

## A Christmas Story... for people having a bad day

**F**ather Christmas, never the happiest of souls (all that ho-ho-ho-ing is just good PR, and it's strictly business anyway) was mightily pissed off. Several of the elves had gone down with MRSA (picked up in a National Elf hospital) and the New Deal elves were having problems producing the toys as quickly as the regulars. By December the twenty-third, they were well behind schedule, and Santa was starting to feel the pressure.

At lunchtime on Christmas Eve, Mrs Claus happened to mention that her mum was coming, which just made Santa Claus even more stressed. And then when he went out to harness the reindeer, he found that three of them were drunk on his cheap rum and the rest had absconded somewhere.

Still, he could always start loading up the sleigh, so he did – until it cracked under the weight of all the PlayStations, Barbie houses and Xboxes. This never happened when all the little buggers wanted was an Enid Blyton paperback and an orange, fumed Santa Claus quietly, lighting a fag – which promptly set his beard on fire. Frantically thumping the sparks from what remained of his facial hair, Santa stomped off to the drinks cabinet to pour himself a large shot of whisky – only to find the New Deal elves had pinched it all and only the Shloer and the Sunny Delight was left.

It seemed things couldn't get any worse.

Just then the doorbell rang, and an irritable Santa stomped to the door. He opened it, and there was a smiling little angel

carrying an enormous Christmas tree. The angel said, very cheerfully, 'Merry Christmas, Santa! Isn't it a lovely day? I've got a beautiful tree for you here. Where would you like me to stick it?'

And so began the tradition of the little angel on top of the Christmas tree.



## Countdown Conundrum

**A**t what point did Christmas become something for which it was acceptable to have a ‘countdown’? You don’t get it for Easter, or the spring bank holiday. Even those other ‘occasions’ which have been invented by a satanic cartel of Interflora, Clinton’s Cards and Thornton’s chocolates don’t overdo it that much. You don’t have huge, illuminated displays in the main streets of the identikit towns up and down the country, shouting out at you that there are ‘Sixteen more shopping days left until Mothering Sunday!’

You are calmly going about your own business in WHSmith one Monday in mid-August and chuckling at the way they always get the ‘Back To School’ stationery displays up at least a week before anybody actually finishes the summer term. You may be dragging a small child around with you, wondering how much longer you can stop it from screaming with the promise of a chocolate bar and a go on the miserable Postman Pat car – and then you see it. The Christmas display. It starts small – just a few baubles and a bit of tinsel, perhaps, and a rack of cards. But it’s there.

You laugh hollowly, wondering who on earth would be contemplating the supreme hell of Christmas when they still have the prospect of filling five more weeks of the endless, stuffy, sweaty, smelly and aching sun-blasted days of the summer holidays, those weeks when the heat clamps you like a huge rubber glove and won’t let go, and you have to mow the bloody lawn every week... (But let’s leave that for another time.) No, you can’t believe that anybody can seriously be planning so far

ahead, be so obsessed by the prospect of that day in December that they actually want to see the trees and the lights go up. They can't possibly already want to start reading tips in the magazines about how to prepare the perfect mince pie, and learning about what Dale Winton, Michael Winner, Lisa from *Karaoke Idol* and the cast of *Hollyoaks* are all going to be doing for the festive season.

But they do. And you are made to feel like an old curmudgeon for moaning about it. 'Ooh, all these people who moan that Christmas gets earlier every year. They should just shut up and get on with enjoying it.' Well, actually, no. We shouldn't. It's about time we made a stand. *Why* do they have to start promoting it in August? It's not like we don't know it's coming. It's not as if we look at the 'Christmas Bargains Galore!' display of catalogues in the window of Boots and think, 'Ooh, thanks for that! Do you know, I wasn't sure if we'd be having Christmas this year. When is it again? December the what? Twenty-fifth? Oh, I might be able to make that. Let's have a little look in the diary. Hmm, do you know, I don't seem to be doing anything then for a few days. I'll pencil it in. Thanks for giving me decent notice.'

Can we not just take it for granted that people kind of know, actually, that Christmas is coming this year, just as it has every year for the last several hundred? How about lobbying your MP to have a new law made – one which imposes a blanket ban on even mentioning the bloody thing until mid-December? Even then, we'd have a good couple of weeks of build-up and promotion.

Worth a thought?

## The Great Christmas Myths

### Jesus

Okay. So this is the big one. Might as well start here and then we can't possibly offend any more people than we do first off...right? On the other hand, even if it might be a made-up story, it's our made-up story, and the idea of playing it down because it might offend certain groups of people is frankly ludicrous. If you want to celebrate Eid, Hannukah, Diwali, the Coming of the Great Cloud Being or any other festival that might take your fancy, then feel free. I'm not going to stop you.

Jesus's mum and dad were forced by a silly quirk of bureaucracy to travel miles from home and had to put up with the only meagre accommodation they could find. (A bit like today's parents trying to find houses in their chosen school catchment areas, then.)

### Peace on Earth

There's a slight problem here. The various splinter groups, regions and countries who are beating and bombing the hell out of each other across the world don't stop doing it just because some tacky lights have gone up.

You can't quite see today's squabbling factions getting down to a friendly game of footie in no-man's land like the English and the Germans did back in the First World War. For one thing, a normal football match is almost as violent, hate-fuelled and xenophobic as your average armed conflict these days anyway. And for another, one of them would probably load the ball with Semtex, offer to let the other team have a little kick-about to

warm up and then retreat to their own goalmouth, sniggering.

And closer to home, the Burberry-hatted chavs in the street don't put their lagered-up fist fights on hold. Indeed, Christmas just seems to be an excuse for more of the same. The ready provision of extra alcohol doesn't exactly help, of course; some people just see Christmas as an excuse to pile into their local watering hole and down an extra six pints before closing time. Perhaps pubs could counter binge-drinking by offering seasonal 'Misery Hours', in which you pay double for a pint?

### **Goodwill to all men / A time for giving**

Right, since when exactly? Christmas just seems to bring out the mean, grabbing streak in everyone. Restaurant menus have a 50 per cent premium added, while holiday booking prices go through the roof. And don't even get me started on the mindless hordes in every department store.

### **Santa Claus**

A myth in which, if you have children, you are expected to be complicit. Sometimes this is more difficult than it might at first appear. Bright children will start posing difficult questions, such as exactly how a portly gentleman like Santa Claus hauls his lardy frame through the chimney pots, down such a tight space and out through the electric fire. You find yourself having to make up all kinds of stuff about expandable chimneys and flip-open compartments, and before you know it you've created a whole set of sub-myths which you then have to remember for next time. Lying becomes so much harder when you can't keep it simple.

The worst thing about Father Christmas is that he isn't even a proper myth. Not in the form he exists now, anyway.

Obviously he is based on the famous Saint Nicholas, who allegedly liked nothing better than delivering gifts to the world's children. You can't help thinking that Nick – while trotting out

on a cold winter's evening to deliver two thousand PlayStations to the snotty-nosed brats on the council estates and shovelling up the reindeer dung – would have felt he'd got a bit of a raw deal over this. At his lowest ebb, he probably sat there on someone's roof, shivering, cursing the bloody kids, knocking back the brandy and wishing he'd been made the patron saint of something a bit easier, like Lost Causes or Putting Your Feet Up or Sorting Out the Middle East Peace Process.

But the 'Santa' people worship at Christmas is based on an image created to promote Coca-Cola in the 1930s. Yes, his uniform isn't red and white for nothing, you know. Now, that might sound pretty corporate and horrible, but just think about it for a minute. Things could be a lot worse. What about a 'Fanta Santa' dressed entirely in orange? Or how about the 'Pernod and Black' Santa in purple? And if it hadn't happened in the 1930s, it could have happened a few decades later. Imagine if Santa had been appropriated and branded in the 1980s. There is every chance that he'd have been transformed into Ronald McDonald, gleefully dispensing Big Macs with every child's stocking and poking his smackable, sinister clown's face into every card and gift tag. Or in the 1990s, he'd have been bought body and soul by Bill Gates and turned into an interactive, downloadable [santa.com](#), complete with cyber-reindeer which, when you gave them a simple instruction, formed a little grey box above their heads asking: 'Are you sure you wish to giddy-up? Yes/No'. And Prancer would suddenly stall in mid-air for no apparent reason and flash above his antlers an information box reading: 'Application Error 232: This Process Terminated.'

And here's one for all of you who are wondering how on earth to break That News to your children before they are told it by someone else. In April 2005, a controversial art exhibition by Glasgow School of Art student Darren Cullen was scrapped. Darren's project was to have been a huge billboard proclaiming: 'Stop Lying to Your Children about Santa Claus' and 'Santa

Gives More to Rich Kids Than Poor Kids'. However, signboard company Maiden refused at the last minute to host the installation. Twenty-two-year-old Darren claimed he wanted to 'highlight the evils of consumerism', although one may suspect that Darren was motivated more by a desire for self-promotion than any sort of altruistic social conscience. He is probably planning his next installation right now – a 16-foot-high sculpture denouncing the Easter Bunny. Meanwhile, the Tooth Fairy was unavailable for comment.



## The White Stuff

**W**hen snow first starts, it always turns people into gibbering idiots as if they have never seen any before in their lives. They gravitate to their office windows and stand there gawping, watching it cover the roofs and cars as if it's the most exciting phenomenon on Earth. Then again, in this country, it is pretty unusual, and therein lies the crux of the problem – we just don't know what to do about it. People start to panic, leaving work early; schools and offices have to close because of frozen pipes; traffic banks up on the M1 and cars are abandoned. It's as if Britain turns into some grim scene from a Jerry Bruckheimer post-Holocaust film, and all because of a bit of weather.

Our European cousins accept that the weather is part of the daily routine, and are prepared for it. In the Black Forest in Germany, heavy snow can be a fact of life from November through to March – people dress sensibly, their cars have snow-tyres and snow-chains and their gritters are out and about early. Here, it's a wonder if you ever see a gritter at all, and even then you're lucky if they do any more than the main bus routes. And if you open one of those yellow bins marked GRIT on your street corner, which the local oiks have helpfully relabelled with another four-letter word, you'll find it either empty, or full of festering dog turds.

Then there's the fact that people, even those who have garages, like to leave their cars on their drives, or even the road (probably because their garages are full of the accumulated clutter of their lives and the paraphernalia of their hobbies). So you get up,

bleary-eyed, and as you're making yourself that first cup of coffee of the day you happen to glance out of the window and see everything covered with a thick layer of white. You allow a choice profanity to escape your lips and get dressed hurriedly, mentally adding half an hour on to your morning journey. Out you go, swaddled in coat, scarf, hat and boots and armed to the teeth with brush, de-icer, scraper and (should everything else fail) a bucket of hot water. You trudge to the road, where the car is parked. You set to work. You brush the snow from the roof, bonnet and windscreen so as to expose the crisp layer of ice below. You get going with the de-icer and the scraper, trying to ignore the slow numbing of your hands. After about ten minutes, you may have cleared a gap on the windscreen just about big enough to see out of if you were to crick your neck into an awkward position. You scrape some more, making a token effort to clear some space from the side and rear windows. Then you step back from your handiwork, checking your watch, reassuring yourself that you haven't lost too much time after all. Your breath mists in the air and you feel an oddly warm glow, a sense of satisfaction. And then you realise you have been scraping the ice off next door's car.

They don't always get it right on the Continent, though. In Germany, the local residents of suburbia are almost fetishistically attentive to shovelling the snow out of the way, sweeping their paths clear and removing the snow from the area of pavement in front of their doors. This, conveniently, gives the surfaces the texture of polished glass. Really clever. What's doubly ironic is that, if you don't ascribe to this convention of making everybody's pavement a skating rink, you get the usual round of hard stares and tutting.

So please don't tell me you're dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones you used to know. There are very few people left alive who will remember a proper white Christmas anyway. Christmas Day is always neither one thing nor the other in

weather terms – it usually manages to be steel-grey outside, with perhaps a bit of wind and rain, as if Nature is grudgingly accepting that nobody's going to be venturing outside as they will all be slumped in front of *Only Fools And Horses*.

The USA didn't exactly have a great time of it at Christmas 1998. Driving snow across the north-east, freezing rain throughout the south and north-west, airports becoming emergency shelters, power lines freezing and snapping... Roads became impassable. In Nashville, 500 people spent a night on the bus station floor or in parked coaches. 'If you prayed for a white Christmas,' said Kurt Pickering of the emergency management agency in Tennessee, 'you should have been more specific.' Well, quite.



## Who the Hell Are Jeff and Sandra?

In these days of email, texting, wi-fi and goodness knows what else, does anyone actually use the postal service for communicating with friends at all? Well, of course, they do at Christmas. An email card just doesn't cut the mustard.

You'll probably have seen that there are cards available for all sorts of occasions. You can mark everything from 'Sorry to hear your auntie's goldfish died' to 'Congratulations on your decree absolute'. But Christmas is still the biggest time of year for the vendors of small folded pieces of card in envelopes, and so this is why you'll start to see the racks being cleared for them around August.

### First-class greetings

The best kind of cards are those from people you see maybe three or four times a year, such as friends or relatives in other parts of the country, because there actually seems some point to them. A brisk message of goodwill followed by a couple of informative sentences is really all you need: 'Hope you all have a good one! We'll be doing the usual turn at the soup kitchen, followed by an afternoon at Grandma Maud's. Not even started the shopping yet! Looking forward to seeing you in Feb. Love, Jonty & Jess.'

But some make you wonder why they bothered.

The third most pointless sort of Christmas cards are from people you see every day, such as your work colleagues – why not have a charity collection instead?

The second most pointless are those from that couple you met

ten years ago on holiday in Majorca who you only made friends with because they had children of about the same age, and who you realised once you got home that you couldn't stand, but who have kept in touch with you ever since and keep threatening to turn up on your doorstep with a boxful of slides.

The most pointless are those from people you don't even know. Once, long ago, you may have bought some paper from PaperWorld. Every Christmas since then, you have received a faceless, corporate card with a fake signature in that horrible 'handwriting' script which makes you think it's been produced on a computer last updated in about 1994, saying, 'A Merry Christmas from PaperWorld to all our valued customers!' I have no idea why on earth I should want this, or be heartened or inspired by it, or why it will make me more likely to buy stuff from PaperWorld again in the future.

Then there are the cutesy cards with the family posing on the front beside the Christmas tree, all in matching jumpers, with the father behind in the role of Victorian paterfamilias, his hand proprietorially on his good lady's shoulder. The Blairs send this kind of card. It's up to you whether you want to be like them.

Technology has brought the wonder of the email card, the preferred seasonal method of communication for people who don't even want to bother writing your name on a piece of card and putting a stamp on the envelope. If you're on dial-up, you'll spend twenty minutes fuming as you sit there waiting for the thing to come in, only to find it's a two-dimensional dancing robin on some pixellated snow, sent by somebody you barely remember who you were at school with twenty years ago.

Within all these categories, there are those which send you either too much or too little information. Later on, we deal with the joys of the 'Christmas circular'. Here, we shall pause to mention those inexplicable cards which are simply signed with the names of the senders and reveal no further clues as to their identity. 'Happy Christmas. Jeff and Sandra.' Or: 'Season's

Greetings. Mike and Helen.’

Your other half comes down the stairs as you are opening the post.

‘I see we’ve got a card from Mike and Helen,’ you say quickly, hoping not to let on that you don’t know who the hell they are.

‘Oh,’ says other half, then: ‘Who?’

You affect irritability. ‘*Mike and Helen*. That’s Mike who you work with, isn’t it?’

Moment of arm-folding. ‘No. Mike’s gay, remember? It’s Mike and *Ralph*.’

You frown. ‘Oh. Well, maybe it’s Helen from Basingstoke and her new boyfriend.’

Pause. ‘If it’s Helen from Basingstoke, why would she sign it “Mike and Helen” and not “Helen and Mike”?’ demands your other half, not unreasonably.

You shrug. ‘I don’t know, do I? Perhaps he wrote them all.’

‘Well, anyway, it’s not her. Her boyfriend’s called Justin, and they sent a card last week.’

You have a think. ‘I know. That woman you used to work with years ago, at what’s-it-called. She was a Helen.’

‘She was an *Ellen*. And she was a Jehovah’s Witness. She didn’t celebrate Christmas.’

You have another think. ‘Your mum’s Great-Uncle Michael?’ you hazard.

‘Er, no. He never called himself Mike in his life. And he’s been dead for six years.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes. Really.’

‘I wondered why he hadn’t sent us a card for a while.’

You continue like this for a while, and eventually have to admit that neither of you knows anybody called Mike and Helen. You can only conclude that you have been the recipient of a random act of Christmas-card sending, perpetrated by someone who gets a bizarre kick out of picking total strangers

out of the telephone book and sending them cards in order to flummox them.

Here's a final nugget for you: the World's Worst Christmas Card. *Private Eye* came up with this, the card signed by the East Midlands Conservative EuroTeam – including Tory MEPs Chris Heaton-Harris and Roger Helmer. It featured a beaming Santa astride a reindeer singing: 'Ho Ho Ho, not Euro-Ho!'



## Figgy Puddin' an' All That: a true account (part 1)

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK.

**Wife:** Door.

**Me:** Leave it.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK!

**Wife:** Aren't you going to answer it?

**Me:** It'll be bloody carol-singers. If I want to hear ugly, talentless kids dementedly caterwauling for the sole purpose of parting us with our hard-earned cash, I can watch *Pop Idol*.

KNOCK!... KNOCK!... KNOCK!

**Me:** Oh, for God's sake.

Stomp-stomp-stomp. *Creeeeeeeeek*.

**Me:** Yes?

[At the door, four sullen, spotty youths in Sheffield's traditional festive garb: i.e. hooded tops, baggy trousers, trainers and baseball caps.]

**Youth:** Carol-singers, innit.

**Me:** I beg your pardon?

**Youth:** Carol-singers, innit. [Urchin holds out grubby hand.]

**Me:** Have you actually grasped the point of this exercise?

**Youth:** Yer waat?

**Me:** I mean, you know you actually have to *sing*, right? This isn't like Penny for the Guy or Trick or Treat. You do actually have to *do* something.

[Urchins glance nervously at one another and grin.  
Collective body language says 'we got a rait one 'ere, ain't we?']

**Me:** So go on, then. Entertain me. *Sing*.

[Nervous shuffling of feet. Nudging and laughing,  
a bit of shoving in the ranks. After a few seconds, two of the youths  
break into uncertain, almost-in-tune, *a cappella* version of 'Stay  
Another Day' by East 17.]

**Me:** That's not a Christmas carol.

**Youth:** It fookin' is. It's on me mam's fookin' Christmas CD, innit?

**Me:** Get lost.

SLAM!

