

The Day Christmas Died

I am not a fan of Christmas. While I can appreciate the idea of a happy family get together, it seems to me that if this was something we really wanted, we wouldn't wait for that one day at the end of the year. We would organise regular soirées throughout the year, without the added stress of presents and turkey and crackers.

I find it odd that for the non-religious crowd, which includes me, Christmas is a completely commercial event where we are obliged to buy gifts for a host of people, at least half of whom we deep down inside don't feel deserve them. How are we supposed to guess what someone we see a couple of times a year could possibly need or want in their life? The ritual of gift-giving just seems like a means of potential embarrassment, when the penis-shaped novelty soap you bought for the office party secret Santa deal gets swapped with the paisley handkerchiefs for great Aunt Margaret...or is that just my family?

Now don't get me wrong. I do love my family and I even quite enjoy spending time with them. Due to my expat lifestyle I don't do it often enough. I just don't want to do it all at once. In my experience, this just leads to stress and snappiness. It starts off all light and joy and genuine warmth at seeing each other, but it ends in snide comments, rudeness and tears. The latter is usually, but not always, the overtired children who have just received more toys that they can play with in a year and still think life is unfair. At least for children there's the prospect of Santa to look forward to, and for parents, there's the threat of Santa that can be used throughout the entire month of December to coerce good behaviour.

I am neither child, nor parent, a fact that bewilders my family, where all of my cousins married their childhood sweethearts and produced multiple offspring at the appropriate times. My barren status does come with it's own reward at Christmas, however, as I am the only adult who does not have any cooking responsibilities. I am not sure how I've gotten away with this for so long as I can whip up a decent roast, but I am happy with the status quo. I compensate by doing a lot of

washing up, but at least that gives me some moments of peace hidden away in the kitchen.

So, I am not a real adult, but I am also clearly not a child. I am a little too tall (but only a little) and I am legally allowed to drink. I am not provided this mercy though as I am in charge of child entertainment. My last home-based Christmas four years ago was divided between giving seven children a dance lesson and trying to fit together the thousands of fiddly little pieces in a mechano car kit. Ah, the joys of Christmas. It ended in tears. Mine.

For the last few years my Christmases have been spent with a motley collection of friends, flatmates and travelers. Three Christmases past, I offered the use of my kitchen to a friend who was keen to put together a Christmas meal. Little did I know that this made me part of the three person organising committee. On the day, the second person cooked dessert, and the organiser put in a cameo appearance three hours after her guests, leaving me unexpectedly to cook my first roast dinner. Trial by fire. Never have I appreciated google more as I frantically searched for the means to create the perfect roast potato and how to make white radish edible.

This year I made a very late Christmas decision. Knowing very few people in London an not wanting to intrude on anyone else's family fun, I was at a loss as to how to fill the day. My plans to volunteer were demolished by the lack of public transport on Christmas day and the reluctance of the Salvation Army to answer any of my enquiries. I was invited to a potluck dinner in Camden Town, but again transport was an issue. At the last minute I put a notice up on a London travel forum to see if anyone wanted to join me for a meal and eight people put their hands up. Off I skipped to the supermarket to purchase enough goodies to feed a small army.

Apart from half of those people not showing up on the day, including one who arrived at 11pm instead of 11am, the day went well, but it did leave me a little baffled. In London, one of the

busiest, hippest, happening cities in the world, there is absolutely no transport on Christmas day. None. No buses, no trains, no tube. There are planes if you can figure out how to get to the airport. I didn't look into boats. With no transport, what do people do? There must be a significant proportion of the population who don't own cars. Do they spend Christmas alone? Or does the family Christmas necessitate a sleepover? I shudder at the thought of extending Christmas festivities to two days. I barely cope with one day of jolly cheer.

This year was exceptional in London. Not only was there no transport on Christmas day, but also everything shut down earlier than usual on Christmas Eve. In case two days of forced family fun wasn't enough, there was a tube strike on Boxing Day. I wonder how many family feuds this caused. Perhaps Christmas can be canceled next year now that so few families around London are on speaking terms.

I took a stroll along the river with a friend early on Christmas Eve. The usually bustling Southbank was nearly deserted. After crossing the bridge we did not see another soul. Our footsteps echoed across the city. There were no cars on the roads, no warm inviting pubs with a roaring fire, and no signs of life anywhere. You know that part of the horror movie where the victims cotton on that they are the last people alive on the planet and are about to be attacked by zombies? It was just like that but without the zombies. If it was my movie it would be called *The Day Christmas Died*. I haven't decided yet whether it would be a horror movie or a family feel good flick.

