my biggest fear – and for justifiable reasons – but that's not a Christmas story so I'll spare you it here.

Let's look to the positives. Our family stockings always had a clementine and an apple in the bottom, at the toe. This was the day before 'stocking fillers' became fiercely marketed as a commodity in their own right. I note that these days 'stocking fillers' may be £5 or even 'under £10' per item. I hate to think how much money is sunk into a stocking for today's child.

Finding a filled stocking at the foot of your bed is great as a child, of course it is, and it has a useful function in that even if the kid (as I used to) wakes around four or five o'clock, it can really slow them down and give parents a lie in till at least 7am. Firstly the child is busy playing and eating the goodies and secondly if they are old enough to tell the time, they know full well that running in and telling their parents that Santa has been much before 6 or 7 am is likely to meet with a poor response. At least that was the case in our house. So stockings pass the time and act as a bribe against an early morning. But to spend the best part of £50 per kid per stocking as one could easily do these days. That seems ludicrous.

Back to my childhood stocking. I can't remember exactly what was in it of course, it's all part of the excited blur. But there generally would be some chocolate, maybe a small selection box, which filled quite a bit of stocking. Then probably some pens and a colouring book. Possibly even a real book. This can all take up a deal of space.

I remember once getting a Pez sweet dispenser that kept me busy for ages. I remember on occasion – like with the Pippin Fort – getting a bigger present which just wouldn't fit in the stocking – which was on the bed along side it. I almost missed it in the first excitement of feeling for the stocking in the dark! But of course the extra, oversized gift set a precedent. The next year I remembered and hoped that there would be something as well as the stocking. Thus aspirational little consumers are made. Of course there is then the disappointment that 'this year' there's no big unexpected extra. Then the guilt starts. Feeling guilty for feeling disappointed. Wondering if it's because you haven't been 'good' enough that year. No child knows what being good really is. On a moment by moment basis maybe, but over a year?



Racking your childish memory to think what it might be that you did that was wrong – wondering if your sibling got more than you because they were good and you weren't. Ah, the wheels are starting to come off the Christmas experience already and I'm only 6.

## **5<sup>th</sup> The gift of secret guilt**

Christmas had been a magical time for me, as I suppose it is for most children, and that's why, I suppose people keep on doing it – but nothing that magical can last. I was six when I first felt guilt. And when I knew that if Santa asked me if I'd been good, I wouldn't be able to put hand on heart and say yes.

And it was all down to advent calendars.

Unlike today, in my childhood an advent calendar was a pretty simple affair. And my brother and I had one between us. To teach us how to share. In those days Advent calendars were a way of counting down the days, not the giver of daily gifts or chocolates or daily brand promotion like they are today. So why would each child need their own? There were two of us, so we took turns opening the door. It was a ritual first thing in the morning, before breakfast. We would gather round the advent calendar, which as I remember was hung (or stuck) on the wall by the cupboard under the stairs. The cupboard which houses adult exciting consumer items like the Hoover and the ironing board. Just along from the twin-tub. Oh, we had it all!

There it hung. The Advent Calendar. Teaching us the date and how to share. Turn and turn about. It was exciting – for a moment – to open the door and find what the picture was. Even though what it was wasn't exciting at all. A picture of a gift box, a tree. You know, I can't for the life of me remember what was behind those doors, but you knew that on 24th you'd get the nativity scene behind a bigger box. So that if you were on the even days (as I usually was, because after all I was the second child) you had one less surprise to come.

I think this was somewhere in the back of my head in my warped logic as I prepared to commit my crime.

It was early in December. There were at least 20 doors to be opened. The anticipation was the biggest part of the excitement. That every day you would find something new, something you couldn't know about till that little cardboard door was prised back. But the year I was six (at least I think it was then) I did a terrible thing. My first terrible thing. I opened my brother's door. A day ahead.

I might blame it on my reading matter. 'My Naughty Little Sister' was a favourite and I clearly remember Bad Harry sneaking in and eating all the little silver balls off the cake. I remember the warm spread of guilt up my own neck, allied with some kind of a vicarious thrill of the crime as I read it. I didn't think carefully about the consequences. I obviously got lost in the narrative. I was a copycat criminal. I have no other excuse.

It was a pre-meditated crime. It had to be. I had to find a time when I could be alone in the hallway, when everyone else was busy, so that I could open the door, peek inside and shut it again. Which I did. I hadn't reckoned on two things. One that it would be the devil's own job to shut that little door again and make it look unopened. I really should have figured that out

in advance! And the second thing was the sense of guilt. Now that one I could never be prepared for, even given my experience of Bad Harry. I learned the difference between reading and doing! The guilt was all consuming. From the moment I opened that door it was like Pandora had opened the box. It was an act that could never be undone. Could never be expunged from my life. All I could do was tell, or keep it a secret.

I kept it a secret. Till now. That's one door open which will never be shut again.

You'll probably be laughing by now. It's hardly crime of the century is it? But it serves as my first (and not last) experience of feeling real, personal guilt. And it never went away. It coloured everything about that Christmas, and everything about Christmases after that. I never wanted another Advent Calendar. The excitement of opening doors was never to be mine again. Every time I looked at one, I remembered what I'd done. I'd cheated. I was not to be trusted. I'd stolen from my brother. Even though he probably never knew and certainly never cared -it's just a lame picture of a donkey or a ball or some such isn't it? Even though it never mattered to anyone else in the world, it was my shame.

The worst was standing there the next morning. Pretending to be excited that I didn't know what was behind the door. Hoping that no one noticed it wasn't quite as stuck down as it had been. Returning to the scene of the crime isn't a comfortable feeling, believe me. And all around me, Advent continued along its ding dong merrily on high way. No one knew. But I knew. And Santa would know. I was NOT a good girl. And there was no way back. It was the first step towards not believing in Santa. All the good work of the previous year with Pippin Fort was lost in the mists of time. No way would that miracle ever be repeated.

I remember the next even day telling my brother that he could open my door if he wanted – that I didn't care. I remember him looking at me strangely. I thought he knew. He probably just wondered what was wrong with me. Why make such a fuss? It's a little cardboard door. From that moment on the ritual lost its charm. The potency of excitement of the unknown was lost in the reality of guilt. I hated Advent Calendars. I hated myself. And I learned the most valuable lesson of my life. Actions have consequences. And consequences can hang around a long, long time. So be very careful what you do and think before you act.

## **6th Stirring the pudding.**

Another Advent ritual, one that happened very early on – and may indeed have been before the Calendar itself was hung each year – was the making of the Christmas pudding. Yes, in the good old days before microwaves and consumer capitalism took over the world, puddings were made by hand.

I'm guessing it would be the first weekend in December, or it could have been as early as the first weekend after Guy Fawkes, the Christmas pudding was made.

Even as a small child I didn't like Christmas pudding. It has always been too rich for me. But what I did like was the process of making the pudding. It's up there with the memory of Listen with Mother – 'are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin.' Though obviously if we made our Christmas pudding on a weekend Listen with Mother wouldn't be on. You can't trust memory 100 %. Things get mixed up, like the pudding. But the ingredients remain the same.

My mother used one of those big buff ceramic bowls with patterns on the outside and inside it was white. It was also used throughout the year for making other cakes – and it was the nirvana from which we got raw chocolate cake mix on a wooden spoon. The treat of getting to ‘lick the spoon’ was an excitement not just reserved for Christmas. Indeed licking the spoon wasn’t part of the Christmas pudding ritual. It was substituted by being allowed to stir the pudding.

I remember the weight of the spoon as it worked its way through the thick mixture. I remember standing on a stool to reach up above the kitchen counter so that I could get enough purchase to actually move the spoon round the bowl. I didn’t pick up the bowl and stir with it under my arm as my mum did. I couldn’t even lift the bowl. But I took my turn in stirring.

The stirring was good but the most exciting bit was the dropping in of the sixpences. I don’t know how anyone else did it but in my house we wrapped sixpences in silver paper and dropped them into the mix, then stirred them in. I remember wondering if I could in any way control and then remember where they ended up. I don’t know how many we put in, but it wouldn’t have been more than two or three. It wasn’t like you were going to get a sixpence with each portion. No, in the days before the Lottery, getting a sixpence in your Christmas pudding was like winning the lottery.

It always gave me a dilemma. Like I said, I’ve never really liked the richness of Christmas pudding and after a roast turkey with all the trimmings (on top of all that pre breakfast chocolate!) I could most happily have said no to it. Except for the prospect of getting a silver sixpence. Sixpence wasn’t a huge amount of money in those days, but it would buy you a quarter of humbugs at least. So I weighed up the options and I always opted for the pudding.

Then I picked my way through it – you had to - because there was nothing worse than biting into tin foil, unless it was not getting a silver sixpence at all and being faced with having to eat a whole plateful of the stodgy, rich pudding. No one wanted to trade Christmas pudding. Even those who loved it couldn’t eat more than one portion. And at Christmas dinner, at least in our house where we still knew that there were starving children - Biafrans in those days if I recall correctly – it was not the done thing to try to fob off your good food. Usually I could get away with palming something to my brother. But at Christmas dinner you were under the spotlight. You didn’t want anything to spoil the cracker pulling moment, which wouldn’t happen till everyone had a clean pudding plate.

Perhaps it was during Christmas dinner that I first realised the painful power of ritual. The mountain of food I didn’t really like, and didn’t have room for, playing against the guilt of someone having put themselves out – and my mum really did love to go to town cooking Christmas dinner. It was her favourite meal of the year, she always said. It was my least favourite. Turkey has always tasted bland to me, like chicken that needs salt on it. I’ve never been a fan of ‘proper’ roast potatoes –all that goose fat or lard – and my mum was of the old school for whom a vegetable really had to be boiled to perdition before it was put on a plate. Gravy, stuffing, chipolata sausages, it all just added to the pile that had to be forced down my throat in full knowledge that Christmas pudding was the next inevitable step. And that you had to ‘enjoy’ every mouthful or you were ungrateful. And being ungrateful that soon after Santa had been was unconscionable.

My childhood was really the age of plastic. But you didn't dare suggest putting leftovers from Christmas dinner into Tupperware. The toys we treasured at Christmas were plastic and usually didn't need batteries. But I certainly needed recharging after Christmas Dinner. With the prospect of cold turkey sandwiches and home-made Christmas cake to come let's just say I was not in my epicurean heaven. Christmas cake is overkill. It's just cold Christmas pudding without the silver sixpence but with the addition of marzipan and icing. I liked the icing but not the marzipan. That's Christmas for you, isn't it? Everything's a trade off between what you like and what you don't. But you have to act like you're having a great time, however sick you feel. At least we did in my family. Even by the time I was 6, Christmas was starting to lose its glitter.

### **7<sup>th</sup> Santa isn't real –don't listen to the non-believers**

When I look back on childhood Christmases they do seem to meld into one or two 'iconic' ones. Some of the events I'm recalling must have happened during the same festive season, but under the age of seven I wasn't really paying attention and they all do tend to collapse into one loose memory where chronology seems unimportant. In general I think *when* is probably less important to children than *what*. Anyway, I call these memories the 'Happy Christmas' period. That happiness was soon enough to end, and while I'm wise enough now to know that it wasn't my Advent calendar crime that sparked off all that followed, I think that was the year that marked the beginning of the end. Let's assume it was the same year that my brother really started agitating that Santa didn't exist.

I suppose that I was now getting ready to accept the fact, because after all, I'd committed the crime and I hadn't been a good girl and so if I believed in Santa he'd not be rewarding me but punishing me, and why believe in someone who is only out to punish you if you fall short of their intolerably high standards? This is a question that might be asked of all the Old Testament type religions. God, and his representative on earth Santa, ought to be love, not accountants doing an audit on how 'good' people are. But it all gets warped too early on. There's far too much scope in the whole Santa myth (and for my money the whole God myth) for things to turn bad, to be bad and to make people feel worthless and guilty. There's not enough love in the world.

So, for a time, the space maybe of several advent calendar openings, I toyed with the idea that my brother was right. That Santa didn't exist. I started an investigation. Asked for evidence (but not too much evidence, I still wasn't totally ready to lose the 'free' gifts.)

'So who is it?' I asked.

'Our parents,' he replied.

'But how about the carrots and the water and the mince pies?' I asked.

He rolled his eyes. He was three years older and experienced in the difference between circumstantial and 'real' evidence.'

'And I've heard reindeer,' I said. I didn't want to let go. I was clutching at straws. 'On the roof.'

'Well stay awake all night and you'll see he doesn't come,' he said.

Now that was just stupid. Now I knew Santa existed and my brother was just trying to get me into trouble.

‘Of course he won’t come if I stay awake all night,’ I reasoned. ‘He knows when you are sleeping, he knows when you’re awake...’ I quoted what is not strictly a carol but a Christmas Song all the same.

Eyes rolled again. ‘You’re too old to be so stupid,’ he said. ‘Ask at school. You’ll see. No one believes in Santa when they’re seven.’

‘But I’m not seven yet,’ I said.

My brother was a player, even before we knew what one was. Maybe it’s the province of the elder child. They’ve seen it all before. They are destined to know more than you right through the joint childhood which you share but which is not conducted on an equal basis. You feel aggrieved that they get to stay up later, seem to be treated better; whereas they bang on about the responsibility of being elder and never quite get over that you were the manifestation of a ‘surprise’ they found they didn’t really want and certainly never asked for. I guess if you’ve suffered the ‘surprise’ of getting a little sister when you were hoping for some more model train track, you are going to see through Santa pretty quickly.

But for me, the best evidence at all for the existence of Santa was that my brother was becoming insistent that I should stop believing. I became sure it was part of a plan – probably in revenge for the advent calendar incident, which he probably knew about but hadn’t said – he was probably working on the revenge is a dish best served cold plan. The more he kept telling me, giving me what he stated was incontrovertible evidence, the less I believed him.

The one question I didn’t ask him in my exploration into ‘truth’ was – why. If Santa doesn’t exist then why do our parents pretend he does? It was a question I did turn round in my own head, or started to that year. And it was a question that would come to the fore soon enough. But that year, while I was still desperately clinging on to the myth with the tinsel, I didn’t ask why.

I played along with all the ritual. We fought over hanging the decorations on the Christmas tree. Our family always had a real Christmas tree. Like everyone else the fairy lights always broke so that was the first family argument. Then we couldn’t find the baubles. Then someone broke one of them – always a special one – and was chastised. Then we argued about what should go on top of the tree – a star or an angel.

Our tree was always a last minute affair, put up on Christmas Eve. One year when I was very young, I remember going to buy the Christmas tree with my dad. We went round a nursery, it was a bit reminiscent of the ‘pick the most photogenic Santa’ affair, and we picked out our own tree, brought it home on the roof of the car and into the bucket it went. That tree, like every other tree we had, started shedding needles straight away so that even Christmas Day was not a Hoover free day. Indeed, hoovering had to be done before presents could be opened. The torment of Christmas morning was seemingly never ending. It was always ‘no presents till after’ and ‘no presents till after’ as they sat there stacked under the tree. And heaven help us if we actually went under the tree before Christmas morning to see which present was allotted to whom. It was strictly a no-go zone, and that not just because of dodgy fairy lights and shedding needles.

Stockings were the big pull for me. Consequently Santa was probably the best bit of Christmas. And that’s because you were on your own, in charge of your own ‘fun.’ As long as you were quiet you could wake as early as you liked and as long as you kept yourself quiet you could have a good couple of hours of enjoying the presents before you had to get up, eat

breakfast, jump through the many present opening hoops and begin on the ‘oh that’s lovely’ routine where you show the right amount of gratitude for each gift. In my case this was often hard because one of my grannies insisted on sending me dolls and I was not a doll type child.

In my time I got small china dolls that couldn’t be taken out of the box, baby dolls that cried and wet themselves (I buried that one in the garden) A Cindy doll when my brother got an Action Man, (I got an Action man for my birthday that year, so I obviously didn’t disguise my lack of gratitude that well!) and one year this huge doll nearly the same size as me. I remember she was called Susan and I was pretty scared of her to tell the truth. At least she wasn’t a present from Santa. If she had been, I’d have known he didn’t exist.

## **8<sup>th</sup>– Grandma’s house**

But among the dolls I did get some good presents. I just can’t remember which came when. One year I got a plastic Dalek suit. It was great. Plastic was, as I’ve mentioned before, the must have thing in my childhood. This Dalek suit was red (television was still in black and white so the colour was a surprise. There was a heavy (for a child) black helmet with the iconic plastic stalk on the front of the ‘face’ and this huge, enveloping red with black dots plastic body. It went on over the head and I ran around endlessly shouting ‘sterminate, sterminate.’ I remember that we adapted the Dalek suit (as we did most of our toys) later on, turning it upside down to play Siamese Twins. If we put it on that way we had plenty of room at the top and it tapered down so that our feet were pretty well stuck together at the bottom. No so much running around that way, but it still amused us!

But the last best Christmas and presents I can remember as a child happened the Christmas we stayed at my grandparents. Of course I was fully expecting more doll horror along with the Christmas Annual which was my grandparents standard offering. And I was somewhat concerned that Santa (who I really wasn’t sure even existed any more) would find us. I was re-convinced when shown that my grandparents had a real chimney. So in fact it would be easier for Santa to find us. And hadn’t I written him a letter telling him we were going to be at our grandparents for Christmas? Of course I had. But I didn’t give him the address. I didn’t know the address, I just knew it was Grandma and Grandad’s and a long way in the car. I was reassured that Santa would know the address. I finally bought it. I mean, if he can flee round the world in one night delivering presents to all the good children, a small thing like a change of address isn’t going to stump him now, is it?

That last ‘Happy’ Christmas does stick in my memory. So I’ll open one last door with a nice picture for you. I warn you, it’s all going to get a lot darker from here on. A lot less fantasy, and a lot more real.

My grandfather smoked a pipe. And cigars. And cigarettes. It wasn’t that unusual in those days but my grandma didn’t like it. So he was banished to one room in the house which was a constant fug of smoke. I quite liked the smell, of the cigars and the pipe tobacco at least. And I loved my grandad. My grandma, I could well do without. She was the buyer of dolls. And through the year she sent monthly magazines for which we had to write thank you letters, even though she sent magazines we didn’t want to read instead of ‘The Beano,’ ‘Roy of the Rovers’ or the ones we did. She sent improving magazines with ‘facts’ and ‘knowledge.’ We wanted entertainment. Grandad knew that.

I remember clearly that he took me on his knee in his room during that Christmas and proceeded to read me Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. 'Marley was dead: to begin with, there is no doubt about that.' I was hooked. We must have had several sessions of it, and I have an overwhelming fuzzy happy memory of the whole thing. Apart from one moment which I've never been able to make sense of. And almost can't believe. It alerts me to the fact that memory is not always fixed, not always reliable and not always clear.

Grandad was one of those who played the coin behind the ear trick, and the blowing smoke out of the nose trick. Was it nose? Or ear? I can't remember. Anyway, at one point in the narrative (I think I remember) he broke off and told me to put my hand on his chest and if I pressed I'd be able to see smoke coming out of whatever orifice it was. And then, while I was looking hard, I felt a sharp burn. He'd put the end of the match on my skin. Now, even as I'm writing this I can't believe it. Why would you do that to a child? Why would my grandfather do that? I've even tried to remember it and wondered if he stubbed the end of a cigarette on the back of my hand, but I cannot believe that was what happened. The memory is too vague, for me to really know what I experienced then or what in fact he did, though the sense of pain and shock is still real. He didn't blow smoke out of his ears that's for sure. I will wonder for ever what it was that actually happened. Obviously he was playing a joke and maybe he made a mistake, maybe he never thought of the consequences. I'm sure he didn't mean to hurt me, and I'm definitely not accusing him of anything.

After all, I have a memory of my father shutting my fingers in the hinge of the door. He did it. But he didn't know he did it. He was the other side of the door. My fingers shouldn't have been there and he didn't know they were. But for a child that sense of something going wrong and the realisation that adults don't always keep you safe, is palpable. The fact that everything that went wrong in my childhood happened (what seemed) horribly soon after the fingers in door incident, didn't help to make it seem less significant. It was the first sign that my father, in whom I trusted implicitly, could hurt me. And he did. In absentia. A door was shut metaphorically that was more painful than the real one. A pain that has lasted most of a lifetime.

But let's hang onto the good memories as long as we can. If I can shut my eyes over the moment of madness of the pipe/match/smoke in ears, and focus on the frisson of fear yet total excitement of the Dickens narrative as told by my grandad, then I'm ready to complete that final Happy Christmas.

The presents that year were amazing. Maybe I got a doll. I don't know or care. Because what I did get, what we both got, were space hoppers. Giant orange bouncy plastic. It gets no better for a child of the late sixties/early seventies. But wait, it does get better. Because I also got a Red Indian outfit. Not a full head-dress, more the sort of squaw type Indian, and if I think back carefully the top was probably more like a tabard (the kind of thing I hate in normal life, the kind of thing cleaners wear or they got you to wear during craft sessions at school so that you didn't get your clothes dirty. I hated craft sessions). Why force us to wear tabards when dad's old shirt on backwards would do just as well? That's what we used at home.

The Indian suit did have fringing on it though. That was the main thing. Fringing on the trousers and on the top. And it wasn't a cowboy suit. Because I was always the one for the underdog. If we played Cowboys and Indians I was always the Indian. If we played Batman and Robin I was Robin. I don't remember whether my brother got a cowboy suit when I got my Indian one, I think he'd have been too old to appreciate that. And I have no idea what he

got when I had the Dalek suit – what present could possibly have topped that? But I do remember that Christmas at my grandparents there was none of the usual torment that went with our Christmas mornings. I'm sure my mum and grandma were horns locked over who could be the most martyr-ish regarding cooking Christmas dinner but we had both a grandad and a dad to keep them at bay and a huge garden to run up and down, and bounce up and down.

I remember that initially the Space Hoppers were to be played with indoors but soon we'd caused enough mayhem that we were allowed to risk the fact that plastic might burst – so stay off the gravel – and bounce them up and down the garden. In my case, dressed as a Red Indian. I may have been the only Red Indian ever to master a space-hopper! There's no such thing as incongruity in a child's imaginative play. It was a great Christmas. The last great one ever. But even Space Hopper's don't last for ever. And sooner or later you have to face the fact that Santa doesn't exist. But that will keep till tomorrow.

### **9<sup>th</sup> It's a forgery.**

Opening today's door, we're a year or two on. A lot has happened. For one thing my parents have now split up. We don't see my dad any more. That door has long since been shut. In his place is a man who wants us to call him 'papa' but who is no sort of role model for a father figure. I miss my dad. We've moved from Dundee to Edinburgh, leaving the house and school I loved. The Happy Christmas phase is well and truly over. The rest of my childhood is a living hell. And worse at Christmas.

That first Christmas under the new regime I had more or less given up on Santa. I had more or less given up on everything. My life had been turned completely upside down and everything I believed in had not just been questioned, but ripped apart, scrunched up and thrown in the bin like so much wrapping paper. The glitter, it's fair to say, had truly worn off.

Instead of a house with a garden we now lived in a top floor flat. There's a park outside, but it's not the same. There's danger everywhere. I hate getting sent out in the dark for milk or whatever it is that my mum's forgotten to buy to make the tea. I hate my new school and my new school mates appear to hate me. They lie in wait for me on the way home and slap and kick me. I tell my mum and she goes to the school and it only makes things worse. So I don't tell. I just try and vary my route home. On the up-side, as we come near Christmas, there is a working fireplace and we're on the top floor so Santa, if he existed, wouldn't have far to come.

I don't know why this happened. I thought we were all happy. I never heard my parents raise their voices. Which is totally different to now. Like I said, there is danger everywhere. And its worst inside the door of what, looking back, I find impossible to call home. My new stepdad has a temper. And then some. And I don't understand that either. He doesn't drink so there's not that excuse. It seems to come out of nowhere. He's fine until something upsets him or someone crosses him or something goes wrong. And of course in life, however much you try to walk on eggshells and do the right thing, there's always something which can upset someone and there's always something to go wrong.



And especially at Christmas. By this time I've grown used to standing outside doors listening to rows. And the one I hear this year is the final nail in the coffin for Santa. In some families rows end with slamming doors and silence. In this new family unit rows usually end with someone getting injured. And it isn't my step-dad. Things are thrown and they get broken and then people get hurt. Sometimes it's me. Mostly it's my mum. She provokes him more, but she doesn't deserve it. None of us deserve it. It's no way to live. But we're living it. We're facing our first Christmas in the trenches.

I'm standing outside the door and I hear the ebb and flow of voices. I'm wondering whether I should go in, because I've learned that while it's dangerous to enter the fray, if I do I might be able to stop him hitting her. I'm learning about intervention. Sometimes it works. Sometimes it just gives them pause for a moment. Sometimes he diverts his anger onto me of course, but that's the price you pay isn't it? Sometimes you have to sacrifice your body to the team? And sometimes we learn that if you go to the phone and say you're calling the police, it stops him. Like all escalating events though, this only works so far. One time you do actually have to call the police. They come. And when my mum refuses to 'press charges' they go away again – a domestic they call it – and they seem to hold her in scorn. But what can she do? Unless they took him away then and there and put him in prison, we'd just be in a worse situation.

The one thing none of them, not one of them, seems to see is two children who should not be going through this. No one suggests that we're 'at risk.' We're a nice middle class family having a 'domestic' you see. So though we might get threatened with the children's home by my mum (and often it seems like a decent alternative to the hell we're living through) we know there's no escape. I say we but by this time my brother and I are living pretty isolated lives. I've enough to cope with living through this for myself. You might think that 'at least we have each other' but I don't recall that being the case. I just recall being frightened and alone all the time.

I'm standing outside the door. As usual. And the argument is about Christmas. I curse myself. I curse Santa. I curse Christmas. Of all the things to have a row about. This is so unnecessary. I keep listening. My step-dad is shouting about the money. Or lack of it. I don't remember the fine detail, but obviously my mum – who loves Christmas- wants to give us more expensive presents than either he thinks right, or than we can afford. Who knows what we can afford any more?

The whole Santa myth crashes right down on my head in that one moment. This is what's wrong with the lie. That for every family who happily run along playing Santa, there's another family for whom the 'secret' means financial hardship. Spending money to keep children happy. It's wrong. I know it's wrong before I'm eight years old, and I don't want it. I don't want them to be coming to blows about my Christmas stocking. I don't want to be the cause of any of this. I don't want Christmas at all if this is the 'spirit' in which it's to be played out now. I want more than anything to go into the room and shout, 'I know Santa doesn't exist so stop arguing. I don't want any presents. I don't need a stocking. I just want things to be like they were.'

And of course the one thing I really, really want for Christmas is the one thing I know I won't get. My dad back. During my many nightmares, where my brain tries to make sense of the violence; through dreams of black clouds and rushing railway trains and cages filled with dripping meat in underground caves, I keep wishing and hoping that my dad will come in and

save me. I need saving, not stocking fillers. There will be no peace on earth in this house for Christmas that's for sure.

But I don't go in. I go to my room to read a book and hope the shouting ends soon without too much bloodshed. Later, on what I assume must be Christmas Eve I discover another secret. I think I was probably on my way to bed but the old rituals of dressing the tree and getting together and sitting on laps with cuddles has gone and it's more of a creeping quietly round the flat trying to work out where HE is and keeping out of the way. The door to the living room is open. I'm about to go in, but I see HE is there and as I silently retreat I see that he is writing 'Santa' large on a card that he's about to attach to the top of a filled stocking. It is the ultimate irony. And it makes me sick to my stomach.

He's trying to con me into thinking he's Santa? He's playing Santa to me? Come on. Apart from the fact that he has the most ridiculously ornate calligraphy styled handwriting which he always uses – is so proud of - so that it would be recognisable even in a court of law, the fact that I'm going to be expected to wake up in the morning and take joy in this thing that has been the cause of all that fear – it's just not going to happen.

In the years that follow I often wake at four in the morning, but I'll never again wake with the excitement of a stocking full of presents at the bottom of my bed. It's not my step-dad's fault that Santa doesn't exist, but he didn't have to forge his signature. Not after shouting about how we can't afford Christmas. Not after making us feel guilty for even being there. So this is the year I really started hating Christmas. And I think you can probably allow me that. There is no good will to all men here except blaring out on the radio or record player. It's a tinnily equivalent and the real thing in no way lives up to the billing.

### **10th Room at the Inn?**

The next Christmas I think I'm ready for it. I know there's no Santa. I've told them I don't believe. My brother and I have both said we're too old for stockings. It makes my mum sad, but my step-dad seems relieved. I don't understand how my mum, in the face of it all, can still look forward to Christmas, can still 'believe' in the magic, but it seems she does. However bad it gets, she's going to have a good day.

She must have a bit more wit than I'm giving her credit for though, because this year it is going to be different. Quite different. This year we're not alone. When it's initially put to me I'm not too keen. We've got a family of dad, mum and one boy coming to stay for Christmas. I can't remember if they're staying overnight or just coming for Christmas dinner. But looking back I recognise it as the start of my mum's new strategy. She's killing two birds with one stone.

We have a big flat. Six bedrooms. We have it on a peppercorn rent – or HE does – and my mum's idea is that if we have other people there, they will act as the distraction that has previously been reserved for the threat of calling the police. He won't behave as badly when other people are there (is the theory.) And the second bird is – we can sublet. Charge people, usually students, to come and live in the spare rooms. Those students may not know it, but they'll keep us safe. They'll keep me safe. Or safer. Because they're not always there. And sometimes they can't stand the atmosphere so they move on. Often they 'flit' in the middle of the night, owing rent or not owing rent. It's a tough gig living with us. The foreign students

stay longer. They don't pick up the vibes as easily. But I'm getting ahead of myself and outside my Christmas remit – we haven't had the students yet – but this year we're giving some homeless people a Happy Christmas.

My brother and I are corralled into the sitting room while it's explained to us that in the spirit of Christmas, and it's better to give than receive... and that while it should be a time for family... and I'm not even listening. Yes, it would be a bit disappointing to have to make room at the inn for strangers if you were anticipating a Happy Family Christmas, but for me it just seems like the greatest idea.

We don't have any more money of course, so sacrifices must be made. That's when we tell them we don't believe in Santa and we don't need stockings. And the boy can have whatever present he wants, we don't need anything. I certainly don't remember any Christmas present I got in the next seven years so whatever they bought me was a total waste. You can't buy your way out of this sort of hell. There's no advent calendars any more, it's just a lot of stress leading up to a couple of days when the chances are that extreme violence will be served up along with endless turkey.

But this year, no. Because this year we are hosting the homeless. I think they only stayed one night. I wouldn't blame them. I don't honestly remember much about it. In the same way that my happy Christmases blur into one and all occurred before the age of seven, Christmases from age eight to fifteen were all one blur too. A different kind of blur. Where I learned that domestic violence is not just for Christmas, but Christmas does seem to bring out the worst manifestations.

Counting down the days is no longer anything of a treat. I wonder what it was like for those homeless people. It's a strange thing, to know that you've shared an important event with people you can't even remember. I wonder if they saw through the fake glitter. I wonder if they wished we'd not had room at our inn.

They will have had a great feed though. My mum never missed out on the opportunity to put on a massive spread at Christmas. I remember going to the shops, and like that early hunt for the best Santa, we used to trawl round till we found the biggest bird that would possibly go into our oven. I remember standing watching it go along the conveyor belt in the supermarket – supermarket's were new and smaller in those days and conveyor belts were quite exciting. I remember we started a ritual of naming the bird. Always something beginning with T. Tallullah, or Tracey or something. As outlandish as possible. I think my brother started that Christmas tradition. It seemed a bit ghoulish, but perhaps we needed some gallows humour in those days. It made us laugh anyway and few things did back then.

I remember having to go out and buy my step-dad a Christmas present. Every fibre of my being resisted it. I hated him for what he had done to my life and what he continued to do every day – including Christmas – and I hated the hypocrisy of having to be thoughtful, buy him something, and something that wasn't socks or gloves, something 'good' so that he'd be pleased. It certainly took all the joy out of shopping. What do you buy for the man you wish you'd never met? Of course I can appreciate that it wasn't all his fault. He had mental health issues. As did my mum. They should never have got together. These things happen I suppose. But like I learned when I opened the advent calendar early, actions have consequences and consequences are not just for Christmas. Some of them last a lifetime. If you live that long.

## 11th Hoovering and Washing Up

I've already laid it out very clearly why Christmas was no longer high on my wish list. But life goes on. Years go on. Christmas is one of the 'markers' of the year. My mum still looked forward to it, even though we all knew that it was going to be one of the stress points of the year. Perhaps she thought if she just did it right it would all be okay. Or perhaps she just loved the fact that on Christmas Day she was completely in control.

Our family Christmases, even without my dad, had much of the same pattern and observed largely the same ritual, and this was it. You didn't get up before 7am. Once stockings were abolished it became 8am, but we weren't keen to get up by that time anyway. You got up and you had to eat breakfast which you didn't want – knowing that the rest of the day would be spend stuffing your face – but which HAD to be eaten before the next part of the ritual could be attempted.

As I remember it breakfast was toast made on the grill. No toaster. Why didn't we have a toaster? The grill didn't work well. Things either didn't cook or they burnt. And burnt toast could be enough to spark off 'a domestic.' More than once I've ducked as a full grill pan, with toast fleeing, came hurling across the kitchen at the wall. And to be totally fair, it wasn't just my step-dad who did that. My mum took her part in the throwing, shouting, hitting and general bad behaviour that went on. The only difference was that when he threw things or broke things it was never his things. Even when the 'red mist' descended he was well able to make sure his own possessions stayed intact. Whereas when my mum lost it, she picked up the nearest thing – usually a pan – and just threw it. And her aim, fortunately, wasn't good. But we learned how to duck.

After breakfast we had to wash up. Our new family rule was that the children washed up. Which usually meant that my brother washed and I dried and put away. I needed a stool to reach up to the washing up bowl. So I got to dry. I remember trying to dry pans that were too heavy for me even to lift, dangling them down close to the ground and hoping that this wasn't ever going to be thrown in my direction! I remember how carefully I had to undertake the washing up ritual, three times a day at least. Glasses were a particular fear. It's so easy, even with small hands, to burst a glass. And in our family, all breakages would have to be paid for. But not usually with money.

After washing up my mum hoovered. And we 'tidied up.' Everything had to be neat and tidy, at least to start with. My mum used the hoover as a weapon and at Christmas it came into its own. Because at Christmas there were the dreaded pine needles. I don't believe anyone ever owned Christmas trees that shedded as much as the ones we had. Hoovering had to go on about four times a day during the 12 days the tree lived with us. And don't let's go into the palaver of taking it out on Twelfth Night! In the flat we had high ceilings so we had a huge tree. I'm thinking probably nine feet. And that's a lot of needles to hoover up. And sometimes hoovers don't like sucking up needles. It's not really what they were designed for. And a broken hoover was a major disaster in our family. What with it being my mum's main weapon.

The rest of the year you could tell her mood through the hoover. If she started before you got up you knew you were in for trouble. If you didn't get up, she'd come into the bedroom and if you were still in bed by the time she started hoovering under it, you might as well give up

all hope. At other random times of the day, the Hoover was used to equal effect to get you moving. If you were sitting on a sofa or chair and she wanted you to be doing something 'useful' but didn't feel she should tell you – you were supposed to know what needed doing without being told – she'd come and Hoover round you.

But the Christmas Day Hoovering holds a special place in my memory. It was part of the deferring of gratification. No presents could be opened till the last needle had been hoovered up. Early on in the game I realised the complete pointlessness of this activity. After all, the Hoover cord was barely rolled up before the first present being taken from under the tree dislodged yet another pine needle. And so it went on. And then, by the nature of Christmas presents, there is wrapping paper and mess attendant. So that as soon as the presents had been opened and gratitude expressed (whether or not you wanted what you got you learned to act grateful!) everything had to be tidied away again and another round of Hoovering undertaken.

My mum liked to play the martyr and Christmas was the perfect opportunity. We didn't get up till 8 am or later but she was up much earlier par boiling potatoes and putting Tallullah or Tamara, or Tracy, into the oven. Opening Christmas presents was just the interval for an orgy of cooking that went on until we were finally presented with Christmas lunch which was had at 2pm on the dot. And we ate until 3pm at which point everything stopped to hear the queen. And then we washed up.

But this was industrial strength washing up. We were always told that we should give the adults a break for Christmas and wash up after Christmas dinner. No one seemed to notice that we washed up every other day of the year too. Christmas was special. Christmas was about us 'doing something nice' and that meant post festivity washing up. It probably took as long to wash up after Christmas dinner as it did to eat it.

And then we all had to go out for a walk. Then back for Morecombe and Wise and cold turkey sandwiches. It seemed like if there was enough structured activity all day then we could avoid a 'domestic' but equally, it just needed one little thing to go wrong – burned parsnips, the wrong look over the chocolate gateau, the breaking of a glass – to turn peace on earth into World War Two. But mostly, I think that Christmas Day itself passed with an uneasy truce. For the adults it was probably a relief in a way. But for me, who never knew exactly what or when something was going to kick off, it offered no day of rest, it was just another day walking the tightrope, holding the breath, hoping that if you were 'a good girl' Bad Santa wouldn't come and punish you.

### **12th What a pantomime – Oh no he didn't...**

I suppose it might have been part of the never be alone ploy that meant we had a big Hogmanay Party each year. Because while Christmas Day, fraught though it was, generally passed off without a major incident – perhaps indeed because it was well structured and the flashpoints were managed, being obvious in advance – the whole Christmas period extends well beyond 'the Day.'

And when Christmas fell in the middle of the week it meant my step-dad could be at home for the best part of ten days. And that was bound to cause trouble. So my mum extended the rituals to keep something happening and to keep people around. On Boxing Day we

developed a tradition of going on a picnic. I know. A picnic in mid-winter. Crazy. Though actually I don't remember the weather being worse than any other time we planned and executed a family picnic in my childhood.

Living in Scotland we got very used to having picnics in the car. We might have been used to it, but it never went smoothly. Someone would always spill something or drop something and spending time with your family in a confined space is the one thing worse than spending Christmas Day in each other's pockets – in my opinion. But the Boxing Day picnic was something of a triumph. Because we found a place that not a lot of other people knew about, that no one else would be daft enough to visit on Boxing Day and that was largely under cover, therefore avoiding the worst of the elements.

It was along the East Lothian coast just past Tantallon Castle, a place called Cove. It involved a bit of walking, in 'bracing' weather, and you had to remember to wrap up warm and take rugs, but mostly, it was a structured activity that took up a lot of time: preparing to get there, getting there, being there and coming back. Of course we ate turkey sandwiches. We were eating turkey sandwiches until Epiphany in our house due to the ridiculous size of turkey that was always bought. So Boxing Day usually passed without incident, though there's nothing to say that it wouldn't all kick off once we got home.

But I don't want you to think that it was awful all the time. It wasn't. It's just that I never knew when it would next kick off. The randomness is what caused the permanent knot in my stomach, the constant fear. It was an early lesson in absurdism! And Advent came to represent the waiting for that year's flash point which was inevitable to come at some point. However, there were, as I said, some good structured 'events' that mitigated for the rest of the time spent figuratively holding my breath.

We made it a ritual to go to the Victorian Pantomime at The King's Theatre on Hogmanay evening. I don't really like Pantomime, but we had a box and that made it kind of special. Being set a bit apart from all the 'oh no you didn't oh yes he did' crowd made it a bit more palatable and the Victorian style was somewhat less irritating than the 'modern' equivalent which just blared pop-music and 'celebrities'. At least there was some semblance of a 'classic' tale like Aladdin or Cinderella. Modern ones tended to be Puss in Boots or Babes in the Wood and always had some form of sexual innuendo going along with them. The Victorian ones were a deal more classy! Anyway, I remember enjoying them. In fact almost as much as I came to hate Christmas, I came to love Hogmanay.

First, I suppose was the feeling that we'd nearly survived the whole festive period – scathed or unscathed- if we got through without the intervention of the police or a visit to the hospital it was considered a triumph. And secondly Hogmanay was a big day on our calendar. Bigger than anything in Advent. My mum loved to host a party. I can't for the life of me think why. It's always seemed like a lot of work to me. But she was happy to put in lots of work to achieve the perfect party. I think she liked to impress. Outward appearances and all that. No one would have been impressed by the reality of our lives, that's for sure.

So on Hogmanay we used to have a huge party at home – lots of visitors meant less chance of violent outbursts. As I remember Hogmanay, we spent the day getting ready for the party, then went to the Pantomime and then came home to host a party that went on till the wee small hours. And that kind of party is the best for kids. Loads of adults not paying attention to you for a prolonged time.

We only came together for the bells, and the rest of the time as I recall we used to play around in the hall, games featuring a sort of balloon badminton or volleyball, while the adults mingled between the lounge and the kitchen. Adults en masse tended to be in a good mood on Hogmanay – perhaps they too were glad the whole festive season was winding to an end and a ‘new start’ would come along soon. And when adults are enjoying themselves, they’ve no time to get onto the kids.

I don’t remember many other kids coming to the party, but there must have been a few, mostly I just remember being ignored by adults and knowing that we were all safe because we were in a house crammed full of grown-ups having a good time. And – because they were all up late, there would be no early morning hangover, no hoovering as a weapon till at least 10am and the happy glow of having had a good time might linger through until January 3rd by which time it would be back to work and nearly back to school and life would go back on as normal. Whatever normal was. For me, normal was waiting for the next horrific thing to happen and hoping it wasn’t anything I did that caused it. But January always offered something of hope. There was a future to look forward to. I could count down the years until I would be an adult myself, and escape from all this.

### **13th Goodwill to all men?**

I find that as I look back I can’t always pinpoint at which particular Christmas any of the following ‘incidents’ happened, but believe me they did. I know that I may seem an unreliable witness what with my suggestion that my grandad burned me with a match (I really don’t think he meant to and I may well be misremembering that in some important respect) and my complete gullibility regarding Santa; added to my own crime of advent calendar opening. But believe me, there are some things, and it doesn’t matter the day or the date, which you remember for ever. So, since it’s the 13th and my title is ironically Goodwill to all men, I’m going to open the door on some of these events, to get them out of my box. It may explain what happened next and it may explain a lot more than that. Either way, its time these things were unwrapped. I’m sorry if they make hard reading, but believe me they made pretty hard living for a child. All of these events happened when I was between the age of 7 and 14 and I contend that no child should be exposed to such things. When they talk of childhood abuse, and domestic abuse they always skate over the actuality with the phrase – too graphic to tell, or too graphic to show. But I think that if people did reveal the acts in all their gruesome detail, more people might put more effort into stopping them.

My family was seen as solid middle class. There was a big smokescreen going on. My mum and my step-dad were local councillors, most people didn’t even know that my step-dad was that. They changed our surname when they married without even asking us. And my brother used to get seriously annoyed when people (as they often did) told him he looked just like his father. He does. It’s just that his step-father wasn’t his father and that’s who they were meaning! People see what they want to see. And you can cover up a lot of domestic abuse if you’re the right class of person. Believe me.

Enough of the skipping round. This is a particularly difficult door to open. But here goes. It doesn’t matter which Christmas it was, but here’s some reasons I don’t like Christmas. Where to start? My step-dad had an uncontrollable temper. Nice get out clause eh? He went into ‘red’ rages. We learned early to try and avoid this but we also learned that anything could bring them on. Like the time I was sitting quite peaceably eating breakfast at the kitchen table

– a big, heavy wooden one – and some argument kicked off. This time it went beyond the flinging of grill pan and he came towards the table – which I'd just absented myself from on the way out the door, fearful of said grill pan – and he upended the whole thing. It sat in an alcove and he simply turned it upside down with all the ephemera of family breakfast still on it. None of the finesse of a magician pulling a tablecloth from the table and leaving the crockery unharmed. The scene was one of complete devastation. But at least no one was harmed.

I did get harmed in the next one. That was unusual. Normally I was a bystander – I learned that if I left the room the violence against my mum could be worse – so I tried to intervene simply by bearing witness. But one time, my threatening to phone the police backfired. I reached for the phone and he reached for my throat, and stood there, throttling me till someone (I don't remember if it was my mum or brother) managed to get to the phone and start dialling. Then he dropped me. I know kids can be irritating but I will never believe anyone deserves that treatment.

Of course, domestic violence, untreated, escalates. And his did. So brace yourself. I should remind you that when not in his red rages, my step-dad was seen by all and sundry as a really friendly, charismatic guy. Learn from that what you will. It taught me to be very, very wary of people who are over-friendly on first meeting -or at all. Never, as they say, judge a book by its cover. My mum fell for it, she didn't walk into it eyes open, but once in, it was pretty hard to get out of.

Our family has always been book-crazy. In what was their bedroom at the time there was a whole wall of bookshelves. Again, I don't know what sparked the rage – it doesn't matter does it, there's no excuse for what follows – he turned on my mum. At the time she was pregnant with what would be my little sister and so his rage was turned (we thought) off person onto property. He launched a karate style kick at the shelves – we're talking about ten shelves loaded with books remember – and he brought them all down. That sort of power is terrifying. The scene was carnage, but obviously not enough for him. This time there were afters. Before anyone could do anything – and what could a 4 foot 6 girl do against a 6 foot 4 man? – he launched at my mum, punched her in her pregnant stomach and the force sent her crumpling back upon the bed. I remember thinking that he'd beaten up my sibling before she was even born. I wasn't old enough to realise the potential danger of his action, and fortunately my mum got through it unscathed. He'd gone a step too far, realised it and left the room. Christmas was over for that year. No one spoke for days. Not until the Hogmanay party when everything was back to normal, bright, breezy, party-hosts and my mum never let on a word. Not that I know.

Another time a well aimed heavy lead crystal bowl, the kind you'd put a pudding in for a party, was thrown at my mum. It hit her on the shin and cut right through. Not only were there shards of crystal everywhere but the blood flowed freely. That one ended in a hospital visit. But she didn't (to my knowledge) tell them what had happened. Doubtless it was a 'tripped and fell' explanation or some such. No one asks too many questions if the victim doesn't volunteer it. And no one volunteers such things because what is the way out?

The last 'incident' I didn't actually see but I saw the consequences of. They were out in the car, just after New Year shopping. Just when you thought the Christmas flash point had ended. He launched out and broke her nose. That one landed her in hospital for a stay. I don't know if she told them how it happened. Probably said it was a car accident. The consequence



of that was that he was left in sole charge of us for the best part of a week. Fortunately that week is something of a blank to me.

But these are the memories that Christmas brings back to me. Like the rest of you, I've got some of those happy memories from being a small child, the magic of Santa and the joy of ripping open presents. But they cannot be stripped away from the later memories. Domestic violence isn't just for Christmas, it's for life and the memories associated with it don't just come at Christmas. But Christmas was always a flash-point, I think it is for many families and I fail to understand why people keep putting themselves through the stress of it all. I don't understand why society feels the need to put people under the kind of pressure that so many people can't handle. There's definitely something wrong with the profit motive, isn't there?

There are some of us who don't believe in Santa, or the redemptive power of the Christmas story. Spare a thought for us will you as you torture our memories with weeks of build up to a great event that we have learned to dread.

### **14th Festive Flitting**

You'll be pleased to know that at least in our family, the high level domestic abuse didn't last for more than seven years. It was Biblical in its proportions while it lasted, right enough, but like plagues of locusts and grain famines, we endured our seven years and then we escaped. And it was during Advent that we followed Caesar's advice, as I'd learned it my first year at primary school – 'and each went to their own land to be taxed.' Well, we escaped at any rate.

We had, by this time, a house in the countryside, some fifty miles away from Edinburgh, which we went to at weekends and holidays. The money from the students staying in the flat with us paid for it. So you see there are always silver linings to the clouds. And since my step-dad couldn't drive we often went there without him, leaving him in Edinburgh working. I guess that was the first sign of the marriage breakdown. My mum was running a careful game to avoid the inevitable beatings – keep the house full of people and have a bolt-hole.

Well, the year I was about to turn fourteen, my mum shared a secret with us. We were flitting. She was going to serve divorce papers on my step-dad and it was all timed for the last day of Christmas term. The planning went on for weeks before. It was an Advent to remember. We had to denude the flat of all the possessions we wanted. For weeks we took trips to the country house with books, toys, clothes and the like. I couldn't believe he wasn't noticing things getting thinner around the flat. Once he did ask my mum what was happening, why things were moving, and she said she was doing some re-organisation and cleaning out. De-cluttering. Somehow she convinced him that she had found some great storage solutions and that loads of things were being held in the capacious storage cupboards. He bought it. He didn't have the same inquisitive nature as I did about opening doors in Advent. The cupboards became increasingly more bare as the month went on. And every day had the frisson of Advent I remembered from the early days of opening the calendar. But with none of the pleasure, only rising fear with each day.

I guess with students and Christmas coming and general mayhem and him not paying attention anyway because he was busy at work, we somehow got away with it, but I still look

back and wonder how it was managed. I had never been so glad to be at school during the days because I was sure all during Advent that we'd be caught. As the days ticked down towards the flitting, I got more and more tense. It was an event looked forward to with even more intensity than Christmas ever could be, and with a deal more trepidation.

But the great day came. It was one of those years when Christmas was on a Sunday and so school went right through till the Thursday. I left for school that last morning as normal but was due back before lunch – just the carol service to endure. I was under strict instructions to come straight home. Did I want to be left behind to face the music? No way. I was out of school like a rocket when the last carol was sung.

The memories of that day stick with me as mildly comic, now that the immediacy of the fear is gone. I remember the moment my mum said we were taking the washing machine. The WASHING MACHINE. It was a hundred and twenty three steps up to our flat and we'd made every one of them literally hundreds of times in the last month. But a washing machine? She was determined. I wouldn't have been much use in the exercise given my small size and weakness, so I left my mum with my brother (he went to a different school and had already broken up) struggling down the stairs with the washing machine. I couldn't believe it. Did she want to be caught? Never mind the weight of the thing, but the audacity to remove 'white goods' just stunned me. But, practical to the last, a washing machine was the one thing our country house didn't have and my mum wasn't for leaving any more behind than she had to. I can never look at a washing machine even today without thinking of the great feat of daring undertaken in the 'flitting'. Shifting that washing machine down all those stairs was a woman the age I am now and a teenage boy. Hats off to them.

Luckily we had a big estate car and the washing machine fitted into the boot. I remember turning the corner from school to see them all there, waiting for me. We were ready to go. I don't remember shutting the door on the flat for the last time, I don't remember any sense of loss or sorrow, or anything except adrenalin fuelled fear, as we were about to pull away. I remember much looking at watches and I think we began our escape around 12.08 but of course I could be making that bit up. That's the thing when life becomes legend, the legend grows. But this is how I remember it now, and I'm pretty sure it's near as dammit accurate to what happened then.

We knew he had been 'served' the notice at midday at his office and I swear (though of course this could be a fantasy memory coming through) that we saw him charging up the street across the park towards the car as we pulled away. It was what I feared, so I may have imagined it. But I think not. I'm sure we laughed about it afterwards, when we were in the brief aftermath period of thinking we'd pulled off the flit of the century, got one over on him finally – escaped to freedom. We knew he couldn't drive (not legally) and so couldn't hire a car that close to Christmas without a lot of bother and would need to 'find a friend' to bring him over the bridge, so we felt pretty safe for a while. I know that in life you have to take the rough with the smooth and not every advent door that you open has a decent picture in it. Not every present you open is something you wanted. But that Christmas we believed we'd got what we wanted. Freedom from harm. It was intoxicating. While it lasted.

## **15th A nearly perfect Xmas.**

The Christmas of the 'flitting' was the first time in years that I actually felt like we were having Christmas. We arrived at the house, which felt even more spacious than usual because Bad Santa wasn't there. I don't know how to describe the feeling which is just what most people consider normal – safety in the home. When your home is the place you feel least safe, when you'd do anything rather than be there, it's very strange to suddenly be able to breathe again. To expand into a space. And I loved that country house. Because it has outdoor space, even when he had been there, I had places to escape, so I always felt safer there. And it was just us. Just the real family. If only my dad had been there it would have been perfect. I still craved my dad, though now of course he was just a fantasy dad, after seven years of not having seen him. I would have given up all my Christmas gifts in order to just go back to the life we had before I opened that Advent calendar door before my turn.

But this was the next best thing. I suppose we were all punch-drunk to an extent. We believed that the random violence was a thing of the past. That we were no longer victims but survivors. That we could rebuild. That this year there really might be peace on earth, at least for us.

And so it was, for a time. We went out on the Saturday, Christmas Eve and sourced a tree locally. We decorated the tree. We'd taken the decorations with us! This is the first and last time I really remember engaging with the whole preparation for Christmas with pleasure. Taking an active part that is. In the early years you are a recipient not a player. It's all some magic which comes your way but you don't have to do anything to make it happen. Except, of course, be good. But that Christmas, which felt like the first real Christmas, I remember being happy to listen to Christmas carols of little drummer boys and decking the halls and tinsel seemed brighter and paper chains were worth making and time spent placing the baubles and putting greenery round the mantelpieces was all part of some great new hope that Christmas could be all that we dreamed it should be. The sort of Christmas everyone wants was to be ours.

I remember just a moment of pause when my mum got ready to place the wreath on the outside door. I knew that that door was the one real barrier to our safety. One day, I knew that HE would come knocking. Even a Christmas wreath couldn't ward off that evil spirit. I was happier indoors. For once, indoors was safe.

Christmas Eve and Christmas Day passed without a glitch. I think my mum even laid off the worst of the ritual obsessions. At least I don't remember the hoovering, and since there were just the four of us, there was no one to put on a show for. There was still a mountain of turkey and trimmings but Christmas dinner was a lot less stressful than usual. Things just seemed to flow. We seemed to have more time to just 'be.' You've no idea how wonderful it can be just to not be afraid. I've never understood why people willingly put themselves in scary situations – on roller coasters, or even reading frightening stories.

How people can experience a frisson of fear eludes me. Real fear is naked in its look and dominant in its power and it's not something I ever want to feel again. It's something I avoid at all costs. And it's something I know could always come back. I'm tempted to think that fear in childhood is unique, because of the lack of power and control one has as a child. But I look at the elderly and think they are similarly disempowered and it does make me fear for a future where I once more may be cast into that environment. What I know for sure is that

once you've lived real fear, the sanitised version is something to be avoided at all costs. So I'll never understand why people do it. My past has certainly made me risk averse, which may not be all a bad thing. But it isn't all a good thing either.

I don't have the words to describe the pure pleasure we experienced over those two days. It is a sort of blur. I wonder if it's how normal people experience Christmas each year. I'd like to think so. That way I can understand why people keep coming back for it year after year. But when you see the 'build up' to Christmas on the television and in the shops and when you talk to people (or listen to them talk) about Christmas, they all seem to moan about it. On the occasions that I confess I don't 'do' Christmas, the response is as often as not 'I wish I didn't.' There's a feeling that we just *have* to do this ritual every year, like it or not. But I say, if you don't like it, don't do it. If spending time with your family is painful, stressful, don't submit to it. If you don't have the time, the money or the love to spend -just don't do it. But I know this counsel will fall on stony ground, especially at this time of year.

Of course come Boxing Day things stopped being perfect. He did come knocking at the door. But this time we were inside like the three little pigs and he didn't get in. There was some shouting and screaming but we stayed safe. No door was broken down. He must have known the game was up and that a new one was on the way. Strategies had to be changed. And he was probably quite pleased to see the back of us if truth be told. The days of Hogmanay parties in the flat were over – for us at least.

We did have one bit of unscheduled excitement that year before the Christmas tree came down. We had a visit from the fire-brigade. We had an open fire and I don't think my mum believed in chimney sweeps. It had become so blocked over the years no self-respecting Santa would have tried to come down it even if he did exist. And some time after Christmas Day the chimney went on fire. It was the first time I'd made an emergency phone call that wasn't to the police, so that was a novelty. They rushed out and then there was a problem. The wrought iron gates had to be removed from the drive because the fire engine couldn't get through. Once this was achieved, the sitting room was filled with burly firemen who managed to put out the chimney fire with minimal damage inside – and I suspect introduced my mum to the concept of regular chimney sweeping! I'd like to say that the black-faced firemen were our first footers, but I'd be stretching things to say that the great chimney fire happened on Ne'er Day. Still, with memory these things all sort of meld together, the good with the bad, the funny with the sad. They all exist together somewhere or nowhere in my particular synapses – behind the doors which I'm opening for you on a daily basis. Reading them back, I think I should be trying to get more humour injected, or more detail or more something... but I've taken a realist stance. I'm trying, as best I can, to draw the pictures as I see them in my mind and put that straight down on paper. It's not great writing, I know but I'm going for substance over style. Though where is the substance in memory?

### **16th Top of the Teenage Xmas Pops.**

I'm happy to say that the worst of the childhood Christmas memories are now over. You can relax. The rest is just so much bitching. The observations that follow are personal but probably much more recognisable to a wider range of readers. I've reached the teenage years. Fourteen. Fifteen. Sixteen. What do you want with a family Christmas at that age? Mostly what you want is to be given money instead of presents and to be left in peace to watch Top Of The Pops. Neither of these things ever seems to happen.

In the post-apocalyptic domestic violence teen years I have to say I can't really remember much about Christmas. We'd moved on and moved away. The house in the country was sold as part of the divorce settlement and in my mind I was homeless. We actually moved into my grandparent's house, though my grandad was long dead and my grandma has moved out to be cared for by an aunt. But it was far away from the wicked step-father. Unfortunately it was far away from everything else in my life – good and bad. So I guess I was as much of a mopey teen as anyone is. I made a new set of friends, some of them Church-goers, or 'God squad' as we called them, and I flirted with the true meaning of Christmas one year – though as I say, I can't really remember it that well. What I do remember is that the 'God Squad' put a lot more emphasis on Easter than Christmas. And I was already getting very uncomfortable with the whole consumerism angle – with or without God. But now, as I scratch my memory I remember even going out carol singing (for money) one of those teenage Christmases. I'm not sure we were collecting for charity, unless it was the charity begins at home type. With cynical hindsight I'm going to suggest that it was a way to deal with the lack of cash that came through during the Christmas period.

I remember those days for the fact there were plenty of 'gifts' that you had to put on a grateful face for. I never did grateful well, certainly not with grace – and the worn out 'Just what I wanted,' 'No, I haven't got one of those,' or more often the lie 'No, I haven't read that one...' were never far from my lips. In reality, I had ALWAYS read that one, and many more. It was what I did during my teenage years – I stayed up in my bedroom and I read. Everything. It was a lot less trouble than listening to music. That had to be done quietly and what teenager wants to listen to music quietly? Oh for a set of headphones for Christmas!

My mum had no one to get in the way of her Christmas ritual now. I seem to recall that we 'did' the Midnight Mass thing on a Christmas Eve now, having struggled to erect and decorate the Christmas tree and get the bastard lights working (now my brother's responsibility!) before we left. The language of Christmas in our house was not the language of the kirk! No one believed in Santa any more, not even my little sister, so we didn't have that palaver to go through. And there were no more Victorian Pantomimes to go to. Not where we were. So it was my mum's version of Christmas that we endured.

Christmas morning. Woken to frantic Hoovering. And probably some cursing about having had no help with getting potatoes ready for par-boiling or something wrong with the turkey and WHY were we not down having breakfast. Simple. I didn't want breakfast. I knew my stomach would be begging for mercy soon enough. Even without a six a.m. (or four a.m) fix of chocolate I knew I'd be feeling sick by the time the Queen came on the television.

So breakfast was eaten, one piece of toast and hot chocolate, and cleared away. 'Can we have presents now?' No. We were threatened with another trip to church, but fortunately there was always some drama or crisis in the kitchen that made that impossible.

Then I usually had to step in and do some Hoovering – after the suggestion that all the work was being done by my mum and that we were ungrateful and never helped around the house. I'll hold my hands up, you know, I just don't DO gratitude for things I don't have any interest in. I find that gratitude can be used as effectively as a Hoover for a weapon any day, and I'm a pacifist in every respect. So to keep the peace I ran the Hoover round the sitting room and hall AGAIN – remembering each time that this was the same space in which I'd woken to the

Space Hopper, the Indian suit, My Grandad reading me Dickens... and I never remember anyone hoovering during that Christmas.

Hoovering done, I'd guess it was probably 10.30 or 11am by the time we sat down to the open the presents ritual. I hated it. It was like some sick version of pass the parcel. Each person had to open one at a time, with everyone else looking on. Maybe normal people like this, but to me it was like the greatest acting challenge known to man that 'No, I haven't read that,' 'Oh, it's just what I wanted,' and the like, endlessly lying and being 'grateful' to order.

I never thought I was that difficult to buy for, I thought what I liked was fairly obvious to all – but somehow I never got what it was I really wanted. I don't think I had expensive tastes, but it always seemed to be that while I got weighed down with 'stuff' very little of it was anything that held any interest to me. I wonder if it's like that for everyone. You can't tell, because everyone is so versed in the 'oh, it's just what I wanted' routine. I guess it was during my teenage years that I really first started questioning whether everyone was just playing along. And if so, why?

I think we did it to keep my mum happy. Though she had an odd sort of happy. I suppose she must have loved the whole Christmas thing, but I for the life of me can't think why, because she acted like a woman on the edge through the whole twelve days. Even without the threat of domestic violence mixed into the pudding. I came to the conclusion that she liked the power of being in charge and the martyrdom that goes with being responsible for making sure everyone 'has a good time.'

But of course we didn't have a good time. At least I didn't. As a teenager, all I wanted was the chance to stay in bed till 11am, not have to eat breakfast, not be woken to the Hoover torture routine, and to watch Christmas Top of the Pops. But it was on when we ate Christmas Lunch. Every other day of the year we ate lunch at 1pm but on Christmas it was 2pm. So that we would be winding up in order to watch the Queen at 3pm. After that it was washing up, walk, respite till turkey sandwiches and cake, Morecombe and Wise and whatever other Christmas treats the TV served up. As a teenager most of these were as welcome as the presents!

### **17th Sick of Xmas?**

The other major problem I had with Christmas during my later teenage years was the food. I'd never really liked rich food and it often seemed to disagree with me. And my mum was old-school. Meat had to be 'well' cooked which means that beef was like shoe-leather. I remember many a Sunday lunch (we always had Sunday lunch, it was like a training ritual for Christmas I suppose) when I chewed beef round my mouth completely unable to swallow it and had to find a hanky to dump a sodden, grey piece of... words fail me... without being noticed. There's never a dog around when you need one!

But Christmas was worst. Chocolate I could handle in abundance, but the richness of Christmas pudding, Christmas cake and turkey with all the trimmings got the better of me time and again. Endless satsumas didn't help. My stomach couldn't handle all the acid. And Brussel sprouts sent me into spasm straight away. Whatever else I have against Christmas (and I've treated you to plenty of that) my guts were not designed for either the religious or the pagan eating rituals! I remember one particular Christmas, I think it was when I was

sixteen, that I never even made it to the Christmas dinner table. That's not strictly true. I wasn't allowed a leave of absence, but I was allowed just to eat a small bit of turkey and some mashed potato.

If I hadn't just spent the last 24 hours throwing up, I would have enjoyed it- NOT having to pile my plate with all the stuff I hated. As it was, I could barely even eat that, and being forced to sit and watch everyone else tucking in and 'enjoying' themselves placed me as the spoilsport – a role I fear I have subsequently been cast in time and again now that I don't 'do' Christmas. No one wants to hear the reasons, however good they are – people just want to play having a good time and no one likes a party pooper now do they?

Being sick wasn't really an option at Christmas. Unless you were full on vomiting - which I managed to achieve that year. Then I was excused Christmas cake and Turkey sandwiches and when I refused the round of Quality Street (it was inevitably Quality Street even though I preferred Roses) I was allowed to repair to bed and not have to take part in the post meal festivities; washing up and TV watching. We're talking the days before kids had tv's in their bedroom and no one had thought of the internet. In bed meant sick. Reading. Well that wasn't so bad. If I felt up to reading. When I didn't feel up to reading I knew I was in real trouble. There would be no Boxing Day turkey for me. I think that Christmas I managed not to eat for the best part of a week. And once Christmas Day and Boxing Day were over, no one cared much. We no longer had big Hogmanay parties, so there wasn't much to look forward to except a new year and one year closer to being 'grown up.' One year closer to leaving home and being an adult. The inevitability I wished for but never quite believed would happen. Knowing that even when it did, the expectation would be that for Christmas you'd have to go back, like my primary one bible text said – each to their own home to be taxed. And so it was.

Some doors in the Advent calendar are less spectacular than others, and I don't know how to dress up being too sick to participate – and this probably isn't a picture you want to look at. But when you're busy planning the festival of gluttony that is Christmas, just for a moment take a pause to consider that not everyone likes Christmas food. Not everyone can eat Christmas food. Never mind the ethics of spending a day stuffing your face while millions of people in the world are starving. If that doesn't put you off Christmas dinner, I don't know what will. But it doesn't seem to. People are great at coming up with reasons why they 'deserve a bit of luxury' at Christmas. I'm sorry, I don't agree. There is plenty to go round in this world. The more we have the less someone else gets. I find the thought of starving people puts me off eating Christmas fare. It's not just my gut that is intolerant of Christmas the older I get.

And while I'm at it – Christmas lights. Why, when we all know about global warming and scarce resources, do we all feel the need to waste vast amounts of electricity over the Christmas period? In towns, villages and our own homes. Why don't we all donate this money to refugees? We give at Children in Need – but few of us know much or do much about REAL children in need on a daily basis. No one knew or cared when I was a child in need. But after Pudsey each year it seems we allow ourselves to go overboard on a gluttony binge. Shopping, eating, consuming... it's all actually completely unnecessary. Christmas is not a joyous time for many people round the world. And if consumer capitalist Christmas is what you need to make you happy, I suggest you need to take a long hard look at yourself.

Like I said, today's picture is me, sick to my stomach. Pass me the alka-seltzer.

## **18th Feeling like you're 14 again.**

What I wanted most for Christmas when I was a child (from 10 years of age anyway) was to be a grown up. I left home when I was seventeen, but as anticipated, the expectation was that I would be home for Christmas. Trying to point out that I didn't consider it my 'home' any more didn't work but for a couple of years, while I was a student, I tried to play along. And even into my early twenties, I kept going back for the yearly punishment – each time trying to find a way to avoid it.

My mum wasn't a drinker and I didn't take to it till I left home, but by the time I was twenty the only way to bear a Christmas with the family was to have plenty of drink in the equation. So I'm happy to say that I don't remember a huge amount about Christmas in my late teens, early twenties but I had one moment of epiphany which stick in the mind.

My brother and I had both left home. My sister wasn't so lucky. But we were all essentially grown up and Christmas should have had a different dynamic. My brother and I both had partners, though not children of our own. Sometimes I thought that only having children would offer the excuse of not coming back to the mother ship for Christmas. It seemed rather too high a price to pay, and a high risk strategy besides, because it was just as likely that we'd have to bring the children to my mum's for Christmas, thus indoctrinating another generation into our family ritual. And the fighting that would happen if we wanted to go to the 'other' family... like I said, it just all seemed too high risk a strategy.

But back to my epiphany. We were doing the pass the parcel present opening part of the day. And I looked round and realised that even in our twenties we were being treated, and worse, acting, like fourteen year olds. It was family bickering and it wasn't funny or clever! It was aggravating and sad. And I realised at that moment that unless I made the break, there was a place where, like Peter Pan, I would never grow up. And it would be Christmas with the family. So I silently promised myself I'd never do that again. Whatever it took I would find a way to avoid a family Christmas. It was the beginning of the end. But with Christmas I discovered you can run, but you can't hide.

The lighter side of that time was the drink fuelled activity. Needless to say, they are rather misty memories. I was never a fan of parties and Christmas parties were no better. In fact in any of the many jobs I undertook in my twenties, and I think it must have been nearly as many jobs as Christmases, the Christmas party was, in its own way, as horrific as our family Christmases. Firstly there were always people behaving badly. Secondly, since there was always a lot of drink you had to make sure you weren't one of them, because there were always consequences. The bosses would put money behind the bar and when the staff got tanked up and 'partied hard' they'd be sitting there taking notes and miscreants would pay for it the rest of the year. And year on year no one seemed to get that!

One year I remember a works Christmas party going to Manchester, putting everyone up in a hotel overnight and then going out on the 'razz' with a big client who was based in Manchester. Carnage. I was sharing a room with a colleague and the last thing I remember is her inviting a couple of policemen up to the room. Policemen? All I know is that I tried on a policeman's hat (one of those weird helmet type things they wear in England) and finding it



very uncomfortable. Actually, that reminds me of another drink fuelled Christmas – at home. I'd become active in a musical theatre group and the band was made up of off duty Guardsmen. And we must have had a Christmas party because I invited a load of them back home. Arriving long after my mum had gone to bed, she was quite surprised to find a couple of passed out Guardsmen in the sitting room the next morning when she went to start the hoovering! To be fair, she took it in good grace as long while they were there – but I got quite a rollocking afterwards. Retrospectively, probably rightly so! But I never got to wear a guardsman's bearskin. No comparative analysis can be made with police helmets. Sorry.

In fact Christmas headgear got me in trouble more than once. From the age of about fifteen I simply refused to wear paper Christmas hats. And that seems to really upset people. I still can't figure out why. I remember having a works Christmas lunch one year out at a restaurant. Apparently I ruined the event for more than one person. And here's why. Firstly, I didn't drink – I was driving and I never drank and drove even when people did – losing my licence would have lost me my job for one thing – and for another thing – oh, come on, what person doesn't know that drinking and driving is just bloody dangerous. But add to my lack of joy de vivre and letting my hair down by refusing wine, I didn't want ice cream. I don't know why they were even serving ice-cream at a Christmas lunch. I don't like ice cream, I never have, and I opted not to have it with my chocolate sludge thing. I'd already NOT picked the Christmas pudding option, so I suppose those for whom Christmas ritual must be obeyed were already gunning for me. And then, the crowning glory was when I refused to put on a silly paper hat once the crackers had been pulled. This was beyond the pale and I got into a full scale argument on the strength of it.

I hadn't made a fuss about the drink or the ice-cream, I'd just politely declined. I politely refused to wear a hat. You'd have thought this was a crime against humanity. When pushed, I said, 'No, I'm not going to wear one.' I didn't think more explanation was necessary. I was accused of spoiling the party. I responded that firstly if the party depended on people wearing silly hats then it was pretty spoiled already and secondly, pointed out that we were supposed to be enjoying ourselves. Therefore, if I didn't enjoy eating ice cream and wearing a paper hat, I shouldn't have to do it. The counter argument – as it always is – ran along the lines of everyone else is enjoying themselves doing this, so should you and if you don't you show everyone else up and reduce their enjoyment. So what price freedom? What free choice do we have if we are only free to do what doesn't upset the majority, no matter how stupid they are being? It wasn't an argument I could ever win, especially faced with tipsy, aggravated people in paper hats – no sense of dignity and no sense of shame being a pre-requisite for the occasion it seemed. It was another nail in the coffin of Christmas for me.

My resolution. No more Christmas in the bosom of my family and no more going to works Christmas parties. Goal. No more Christmas. Good luck with that one eh? After all, we've still another six doors to open!

### **19th Marry at Christmas – repent for Lent**

My strategy, I will agree, was somewhat radical! I can almost laugh about it now, but only in that hollow –how could I have been so stupid – way beloved of the possessor of hindsight. I was looking for a way to avoid the horrors of a family Christmas. The whole thing had grown into epic proportions by now anyway – the family extended once more. My brother was married, my mum had also re-married and I had a partner. We'd tried going to his family for

Christmas, we'd been to my family for Christmas and by year three I was ready to burst. So we decided to go away for Christmas. People do it. The same way that people go out to eat for Christmas Dinner rather than have to endure the home-made ritual gluttony fest with all the trimmings. I told my mum this. The response. Not good. *Other* people may do this, but it seemed *we* did not.

I told her in November. I thought it'd be good to give her plenty of time to get used to the idea. I did feel a bit guilty about leaving the rest of them to shoulder the burden, but come Christmas, I reckoned, it was every man for himself. When I look back I'm still not sure which part of the plan I got wrong. I think it was in telling my mum where we were going. She became jealous and didn't want to miss out. So she decided that if *we* were going away for Christmas, then we were *all* going away for Christmas. That's right, they were coming with us!

We'd booked a bolt-hole up in the Highlands in a small chalet complex. Mistake. There were two other chalets available. My mum booked one. So I didn't so much escape Christmas as relocate it lock, stock and barrel. Without all the comforts (and distractions) of home. And instead of being able to go visit my mum's just for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day and then beg mercy and go off to my partner's family, or sneak home, we were stuck with my family for a whole week! If I'd thought the whole Christmas fest had got too big by having to juggle two sets of family expectations, this was the worst icing on the cake I could imagine. A whole week with no escape!

Luckily we didn't have to travel together. We went up first. We revelled in how remote and isolated the place was. And there were no other people staying in the chalets. Without the imminent arrival of my family it would have been the perfect escape from Christmas. But as it was my mum had forced my little sister to come along – and she was in her teens and not grateful at being plucked out of her natural teen environment to have Christmas in the wilds with no phone or internet access. My new step-dad was part of the package too. He was perhaps a man more sinned against than sinning, I never really got to know him, for his reign was relatively short-lived; but I can't say that from the outside it looked like a happy marriage. If it was a marriage of convenience it didn't seem very convenient. For my own case, I just found the man boring.

My mum was in her element. She had known the place would be remote so she brought everything (and then some) needed for her 'perfect' Christmas, with her. Which meant we couldn't even get in the car and drive 20 miles to the nearest village for respite under the guise of buying some stuffing or chipolatas. Fortunately she didn't bring a Hoover! And it took her some days to find the one provided. Silver linings abounded.

There was another stunt my mum pulled. Again, I don't know how she did it. She sorted the Christmas arrangements so that she and my new step-dad had the chalet for 2 and we got stuck with my wee sister. It may seem un-festive of me to complain about that, but I had been hoping for some one-to-one time with my partner, not to be a teen babysitter. Of the actual Christmas experience, what can I say? Well, at least there were lots of places to go out walking. And it was possible, sometimes, to escape and shut the door on our own chalet and watch TV. I'd grown past the stage of wanting to watch Top of the Pops, so it was my wee sister who sulked on that account. But we still had to negotiate all activity in our chalet round a goth with an attitude.

My mum used the change of location for some attempt at 'bonding' which was more like being put in a cooking boot camp for three days. She huffed and moaned that we weren't helping enough, not doing it right as she demanded full attention over the creation of Christmas food from both my wee sister and me. The kitchen definitely wasn't big enough for the three of us. But we pulled out a complete Christmas dinner, with all the trimmings, which once again I was forced to put on the grateful face when I ate it, once again vowing I'd never subject myself and my stomach to this again.

While the women cooked the men had to interact. I should feel sorry for them I suppose, but in retrospect they both deserved it, so at least someone got what they deserved for Christmas, but it wasn't peace on earth and goodwill to all men. I can't remember a thing about the presents. As usual. The whole exchange of gifts had become just pointless to me. Even though I put a lot of thought (and tried to be creative with money) into the process, I wasn't either interested or grateful for anything that came my way.

Christmas continued to be a spectacular vindication to me of how little anyone knew me, and how little anyone cared to try and find out. It seems to me that a lot of people give gifts according to the following principle: I like this, so the person I'm giving it to should be grateful that I'm giving them something I'd want. Whereas for me the principle was: think hard about what that person would want, then buy it for them. I don't see how hard that is – though I'll admit it does require actually thinking about other people and I've yet to see evidence that many people do this – especially at Christmas.

But the vow I made myself after that relocated family Christmas was NEVER AGAIN. And I really meant it. I came up with another plan. And this is the one that was really badly thought out. Well, it could have been a masterplan, there was just one weak link. I'll save the revelation of that for you for a while.

The plan- Get married next Christmas. If we honeymooned over Christmas then surely my mum couldn't come with us? Great plan. Shame about the husband. We went ahead. We got married the week before Christmas the next year. I discovered that marriage can be as horrible as Christmas because the honeymoon was over before I even left the small reception which was held, you guessed it, at my mum's house. It was the sop against not having Christmas with her. She got to host a wedding reception I didn't want for family and friends and work colleagues.

I'd been with my partner for five years and it was more or less the time to decide marry or split up. I certainly backed the wrong horse there. It may seem petty now, but in the context of the promises made even in registry offices, I took it hard when, having told me that he'd given up smoking – no *really* given up smoking this time - I went out into the garden some two hours into the reception to find him hiding round a corner with his sister – smoking. It wasn't the smoking that got me, so much as the duplicity. Now before you think I'm over-reacting, this was a man who said that telling a lie didn't count unless and until you got caught. When I heard him say that I dismissed it as nonsense, not willing to believe that someone could really a) believe that and b) live their life on those principles. But he meant it. Five years later I discovered this wasn't just his belief, it was his belief system. And that, I'm afraid, was anathema to me. Like I said, the honeymoon was over long before the reception and certainly before Christmas Eve.

On the up-side. We went on honeymoon to another remote part of the Highlands. The icing on that particular Christmas cake was that he'd left his wallet behind, so we really did have to be pretty frugal on the spending. It was the days I still had credit cards, but they didn't extend to splashing the cash. So, for the first time ever we didn't 'do' Christmas. He wasn't bothered, but I think it was just because he was too lazy. We still had plenty of nice food, cooked by me and drink, bought by me, but there was no evidence of tinsel and the trees stayed in their rightful place in the forest. We were out of phone communication at that place and were truly alone. Which would have been wonderful for any normal honeymooners. However, for me, it was the Christmas I realised how truly alone I was, and what a complete mistake I'd made. I may have avoided the Christmas hell, but I'd just signed up for something even worse on a daily basis. And I couldn't see any way out.

### **20th Christmas Made in China.**

While two hours is a bit short for a honeymoon period, you'll not be surprised to learn that by five years the marriage itself was in complete meltdown. And Christmas was coming again. What to do? I was getting desperate. We'd had five years of juggling the various families. The best compromise was that there was no Christmas in our house, but I couldn't escape from it whenever I left the house – and indeed even in the house the TV and radio are full of it. The neighbours all have tinsel and lights and trees and frivolous nonsense. People still send you Christmas cards. Actually, I've worked out that you have about three years after you send your last Christmas card to someone before they knock you off their list and stop sending them.

That gives me the opportunity to digress into what I think is wrong with the whole Christmas card thing. Apart from the obvious waste of resources of. Right. Here goes. The supposed point of Christmas cards is to show people you're thinking of them at Christmas. But the reality is that people have long lists, which they tick off, just signing the inside of cards without barely a thought. Very few people actually write a message, much less a letter to go into the card. How can they? They've got hundreds to get through after all. I'm sorry, I don't see the point. I don't need a collection of autographs on my shelves for a fortnight thanks, hiding the books! And I don't need to celebrity endorse a range of cards to send to other people I barely know, don't give a shit about, never think about, feel guilty about not having kept in contact with –etc. When I send a card (which thankfully is virtually never now) I put in a proper letter, using the opportunity for some real communication with the recipient.

Of course with the rise of Facebook and ecards and the like, real cards have become even more redundant, even more wasteful of resources. I know, I know, the argument against me is always that suggesting we are wasting resources at Christmas is being a Scrooge. I fundamentally disagree. If you've got enough money to spend on cards and stamps you could donate it to charity instead, or actually do something with the money that makes a difference to the life of someone who doesn't have the luxury of being wasteful. There's an American Indian saying 'Only when the last fish has been caught and the last river has been poisoned will we realise we can't eat money.' And I endorse that - only when there are no hungry people and maltreated animals on this planet will I willingly engage with the Christmas process. Until then, I'll stick with my principles and use my resources (both physical and emotional) for better purposes than tinsel, turkey and tanking up!

You'll see where I'm going. I had finally had enough. By five years into my marriage I was completely convinced that Christmas had become nothing more than a commodity. I thought that it would be a good plan (I should have learned from my mistakes, shouldn't I?) that I reasoned, why not go somewhere they *don't* celebrate Christmas! The obvious answer? Communist China. I couldn't think of a place less likely to be Christmassy than Beijing.

Once again I should have thought a bit more deeply.

Using the excuse of my husband's 'landmark' birthday, combined with some money left us by the death of his mother (no more visits to his family for Christmas, then!) I booked us a 10 day trip to China. We're talking China before the Olympics, before it was fully 'open' to the West, and so still to some degree an exotic destination.

The reality (never quite as sparkly) was a long haul flight from hell, gaining an understanding of how turkeys must feel on their last trip to the abattoir; with the enhancement of jet lag and culture shock. The biggest part of the culture shock was how Christmassy it was! We were booked into a swish hotel (the only kind you can stay in in China as a foreigner) where the lobbies all had giant Christmas trees, complete with tinsel and lights and to cap it all, there was no escape from the tinny Christmas tunes. They even piped them in the lift. It didn't take me wrong to work out my mistake. Let me take you through it, in case, like I was, you are surprised to find Christmas in China.

Christmas is about commodities, right? And where do they make all these Christmas things? You got it. China. Christmas is no part of Chinese culture but it is a huge part of their economic system. And the cheaper and tackier and more plasticky the better. So, instead of escaping from the consumer binge that is the festive period, I'd placed myself into the worst excesses of it.

The staff had obviously been trained in Christmas and Christmas etiquette. Wherever you went in the hotels (and you weren't encouraged to leave them) you were greeted with 'Happy Christmas' and beaming Chinese smiles. They knew more than I did about Santa (well, after all, they are the elves who work for him all year, aren't they?). The only real Chinese part of it was that they were all shocked with those of us who had chosen to come to China during this important 'family' time. It was impossible to explain that you wanted to escape from family. Family is everything in China it seems, and no self-respecting Chinese person would think of missing their own Chinese New Year homecoming festival. So we were not just strange foreigners, but considered, I suspect somewhat beneath contempt for being anti-family, anti-tradition.

It was stupid of me to think that Chinese people would a) be distanced from the whole Christmas thing and so b) understand the desire to get away from it. It was a different culture to them – goodness knows what they make of all the crap they manufacture – but they understand the fundamentals of tradition and a tradition with family at the centre is something they buy into wholesale. Our stocking fillers are the means by which they get the money to go back to their own families at Chinese New Year. I suspect the entire nation breathes a communal sigh of relief when our Christmas stock is delivered – and counts their yuans. Doubtless when they come back to work from Christmas New Year they are geared up to start the mass production of more crap for the next Christmas season.

So. You learn something with each passing year. And I learned that even travelling to the other side of the world is no escape from Christmas. Since this is a Christmas story, I won't give you detail of my holiday. Suffice it to say, once you got out of the hotels and away from the trips –and it wasn't easy to shake off one's 'guides' - there was a lot of interest to explore in Beijing and beyond. The Chinese in their native environment carried about their business oblivious of Christmas. But the price we pay for import/export of Christmas to China is that a Westerner cannot escape it even in the heart of communism. I don't know what it will be like there now, but I can't imagine it will be any less commercial or commodified. China has taken to capitalism like a duck to a pond and Christmas is such a vital part of capitalism, isn't it. Jesus has more or less been cut out of the equation. There are plenty more celebrity endorsements of product Christmas!

## **21st Christmas in Cyprus**

Scroll on five years. Another Christmas, and a new partner. Divorce was a painful process for me, because I hate to renege on a promise, and with divorce you have to accept that you haven't lived up to your own expectations. Being rid of the 'other party' is easy enough, it's living with yourself that is hard about divorce. But I got over it, believe me. I learned and I grew and I became more myself than I'd been for over a decade now that I wasn't weighed down by being attached to someone who, it seemed, had completely opposite values to myself. It was my time. But Christmas comes round every year, and it still had to be negotiated.

Between China and Cyprus I'd managed to keep most Christmases relatively low key. I couldn't get my family to stop sending me presents – even though I didn't spend Christmas with them. My brother got let off the hook the year we all went to the Highlands and now he was married with kids, they pulled a lot of the focus, so I got my 'bye' for several years. I was able to establish something of a pattern. Low key would be the best description. And that suited me fine.

But this year was going to be another 'first.' I was with a new partner, which meant, I thought, teaching a whole new set of people my views about Christmas – and inevitably alienating them in the process. My partner had other ideas. He had never enjoyed Christmas either (it's amazing how many people confess to this actually!) and he'd just got divorced so he wanted to get away. How about we went off on holiday together over Christmas?

It was a great idea. Of course I no longer had the illusion that we would escape Christmas through travel, but it would cut out a lot of the difficult bits – spending Christmas with his family for example. They were all died in the wool Christmas freaks, with their own set of rituals – which involved a lot more eating of rich food than I would ever be able to stomach – and I was pretty sure party hats would come into the equation. I wanted to make a good impression and I've learned that I don't make a good impression on normal people at Christmas. No one likes being told that Christmas isn't great for everyone, especially those who keep in the happy Christmas bubble and still engage in stocking fillers for all.

We could leave them all behind. Right through the festive fortnight. What's not to love? It was just pick a destination. We chose Cyprus. No expectations about the Christmas factor, but we rented a self-catering apartment and hired a car and would be pretty much able to

enjoy the place and each other's company without interaction. Okay, hide your eyes from the Christmas tree when you go through the lobby, but it's not that much of an imposition. The apartment block was actually pretty low-key. In fact, I have to say, that to get away from Christmas, Cyprus is probably my destination of choice. No one was really bothered and I suspected that many of our fellow travellers were of the same persuasion as us – they couldn't see Christmas far enough away. Of course there were the uber-revellers – who got tanked up on the plane and one of whom, a girl called Abb-eeeeee by her pals, got so drunk that she passed on the corridor of the plane and the rest of us all just stepped over her – we'd endured the 4 hours it took her to get that paralytic and no one, cabin staff or fellow passengers gave a damn. I wished her a stomach pump for Christmas and on we went. There were also the families, transporting their Christmas lock, stock and barrel to the sun, but we knew it would be easy to give them a body swerve. Stay away from hotel pools and we'd be fine.

The aim was non-Christmas in Cyprus and I have to say, for the first time the plan came together and we had a wonderful time. The weather was a bit more festive than I'd anticipated – we had a lot of warmish days but we also drove up into the hills and experience fog and snow. That's okay, I like snow, I just wished I'd packed warmer clothes. But beyond that we had time on the beach and travelling round the ancient and natural sights of Cyprus. There are loads of them, though when we were there it was also an island becoming a building site by the minute – more tourists, more ex-pats. But at least there was virtually no evidence of Christmas.

We stocked up on good Greek food in case we couldn't get a meal on Christmas Day. Though we weren't even sure, after a few days there, which day Christmas Day would fall on. One day we went out and some of the restaurants were closed, but the Chinese wasn't, so we went there. And had a lovely meal. I reflected that I was in a far better place, both physically and emotionally than when I'd had Christmas Day in China itself. The combination of the right person, the right place and the ability to turn a blind eye to the trappings of Christmas, made it a holiday to remember. We stayed through New Year and never mixed with other people the whole fortnight. There were fireworks on the balcony and a party downstairs for Hogmanay, which we duly reported on an international phone call to our respective families. But we held our own festivities. And they had nothing to do with Christmas.

And by the time we got back, Christmas had been consigned to the landfill along with the trees and tinsel, and if not forgiven, it was more or less forgotten that we hadn't been there as willing participants. I'm sure we weren't even missed during the Christmas period, and that, for me, is a result. Each to his own, and I'm not trying to stop anyone else enjoying Christmas, however they want to do that – but I'd like the respect of other people letting me NOT indulge in the Christmas experience if I so choose. The only way to achieve this seems to be cutting yourself off from everyone for the best part of a month. And with family that isn't at all easy. Christmas is for children, for families, for consumer capitalism – it's not a time to be refusnick! But after Cyprus the die had been cast. No going back. We'd fully broken the family Christmas hoo-doo and there was no going back. Ah. So we thought. You can never predict the future now, can you. There's always going to be a Bond movie in the Christmas mix and you can never say never again.

## 22nd Just any other Wednesday

But today I can bring you tidings of great comfort and joy. And hope, if you're someone who wants to avoid Christmas. Here are some observations I've gleaned over a couple of decades of trying to avoid 'the big day.'

Come the 20th December most people will leave you alone because they're busy with their own Christmas. And once they know you're a Scrooge about it they'll pretty much leave you alone lest you dampen their ardour for 'the big day.' Up till about the 20th they all moan and groan and talk about how expensive, difficult, unpleasant it all is, but by the 20th they've bought into it big-style and you can, if you're lucky, ride the slipstream and just keep under the radar. Apart from family phone-calls on Christmas Day. Looking back over the past couple of decades there were quite a few years when I achieved my goal of avoiding Christmas virtually wholesale – and these were years I just stayed at home, battened down the hatches and got on with life.

The only sacrifice that has to be made is to keep away from television, radio and the internet. These days that has to include social media. If you go on social media any time during the twelve days of Christmas you're asking for it. I can't imagine what FaceBook and Twitter are like on Christmas Day, but if this year's Halloween is anything to go by, your 'stream' or 'page' are likely to be filled with greetings and pictures of everyone you know (and on social media a lot of people you really don't know) having a jolly time. That's definitely one for me to avoid. I have issues with social media in general. It seems to be living life one step removed from any kind of reality. And I suppose if I've anything to thank Christmas for in my adult life, it's a yearly reminder to 'keep it real.' Because the best tip I've got for a good un-festive period is: sign out for a week. Get your food in early and avoid the shops. Stay home with a load of good books and get on with whatever it is you do to amuse or entertain yourself in the best of times. Just stop the world and get off. Take a break.

If you want to be an avoider 'light' and like to go shopping for bargains then avoiding the shops and the internet can be hard I suppose. For me, I remind myself that bargains are always there, that shopping is a created vice, that the best bargain is learning to live without. And believe me, there's a lot of things we take for granted as essentials that are pretty easy to live without. As for luxuries? Treats? For goodness sake. Well, I suppose if you want or need those things you're not going to be looking for tips on how to avoid Christmas are you?

If you actually like the idea of Christmas but don't like the commercialism then there is plenty you can do. Volunteer to go and give someone else a better Christmas. Which is another way of getting back to the 'real' spirit of the day. Whether it's from religious or pagan perspective, if you get warm feelings towards other people at this time of year, or enjoy giving more than you enjoy receiving, then getting down to a soup kitchen, a homeless shelter, or if you're not that brave just seeking out an elderly person, or someone on their own, or someone who may be struggling, and give them a good time. Be with them, take them out, cook for them, buy presents for their kids. I'd just add the caveat that you should make sure in advance if they want this kind of interaction.

I've never volunteered at Christmas simply because I don't want anything to do with it. But there must be people who do want to but haven't the means. People who actually want or need help to enjoy this time of year. I'd have thought the help would be more about company, but it might be that giving a gift is more appropriate. My point is, with a couple of days left,



you could still put a bit of thought into this and do something different this year. If you like Christmas, why not connect with the true spirit of it and do something for someone else, without looking for something in return. It shouldn't be rocket science, or a strange notion, to do something nice for someone who isn't in your family at least once a year! If you buy into Santa then *be* Santa. But make sure you pick someone who will appreciate it. And don't expect that everyone does appreciate being reminded of Christmas.

For me, the best Christmases are the ones that just don't happen. I'm sure I'm not alone in having a lot of very unhappy memories stirred up at this time of year and whatever I can do to avoid them, I do. And it has worked well for me various times, when I've just been having a Tuesday, or a Thursday, or such – doing some reading, writing, even domestic chores (perhaps not Hoovering.) I remember possibly the best non-Christmas day was the one where I was in the kitchen at about eleven o'clock in the morning struggling with the clothes dryer which hung from the ceiling and which had a rather recalcitrant pulley system. It had broken just as I was pulling the washing up, so I was perched on a kitchen chair, trying to work out the ropes and pulleys and struggling against the weight of it, balancing it as I recall on my head – all so that I wouldn't have to take the clothes off and put them on again – and the phone rang. That was in the days I answered my phone. I tend not to these days. But I jumped down, got the phone and it was my mum wishing me happy Christmas. I'd completely forgotten about it.

'What are you doing,' she asked.

'Trying to fix the clothes dryer,' I replied, honestly.

That obviously didn't compute with her and I was left alone. Christmas interaction lasted less than five minutes and I quickly forgot about it again as I went to complete my task.

Believe it or not, that's my idea of the perfect Christmas!

Total avoidance is, of course, rarely possible, but another tip to give you maximum festive free time is that *you* ring the people who you know will ring you to wish you Happy Christmas. Get in there early. I've learned it doesn't hurt to wish other people Happy Christmas. Fundamentally (despite pointers to the contrary) I'm not a Scrooge. If people genuinely enjoy all the Christmas stuff, that's their right and privilege. It's not my way, but I'm not there to spoil their party. And phoning a few people in the morning to wish them Happy Christmas is a good way to get the rest of the day free. Of course you do have to remember it's Christmas Day to employ that strategy, and I don't always remember. When I do, I just put on my best smile and think of it like a chore that has to be accomplished. I wish them well with as genuine an emotion as I can and get on with my day.

Getting Christmas presents can be another problem of course. It took me a decade to train my own family not to buy me presents. It's not as easy as the Christmas card deal. Family do tend to expect presents themselves and will keep buying for you even when you say you don't want a present, simply to get one themselves. I've still not trained my new 'in-laws' not to buy. They are serious fun Christmas people. The tip, which worked on my family but not (yet) with the in-laws, was to give charity donations on their behalf as Christmas presents. They pretty soon stop wanting that as a gift, I can tell you. Strangely, none of them has turned the tables on me and sent me charity donations as Christmas gifts – which I would really appreciate! The 'in law' family are stocking-filler type people and they fall into the category of people who just love Christmas shopping, so I'm not hopeful that they will ever get to grips with the idea that some people just don't want Christmas presents.

I am deeply uneasy with presents bought by people who just love Christmas retail therapy. So I developed a way of dealing with my unease. When bought such a present I then go out and give a charity donation for the same amount. I've got something I didn't want, maybe, but I turn it into something useful. I've sponsored guide dogs and gifted toilets and goats and all sorts this way. At least it makes me feel something good comes out of the whole thing. But I'd really rather not have to engage with the spurious practice of keeping the Chinese workers on sweat-shop wages while the earth's precious resources are ravaged for more useless plastic crap. It's just me, but I don't see that as 'fun' or 'festive' or positive in any way. Other views not only exist – but are dominant – so I hope I don't offend, but surely I'm entitled to my opinions too? I think, after all, I've given quite a few decent reasons why I don't want to be part of the whole experience.

### **23rd The Final Christmas – death duties**

As I said, over the last decade or so I've managed to more or less avoid the whole Christmas bonanza. While my in-law family are Christmas freaks, we live far enough away from them that we often don't see them till spring, and since they haven't got to grips with sending gifts through the post (they probably like to see our gifts under their tree on Christmas morning) we face the ordeal (and I'm afraid for me it is still an ordeal) of having to open Christmas presents months after the event. Which means putting on the grateful face. Still, nothing's perfect is it. I am willing to compromise where necessary. I just wish that people would respect my wishes enough *not* to include me in their Christmas.

As proof that I'm not heartless, I'll tell you of the last Christmas I 'did.' (And I'm hopeful it'll be the last one I ever have to 'do.') It was my mum's last Christmas. We knew she was dying of cancer. She'd been diagnosed with three months to live and we knew that even if she lasted longer than this (she did) she wouldn't see another Christmas. So I put all animosity aside and did what I knew was 'the right thing.' I went to spend Christmas with her and (most) of my family.

She was more or less bedbound but as I knew that Christmas was her biggest pleasure through the year, I determined that we'd do the best we could to give her a final Christmas. I even did some Hoovering! She had organised a Christmas tea party and she'd booked for us all to go out for a Christmas Dinner. I had been more than happy to cook all the Christmas Dinner for us all at home, but my mum was always pretty territorial about her kitchen and the thought of me 'taking over' Christmas wasn't what she wanted. So we went out.

Unfortunately, she wasn't well enough to go with us. I would most happily have stayed behind with her, but my sister, who was living with her at the time, took on this role and we were detailed to go out and 'have a good time.' We did our best, but I couldn't help thinking how overpriced the food was, how crap it was for the cooks and waiters (though maybe they were enjoying avoiding their own families at time and a half!) and it all felt a bit strange. At least I avoided eating turkey and Christmas pudding.

We got home and my mum had made it out of bed. She'd had something of turkey and Christmas pudding I think, but she was struggling with eating in general so I think it was more the idea than the actuality she experienced. Maybe it sparked the memory of Christmases past. But I think what my mum liked best about Christmas was that it was a wipe the slate clean sort of time – you did the same old things you always did – but as if for the

first time and with the hope that this time it would be 'brand new' and perfect. Like I said, her relationship with Christmas has always been a mystery to me.

However, what my mum did teach me during her prolonged dying process, was how almost infinite the human capacity is to reduce expectations. I'm sure she extended her life by some six months simply by constantly reducing them, while steadfastly also refusing to let go. But of course, inevitably, she died and I wouldn't wish the quality of life she had for the last six months on anyone. But, it was her choice and we all respected that, however hard it was for us. I'm sure it was harder for her.

That Christmas afternoon we all opened presents and I did the best job ever of the gratitude game. It's tough buying a present for someone who is dying, hard to get something from the world of consumption that is valuable in the moment. Which is ironic given the 'life' of most consumer items these days. But with approaching death, priorities change and it was a really limited range of things we could wrap up for her. The 'gift' was us all being there and we gave that as wholeheartedly as possible. One last time.

Once the presents had been opened, the front door was also opened and the friends came in. She had a decent circle of friends in those last months, all of whom gave up their own family Christmas to come to ours. And you know what, we actually had quite a good time. There was an elephant in the room of course, the awareness that we were all doing this for one reason and that it was a once only event. Perhaps it was because of that that we all had such a good time. It wasn't about consumer capitalist or even religious Christmas, it was about doing something for someone – giving them what you knew they wanted – because you couldn't give them more life. We stayed a couple of days and when we left I went to see my mum, propped back up in bed, wearing her wig and looking small and vulnerable but still recognisable. She beamed at me. 'You didn't think I'd be able to manage it,' she said, or words to that effect.

'Did you have a good Christmas?' I asked her.

'Yes,' she beamed. And with a sort of triumphant tone, like she'd brought the prodigal home, added, 'Did you?'

'Yes, mum, I really did,' I said. And meant it.

And when I left her bedroom, I told myself that this was how I would always remember her. I knew there were tough months ahead – nine of them as it turned out – during which time she reduced her expectations and became both mentally and physically quite unrecognisable. But now, years on, the way I like to remember 'last' seeing her is that Christmas. How strange that it should be one of my happiest Christmases, and one of my happiest memories. But it sticks with me. The spirit of Christmas can strike from time to time, but to expect it every year is perhaps over confidence!

## **24th Enjoy your Friday of Peace on Earth?**

So tomorrow, while you're celebrating, I'll be trying to get through another Friday. Every other year I'd be packing my memories back into their box for another year but this year I did something different. I opened the doors. I gave away my memories. I don't need them any more and a part of me hopes that now they are public they no longer belong to me. I can live without them quite happily as I move on into a New Year.

We, or at least I, live in a world that is so filled with contradiction. I'm convinced it could be really simple to live a peaceful, good, happy and fulfilled life. I'm equally convinced that it's almost impossible given the conditions that exist. And I'm more than ever convinced there's very little any of us can do to really change things. What I wish for everyone as we go into 2016, is the opportunity to open your eyes, to think for yourself, to challenge all that we are told and sold, and to do the best you can.

It's been an interesting experience re-visiting my Christmases past. I'd like to think its cathartic, and in a way it has helped me to contextualise a lot of experiences into the wider pattern of my life. I guess I've reached that time in life when you start to reflect and make sense of the past more than looking eagerly towards the future. I've opened the Advent calendar of my past life and if you've made it this far, so have you. I know it wasn't much of a gift at times but I hope you've gained some insight if not pleasure from what we've shared. Maybe it's got you thinking about your own relationship with Christmas past and present. In which case I have probably given you your own memories, both happy and sad.

Sorry if you feel I've not given this much of an ending, but the doors are all open at last and at least. Perhaps it's appropriate that my Advent calendar ends with a whimper rather than a bang! It'll soon be Saturday. Then Sunday... then a whole new week begins. I'm looking forward to that. Till then, enjoy your Friday in whatever way you please.