

## EMILIA CLARKE

I would say, and I think anyone who knows me would agree, I'm more of a giver than a receiver. Christmas was always my time to shine. I would get giddy with the planning, mastering and presenting someone I loved with the ultimate gift. The entire process gave me unbridled joy, from lying awake at night going through every option and then scribbling notes before landing on The Perfect Gift. As December rolled round I would go into overdrive.

My dad, however, was one of the hardest people to buy a gift for. He had me stumped every year. I would spend an unnatural amount of time trying to work out just what to get him; the response on giving him something would always be that of sincere love and grateful noises but I was never sure I'd got him something he wanted, or as dads often say, needed. (I 'need' shoes and chocolate; he 'needed' food and shelter – you see the predicament.)

I get this gift-giving mania from my mum, whose generosity knows no bounds. Christmas always consisted of navigating a path to the kitchen from the tree that had more presents pooled underneath it than the four members of our

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family (five including Roxy, the dog, who obviously didn't miss out here either) could ever hope to open on one day.

Very quickly, our 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> December days turn into a massacre of ripped paper, ribbons and cards, presents once lovingly wrapped, now discarded in the name of all things CHRISTMAS. But throughout, my dad never really shared wholeheartedly in the festivities. The gifts for my brother and me were always from both parents but they had the undeniable trademark Mum stamp all over them. You could also tell from her beaming face as she tried to hide the sheer excitement of us jumping for joy. Throughout, my dad remained quiet and occasionally . . . erm . . . soporific.

As I grew up I was determined to get him involved and stuck in, with The. Perfect. Gift and firing up that spark. I kept trying for many years, and as my earnings went up my gifts got more extravagant (up until that point they had been a little more on the homemade side). Every time, he made all the right noises and wore the jumpers/jackets/cashmere socks all year round, but I could tell that something was missing.

Then in 2015, I had the idea of taking my family away for Christmas. It was going to be a surprise present. Throughout my and my brother's childhood we had all gone away on breaks many a time but they mostly consisted of walking holidays in the UK, or quick trips to neighbouring European countries. It had been a fair few years since we had all been away together. The family holiday had become a forgotten relic revisited only in our photo albums.

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I kept my plan a secret from them all, and instead enjoyed keeping my mum on fretful tenterhooks as I insinuated I may not be able to stick around much after the 25<sup>th</sup> due to tight filming schedules (lies, all lies, to throw them off My. Perfect. Gift scent).

I waited until Christmas Day arrived. As we started tucking into a Dad Clarke Christmas dinner (he was honestly the best cook in the world), I presented them with a wrapped package. In it was a red robin onesie and inside the onesie I had hidden the itinerary for the trip to the North Pole I had planned for us. Safe to say they, Dad included, were speechless, mainly at my ability to keep a secret from them, but also at the fact that we were leaving the very next day.

It was on this trip that I realised what made my dad giddy with joy: it was the gift of us. The holiday could have been down the road for all it mattered, the important thing was that we had proper time together as a family, sharing the love and the laughs, and remembering how lucky it was that we all got on.

This would be my darling dad's last Christmas. I don't know if on some level I knew it might be and had spent my years waiting to give him this, his perfect gift, that of time. We knew he was sick but the cancer was lying in wait, we were told, till a time when it would make itself known, and I guess I wasn't very accepting of what that might look like. But this, his last Christmas, was simply the best family holiday – heck, the best holiday even – I'd ever had.

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After that particular week away and after losing one of the most brilliant men I will ever know, the giving and receiving of presents – all that ‘stuff’ – just became less joyful. And in truth I’d give it all back in a heartbeat, every single chocolate orange, every single shoe, for one more moment with him.

So, Christmas. The perfect gift. What it all means to me is just an excuse to look around at the people you love (or the people you love to have fights with in December) and take time. Take time to remember, take time to laugh, to cry, to feast and feel alive. For me this is now what Christmas is: it’s for holding on to who you have got.

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## EMILY WATSON

So, when Greg and Emma ask me to write a piece about Christmas, of course I say yes, because you've just gotta love them, haven't you? But inwardly I'm horrified – 'I'll give it a go but I kinda hate Christmas,' I email Greg hoping to be let off; he shoots back immediately 'We all do. That's the point.'

I've got a couple of months till the deadline and I put it off as long as I can, groaning every time I remember. And here I am at the eleventh hour contemplating why this is so difficult. I'm being asked to define myself. Oh shit. I'm not sure who I am. But I'll have a crack.

There are a lot of obvious reasons to loathe Christmas. It's so damn commercial, cynical. Characterised by advertising. Such a generator of plastic and waste, propelling that carbon curve ever upward, teaching our children to tread the neural pathway of desire and rampant gratification pushing us ever closer to that extinction tipping point. Not really an act of love. Not very Christian. Not that I am one.

Then there's family. Well we all know how that can go. The collective need for everything to be perfect turning people you love into passive-aggressive total control freaks, creating the family equation that true happiness can only be achieved

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through superhuman levels of stress. All this while your friends dazzle from their social whirl that you're never really in or up for. Which can all make you feel, well, low, yeah, just low.

Which brings us to the food. Oh god. Just so much to regret.

And then there's the Christ Child and every act of violence that has been, is and will be committed for or against his name. His church that keeps millions of women and children world-wide in poverty by the suppression of birth control.

So I guess that's it. I'm angry at Christmas. It seems like the poster child for everything that humans get wrong.

And yet . . .

I think about my blue watch and the walk home.

I'm nine? Ten? Eleven? We're at midnight mass in the tiny Norman church in my granny's Dorset village. The farmer's wife, Rachel, is squeezing every last drop of glory out of the tiny organ and as we launch into the last verse of 'Oh Come All Ye Faithful', I glance down at my watch, blue face, white hands, blue strap, to check. Yes, it's gone midnight. It's really Christmas and yes we are allowed to sing that last verse: Yea Lord We Greet Thee, Born This Happy Morning. And it is a happy morning. I am so happy. I beam up at my parents who are singing lustily away – even though I know they're not Christians so I'm not really either I suppose. But something is making my heart sing. We refuse all offers of a lift back to the cottage and walk home. The four of us. Mum, Dad, my sister and me. As we pass the farm, we listen out in the utter quiet

for the bird of dawning that singeth all night long. I know of course it doesn't – but it's just a thing, our thing, a Shakespeare mum thing, and a thing that makes us all hold hands. The only sound in fact is our feet crunching in the frozen mud on the lane. We stop between the hedgerows and look up. It's a clear night with a deep frost, the sky vast and full of stars, logic of daytime wiped from the earth. As we stare up into the unknowable the glow of certainty starts to fade and I feel the fear of floating away. I am saved by a smell, wood-smoke, its burnt-earth embrace summoning us back to the hearth, where there will be hot chocolate waiting by the fire and we will light real candles on the tree. The bedrooms are cold and there will be Jack Frost on the windows in the morning. But as the bed warms, I go to sleep happy. Christmas Day is ahead of me, with rituals of presents and candlelit feasting to come. Life is perfect.

So what happened? I grew up, I guess. But if my children are going to feel that certainty – everything in its right place – change must come. Well it seems it's coming anyway. What kind of change is up to us.



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## EMMA THOMPSON

If only we could spend Christmas alone – or with the friends we actually like, all would be well.

Unfortunately, we have for some reason all been forced into spending it with our parents, siblings and other associations that may well not suit us for more than ten minutes at a time. Days of enforced propinquity during which one is required to be cheerful cannot be good for us.

I propose a huge re-thinking of the event. We shall follow the example of the brave soldiers in the trenches of the First World War. On Christmas Day there shall be no fighting, no conflict and no memory of what has gone before. We shall meet in a neutral space, a no-man's land where the only gifts allowed shall be hugs and tears. Words are not to be spoken, thus avoiding unnecessary explanations, recriminations or expressions of affection we do not feel.

If the above sounds Scrooge-like, just think of the recycling we could avoid. No paper, no plastic and no unwanted gifts that end up in landfill. Just a moment of shared emotion, religious or otherwise, a moment of peace in our harried lives. Imagine it. It would be bliss.

In the meantime, all human partnerships are at some stage

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– quite early on in all probability – forced to negotiate the thorny thickets of the festive season. A lot is to do with expectations. For instance, my husband would prefer to be placed into a medically induced coma from 15<sup>th</sup> December until early January whereas I start pushing cloves into oranges just after Guy Fawkes night.

Somehow, the two of us have made it through twenty-three Christmases thus far. Here is how, in three sentences apiece:

1996: Greg in steep depression. I try to raise his spirits by suggesting we cook the turkey in bondage gear. We try it, but get grumpy as bits of leather keep dragging through the onion sauce.

1997: Greg less depressed as we are in Scotland with my Ma and her best friend, Mildew, who used to be married to someone who was in Colditz. It is frozen and beautiful. I give Greg a posh army knife which he immediately uses to slice open his hand.

1998: A booze-free year as I prepare for IVF after an ectopic pregnancy. Greg depressed, so I leave beer and pies near the Christmas tree, hoping to lure him nearer. It's like living with a fucking hedgehog.

1999: Our baby daughter, Gaia, wrapped in a blue blanket, is three weeks old. We dress her up as Pontius Pilate and laugh immoderately. I sit inside the wreckage of my body and gloat over my tiny human, never happier.

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2000: The miracle of Gaia continues as she impersonates an elf in the snow. Greg moves closer in as he doesn't want to miss a minute of her face as she looks at the tree and the lights and makes incoherent noises of interest and approval. Perhaps this signals a change in his attitude to the season?

2001: Greg's parents are divorced so they take turns to spend Christmas with us. His mother is clearly not a big fan of the thing. But she does turn out a good class of biscuit.

2002: Actually, so does his father. He is happy to help in the kitchen, but he is not relaxing. I begin to understand my husband's resistance to all the relentless cheer.

2003: A person called Tindy has joined the family. He has never experienced a Christmas like ours before. He stares at us as if we are all quite mad.

2004: The smoking ban has inspired Greg to build his own pub in one of the old barns back in Scotland. Greg injures himself with a hammer and Tindy discovers the joys and unfortunate consequences of sweet Christmas liqueurs. Greg's finger is mashed to pieces.

2005: Greg injures the same finger again while building a sauna. All the instructions were in Finnish. Now his bad finger points slightly to the left all the time.

2006: A true freeze this year means we have to break the ice on the river to get in for daily wash. Someone cycles down it.

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Gaia and Tindy whoop and holler and even Greg is so consistently cheerful that I pray this happens every year.

2007: A rare Christmas in London with our gay mates whose warmth and generosity blow the last of Tindy's traditional and inherited homophobia out of the window. He eats an entire box of chocolates before dinner as we have forgotten to warn him of the addictive power of refined sugar. He and Gaia holding hands is the gift of the year.

2008: Greg's father has died. We raise many glasses. Greg injures himself making a memorial bench.

2009: Greg's mother has died. We raise many glasses. Greg injures himself making a memorial bench.

2010: No one has died. We all celebrate wildly except Greg. He has nothing to build.

2011: Returning from taking Gaia and Auntie Bobs (Greg's sister, Clare) to the Galapagos, we plant as many trees as we can to offset the carbon. I decide to cook a three-bird roast. Two of the birds arrive at the table almost perfectly raw.

2012: Frozen solid everywhere in Scotland. We struggle to stay warm and to keep the paths open and walkable so we can get to each other. Upon their return to London, our friends tell us it was like staying at a labour camp.

2013: Frozen solid again. Greg fashions a snow plough out of the quad bike and a piece of old roofing. Our friends have gone to Portofino.

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2014: Clare not at all well again so we spend Christmas in London. Lots of visits to a bedecked Macmillan Centre. The best of Christmas spirit, that is to say, a generous and loving but anxious atmosphere, is very strong.

2015: Huge family affair with Clare and her best mate, our neighbours and all the family. We cook twelve feasts for twelve nights in a row. By the end, even I hate Christmas.

2016: Clare has died. Our first Christmas without her. We plant her many wonderful trees and water them with beer, wine and tears.

2017: Gaia breaks her special-I-never-miss-with-this-one pool cue. Greg, under the influence of Highlander Ale, immediately tries to mend it. It splinters and takes a massive chunk out of his nose.

2018: The entire family convenes up in the glen – our beloved nephews, my sister, mother, Tindy, his new wife, our neighbours, their new dog, a lot of new. Greg cuts himself unwrapping a gift. Now, I begin to fear for his survival.



Sample Chapters.  
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## GRAHAM NORTON

Catering killed Christmas.

It was the winter of 1984 and I had just arrived in London, fresh off the boat and bus from Ireland. Despite my greenness, I soon found my 'big smoke' feet and was working in a restaurant in the impossibly cool Covent Garden. Michael and Shakira Caine had been seen leaving Carluccio's across the road, gangs of brazen girls and sheepish boys waited further up Neal Street to catch a glimpse of Matt and Luke from Bros and there was a shop that sold nothing but tea! I might have been penniless but just to walk around Neal's Yard or Seven Dials made you feel as if you were at the centre of everything that mattered.

The restaurant was called Smith's and occupied a vast white basement space, where the walls were covered with tasteful art while the customers were served food that was often tasteless. A revolution might have been happening in cooking across the capital, but it hadn't reached the old-school Irish chef that ruled our kitchen. Even I thought that a special of the day that consisted of white fish covered in white sauce, placed on a white plate along with some rice and potatoes might have missed the mark when it came to sophisticated

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dining. Despite our culinary shortcomings, it seemed that businessmen with expense accounts and nearby offices didn't care. The place was busy and the young, enthusiastic gang of us that waited tables rushed around kicking our long, starched aprons in front of us.

As December began, some of the more seasoned staff started to drop hints that Christmas was coming and that was not a good thing. This made no sense to me. I loved Christmas and being a bit busier just meant that we would make more money, surely. The shop windows began to glitter and coloured lights turned every street into a festive avenue. This was the real thing! This was the winter wonderland that Bandon, County Cork, had tried and failed to emulate.

To be fair, when I had lived there just eleven months earlier, I had been entranced by the thin strands of tinsel that snaked around displays of knitted hat-and-scarf gift sets. I would squint my eyes so that the illuminated Santa suspended between the library and Galvin's pub glittered like the star of Bethlehem guiding those wise men.

London was different. It wasn't just the lights and moving figures waving from shop windows. The city had an energy that bordered on frantic. My mother might have fussed over ordering the turkey but the shoppers on Long Acre seemed to be stockpiling for an unannounced apocalypse.

Down in our basement, one glance at the reservations book revealed that the dire warnings had been correct. We weren't going to be busy; we were going to be overrun. Tables of twelve, fifteen, twenty, all arriving at the same time. Lunch



and dinner, it made no difference. For two solid weeks. The apocalypse was real and it was happening in our restaurant. We became an aproned army that had just been told we were about to be shipped out.

I cannot stress enough that this was a different time, but the rampant 80s' excess of office Christmas parties was intense, frightening and on occasion stomach-churning. My first clue that these groups were after more than paper hats and finding the ring in the plum pudding happened on the second day of the festive madness. Several large tables filled the basement and we were swamped. Bread to be sliced, champagne to open, orders to take. After twenty minutes, the place looked like *The Poseidon Adventure* after the giant wave. 'Don't run!' our manager barked at us as panic threatened to overtake his staff.

A round table in the middle of the restaurant was winning the hotly contested title of party most likely to finish the lunch slipping around in their own vomit like Bambi on ice. We couldn't open the wine fast enough. At one point, as I rushed back to the kitchen, I noticed a young woman had left her chair and was sitting on the lap of an older, overweight man. My innocent Irish eyes thought that was bad enough until I passed them and saw that she had unbuttoned her blouse and pulled down her bra so that her corpulent colleague could kiss her breasts. For some reason, this struck me as particularly objectionable because I hadn't even served them their main course yet. Presumably in my prudish world this was

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the sort of behaviour you saved till after dessert. In retrospect the most shocking aspect wasn't that they had done this, but that nobody seemed to care. All around them people were too busy ordering bottles of brandy or finding out who had the cocaine.

At the end of each night we sat in a circle, shell-shocked. Then the news would come that no taxis were available, or that there was an hour wait. Sometimes we opted to stay and hope one would arrive, but more often we shuffled down to Charing Cross or Trafalgar Square to wait for night buses full of yet more people wearing gravy-stained paper hats. If I had to design a scented Christmas candle, it would smell of sick.

Day and night, for two weeks it went on, and in various forms for the next eight years, I delivered unwanted turkey to people who were just hell-bent on having the most 'fun' they possibly could. Fun? As I watched them drink and eat themselves into dribbling fools, I couldn't see the joy. Like cats chasing shadows along a wall, these revellers would never catch what they were chasing. Christmas had been something I used to look forward to for months. Stockpiling gifts under my bed, carefully rewriting my lists for Santa, sitting with my family to watch the seasonal specials on television, but now I was just an unwilling witness to the fall of the Roman empire.

I still went back to Ireland for the day itself. I made the appropriate noises of appreciation when my mother presented the turkey. I was thanked for the gifts I had carefully chosen to fit in my suitcase, but it was useless. The joy was gone. Squint

GRAHAM NORTON

my eyes, as hard as I might, looking at the tree no longer transported me to a magical galaxy. Working in restaurants gave me so much over the years – employment, stories, friends for life – but it also robbed me of something very precious.

Catering, I want my Christmas back!



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## GREG WISE

My struggles with everything Christmas started early. Kindergarten, to be precise. I think the following incident may have been the tipping point. Newcastle upon Tyne, *circa* 1969. The Nativity play. A collection of tiny Geordies re-enacting the manger scene. Yours truly as Joseph. In a draughty old wooden hall that was the venue for both the pre-school and the Cub Scouts. The show was stumbling along, but ground to a horrified, bemused and tittering halt when Joseph picked the baby Jesus up out of the manger by his hair . . .

Shortly after I was expelled. Yup – you read correctly. I was *asked to leave*. I think my mother was summoned one day and gently told about her three-year-old son, ‘There’s nothing more we can teach Greg.’

That Nativity play was the start of the slide into my lifelong Yuletide neurosis.

I have a Christmas Day photo of me around ten sporting terrible mum-cut 1970s’ hair under a paper crown. I am wearing a rictus grin, modelled on Oliver Cromwell’s death mask. All of us in the picture are equally strained, holding up glasses in a toast. I am with my dad, sister, mum and gran – the only one who is grinning properly due to her enormous false teeth.

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She was my father's mother, and her relationship with my mum was tense at the best of times.

And Christmas wasn't the best of times. Whether it was the fact that Gran was a gritty northerner and my mum from Hungarian lineage, and it was down to 'I'm not eating that foreign muck', I'm not sure. Probably not, as our Christmas fayre was quintessentially British – apart from the Heidesand biscuits (German), marrons glacés (candied sweet chestnuts, French) and perhaps a cheeky bottle of fizzy red wine (yes, the 1970s were like that – Lambrusco, Italy).

Maybe the battle lines were drawn between Mum and Gran for a different food-related reason: from being tiny, I would hang around in the kitchen – absolutely not a place for a male of her lineage, according to my gran – and my mum made it a tradition that I would make the Christmas cake. Maybe not as good a cake as she herself would have made, but *you have to score the points where you can . . .*

The soundtrack of the season was what kept me going: I *adored* the choral anthems I sung in my school church choir – Howells' 'A Spotless Rose', Praetorius' 'Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming' and other rose-themed songs. Should have stuck to those, as one of the most shaming moments of my life occurred when I sang a non-rose tune at Christmas when I was nine. It was in the tiny church in the village of Kirkwhelpington, in Northumberland, where I was brought up. It is tradition to start the Christmas service with an unaccompanied solo of the first verse of 'Once in Royal David's City'. The chorister is given a single note from the organ and sets off.

Now, I pride myself on being able to hold a tune – I reached the heady heights of Head Chorister at my school – but as I got to the end of the verse, the organ started in a *totally different* key to mine. I wished the ground could swallow me up as I processed down the central nave of the church, everyone thinking I'd slipped a couple of tones during the verse. I'm sure the organist had done it on purpose. Maybe he didn't like 'that foreign muck' either.

Even though the day itself was often agony, I tried as much as possible to enjoy the run-up to it, making approximately 23,000 miles of crêpe-paper streamers, which I would wrap endlessly around my quite small bedroom. I decked the fake Christmas tree – a silver and white sparkly thing, put back in its box early January ready for the next year – with enthusiasm. Goodness only knows why we didn't have a real tree, as my mum was very much from the Germanic tradition of the Tannenbaum with carved hangings and actual candles. I never asked her about our ersatz tree – probably just a pragmatic thing: no needles, no having to dispose of after. No bloody fun. Probably the latter.

By the time I became a teenager, my parents' marriage was on life support of the 'staying-together-for-the-children' variety. And Christmas was the stage set for playing out their drama. For two unbelievably tense and angry Christmas lunches in a row I left my house, walked across the fields, on to a railway bridge and ran the gauntlet to the other side of the river, where I joined my chum and his family for the rest of the day (when I failed to turn up on the third year, he called and

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asked what had happened – I can't remember what kept me away that time, but I'm sure it wasn't the fact that I was having a good time). During another Christmas lunch, my mum left the table, left the house and returned early January. I still have no idea where she went.

As soon as I went to university, my parents divorced. Finally. But that set up its own terrible dynamic: which parent do you spend Christmas with? My sister and I went for the biennial option. Christmas was never going to be anything but guilt-laden, falsely jolly and something-just-to-be-suffered from then on.

And then I met my wife. She is to Christmas what Joe Stalin was to genocide – really committed. And I discovered what is meant by the 'Irresistible Force Paradox' – what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object . . . Something like that, anyway. Or waterboarding. Maybe Chinese water torture is more apt, as it took some time to realise that resistance was futile. Something, someone was going to have to give. And it wasn't going to be her.

She 'gently' taught me that there are some things, actually, that are quite nice about Christmas. For example, that it isn't illegal not to have turkey, which was a profound relief as I find turkey really boring and a sort of 'poster boy' for the day itself – overblown, tasteless and almost impossible to enjoy. Over the years, we've had goose, three-bird roasts, five-bird roasts, *boeuf en croûte* – who knew that our lunch didn't have to be dry and dull? And we are allowed to share the day with people we actually like and find interesting. Who knew that



was a possibility? In recent years we have sat down to eat with Rwandans, Chinese, Egyptians, Americans.

Also, oddly, despite my bah-humbuggery of it all, I now spend more time than anyone else in my family on presents, as everyone gets homemade gifts from me. In the early days they consisted of jam and flavoured vodka from our damson tree, Heidesand biscuits (the ones my mum used to make) and chocolates (from my great-uncle Max's recipe book). These days, since we spend our Christmases up at our Scottish cottage, I give folk stuff I've made in my barn – candlesticks, bowls, platters, lamps, carvings. I'm nearly reaching the point where they are tiring of timber-themed offerings. Luckily, I've found a guy who will teach me how to make ram's-horn shepherds' crooks, so everyone will get a stick this Christmas. Be a bugger to wrap, though.

As a foil to the ersatz tree of my childhood, in Scotland I now cut down a big real Tannenbaum from the hill behind us and stick it in our back green covered with lights and a big star on top. We've gone as high as 25 feet – not quite Trafalgar Square standards but rather wonderful. Unless it blows over. Which happens from time to time. The 23,000 miles of crêpe-paper streamers have become a million fairy lights which I staple all around the eaves of the buildings, with Bhutanese prayer flags weaving through the roof trusses and holly and greenery from the riverside.

I've even got over my Christmas music trauma. Since our daughter, Gaia, was five or so, I have recorded her singing carols. I put down one or two a year, getting more professional

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as both her voice and my ability to use the software on my computer grow. We now have an album's worth. The first recording was 'Once in Royal David's City' – her singing the first verse *a cappella*. I started the accompaniment to the second verse in, I'm pleased to say, the right key – bringing, perhaps, some sort of laying to rest of my ancient carol-based shame.

We all, I suppose, become parodies of ourselves within family folklore, with roles cemented over time, and often played up to. I am Scrooge, the naysayer, the swimmer-against-the-tide-of-tinsel, the Grump. And it's not just at Christmas. I am writing this while working in Los Angeles – a Shangri-La for so many people. But not for me. A mate here now addresses me as The Grumpiest Man Alive. I take that as a compliment. Maybe I am genetically predisposed to always be the *foil* – if I really hate it, it must be wonderful . . .

So here are the Grump's 'Hopes for Christmases to Come': can we please, finally, do what we have always bloody said we'd do and have a Secret Santa, so that we only buy one present for one person? If I am, once again, overruled, here are other various present suggestions:

- they should all be homemade; or
- they should cost less than £10; or
- they should be smaller than a house brick.

I suppose my main hope is that my son and daughter will not exhibit the PTSD that I bring to this time of year, and that I am in some way part of the joy they experience – the Infidel at the Christmas Day service, the grist to the family's mill.

GREG WISE

I feel, though, that by the time I die, my defences (or aggression, depending which way you look at it) may have been worn down completely. Give Mrs Wise her chance – she's only had twenty-three Christmases to work on me thus far . . .



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