

## Christmas in England

When I was a child Christmas seemed to last for the whole month of December. Early on the morning of December 1<sup>st</sup>, my siblings and I would race down the stairs in our pyjamas to our chocolate advent calendars. We opened the first little window and gobbled down the tiny chocolate inside. It was cheap, supermarket chocolate, more sugar than cocoa, but to us it was extra tasty because it heralded the start of the Christmas countdown. Every day after that we would repeat the ritual, unless we forgot in the hurry to get ready for school. Actually, those days were pretty great too, because then you could pass the day at school happy in the knowledge that there'd be a chocolate treat waiting for you when you got home.

Soon it was time to start decorating the house. My parents would come home one day with a Christmas tree, which diffused a very particular seasonal smell and scattered sharp pine needles through the house as it was dragged into our living room. We'd all spend an evening decorating the tree with a mixture of homemade and bought decorations. Some became family favourites. We still have a red, feathery, one-eyed old robin which sits proudly on our tree each year. When we were really young, we would make angels from toilet roll holders. Mine were always gorgeous, but not very angelic- big, lipstick red mouths, and long curly eyelashes. After a while, I think our parents got a bit sick of our gaudy decorations cluttering up the tree. Plus, us kids were determined to have every single bit of tinsel and every last fairy light draped across the branches, resulting in a glittering monstrosity. So, we ended up with a smaller, plastic tree that we were allowed to dress, while my parents took care of the 'real' tree. We'd be very polite, of course, about our parent's efforts, but secretly judge the lack of tinsel.

As the month wore on, we'd start doing more and more Christmas activities at school, like making even more toilet roll angels and rehearsing the annual nativity play. One year I got to play Mary. My proudest moment was when I said my one line to my primary school 'husband,' "Does that mean we shall have to travel to Bethlehem, Joseph?" At home we'd bake mince pies, listen to Christmas carols and go to late night shopping events in our village, where locals would gather to drink mulled wine and browse the shops for presents.

Every year we wrote our letters to Santa. "Dear Santa, this year I've been really good, I promise. I'd really like this, that, and those for Christmas. Thank you!" One year I wrote mine in a picture code, convinced that Santa (being magical) would have no trouble working it out. I think it gave my parents a bit of a headache trying to decode my drawings. On Christmas Eve, we'd leave Santa a glass of sherry and a mince pie by the fireplace, and put out a carrot for Rudolf the reindeer by the back door. Santa must have been pretty tipsy by the time he'd finished his rounds, because he'd always finish the sherry. The mince pie was often only half eaten, and the carrot had some bite marks in it, as if Rudolf had been quite full already, but had politely nibbled at the carrot to please us. On Christmas morning we'd wake up much too early, and wait for our parents to rise before tearing down the stairs and bursting into the living room. In a frenzy of activity we'd check whether Santa had left us presents in our stockings, and whether he'd eaten his mince pie, and someone would run out to the back door to see if Rudolf had found the carrot. A white Christmas is so ingrained in my image of Christmas, thanks to movies, TV and kids books, that we'd also run to the window to check if it had been snowing. It almost never had been, but we quickly forgot

the weather as we tore into our Christmas presents.

Years later and it's Christmas time again. But this time, for the fourth year in a row, I'm in Leiden for most of December. It's a very different experience. For one thing, the countdown starts a whole lot earlier, because of the Sinterklaas activities at the start of the month. This year I swear I saw pepernoten in the supermarket in August... I've enjoyed learning some of the traditions associated with Sinterklaas, and I've been especially taken with the poems that are written to accompany presents. This is such a nice and personal touch to gifts, and if you're no Shakespeare a naughty rhyme is enough to add some humour. I've also really got into all the spicy and almondy cakes, biscuits and tasty things in between, which litter the supermarkets at this time of year. Yes,

I do miss mince pies, and when I get back to England in time for Christmas one of the first things I do is devour a warm pie with some proper British tea. But the sheer range of treats here is something that merits appreciation. Oh, and the fact that glühwein can be bought ready-made by the bottle.

My flat is way too small for a proper Christmas tree, but I bought a few branches at the market and some second-hand decorations at a charity shop. The smell of pine instantly brought on a wave of nostalgia. Now I'm inspired to speed through my remaining essays and assignments so that I can wrap up warm with a mug of hot glühwein. Merry Christmas, everyone!

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