



PRESENT JOY
Rosie with her brother Christopher

My most magical Christmas

Three writers on the amazing childhood Christmases they'll remember for ever

'Father Christmas had told me his real name – it was Ian'

By Rosie Mullender

When I was growing up, my family didn't have much money – Mum was a nurse and Dad worked in a factory. So I didn't have a mountain of Christmas presents to unwrap (like many 80s kids, I yearned for, but never received, a Mr Frosty).

Instead it was the little touches that made me love everything about the season, and which will stay with me for ever. Stirring the Christmas cake batter and making a wish; driving from our home in Basildon to Southend-on-Sea in the back of my dad's creaky Morris Minor to see the festive lights; and hanging up the same precious wooden tree ornaments each year. These were rituals that we all looked forward to.

My most magical Christmas came when I was seven. I remember that burst of excitement when my elder brother and I woke up in our shared bedroom to see the pillowcases hung at the end

of our beds, already filled with gifts. "I can see something shiny," I whispered to my brother Christopher. And he whispered back, "Me too!"

Poking from my pillowcase was a party horn with a shiny foil fringe, which glittered in the light from the hall. Mum had collected

little bits and bobs throughout the year – pens, a colouring book and a chocolate orange were opened to shrieks of joy. It didn't matter what was inside the stocking – I just loved unwrapping all the tiny packages.

But the best package came with a label: "To Rosie, with love from Ian." Imagine my delight!

Father Christmas had decided to tell me, out of all the world's children, his real name! And it was Ian. Inside was a special Christmas mug, and I treasured it.

Back at school, I excitedly told all my friends that I knew Santa's real name, and they were green with envy. I might not have been able to boast about receiving the biggest, flashiest presents, but I had something even better to share.

The story is now a family legend. Years later Mum confessed that she was so tired from working night shifts that she'd accidentally added a family friend's gift to my pillowcase.

Even though money was tight, my parents did so much to make all my childhood Christmases feel magical – but I think that one has to be the most magical of all.



When I look back at childhood Christmases, there's no contest: the most magical moment was on Christmas Eve 1987 when I was six.

I loved Christmas for the usual reasons: the anticipation of presents to come, the fact that school had just broken up, the magic of Christmas kids' telly. But I also loved it because I'm half-Polish, and Christmas Eve – aka Wigilia – is a big deal to Poles. It meant driving from my parents' house in Birmingham over to my grandparents' in Nottingham, where I'd see half-remembered family members, take part in exotic Polish festive rituals, eat really "weird" things, and be allowed to open a small selection of presents. Result!

But even that wasn't why I really loved it. What I was most excited about in 1987 was the journey home, because that night I had a plan – to see Santa.

We probably only left my grandparents' house at about eight or nine, but it seemed very late to me. It was totally dark, and the journey home was quite long, about an hour and a half. With me was my old toy dog, TerryLee (so called because the label said he was made of terylene), and we'd spend the whole journey staring out of



'I had a plan to spot Santa and his reindeer as they flew over the Midlands'

By Andrzej Lukowski

the window. First there would be the Christmas lights of Nottingham: I was wowed by even the odd Christmas tree sparkling away in empty front rooms, the twinkling lights pure magic.

But what I was really blown away by were the big ones: houses either drenched in fairy lights or festooned with extravagant, over-the-top decorations like huge illuminated snowmen, Santas and reindeer. Yes, I roll my eyes at these things as an adult. But I'll never forget how amazing they looked to me as a little boy: pure, glittering wonders that seemed all the more special because they were on silent houses, not big, busy high streets.

The lights set the scene for the main event: that night Santa Claus would swoop through the skies. And I would see him. I wasn't bothered what gifts he'd bring me (so long as he brought me some presents). What I was truly excited by was the fact that something actually magical was happening: that year I'd

reasoned that he and his reindeer would be flying over the Midlands while we drove down the M42 – giving out presents to the kids who'd already gone to bed. And so for 90 minutes my terylene dog and I stared out of the window, amazed by the Christmas lights at both ends of the journey, and equally impressed by the dazzling sodium glow of the motorway.

OK, in the end I never actually saw Santa, and figured that the glare of the motorway lights was probably responsible for my not spotting him. But somehow looking at the lights and hoping was enough to fill me up inside – I wasn't at all disappointed.

But Christmas lights on Christmas Eve are a kind of magic, I think, and even motorway lights too if you're in the right frame of mind. When I drive my kids to Birmingham for Christmas Eve to see their grandparents this year, I hope they feel how I felt in 1987. But the truth is, it's still pretty special for me too.



FAMILY CHRISTMAS
Anna and her dad Michael

My favourite Christmas gift is one I don't even remember unwrapping. Like many children, I had fallen in love with Sylvanian Families. The toys were small woodland creatures, with clothes and houses, and I was building up a collection of animal families.

A small grey mouse called Prissy was my favourite Sylvanian, which my mum and dad gave me when I was six. And the Christmas tree was too big an adventure for Prissy to ignore. She was quickly out of her mouse house and into the branches.

Every year, Prissy's pilgrimage to the tree got more involved. She had a hammock that also served as a backpack, pillow and change of clothing. She made friends with my favourite decoration, a white dove with fans of tissue paper for its wings and tail.

Campsites were made, padded with tinsel and warmed by fairy lights. There were missions and routes to follow. I spent hours

'I fiercely believed in the Christmas magic – I still do'

By Anna Fielding

every year with Prissy, the dove and the tree. It was a make-believe world I could only access at Christmas. I believed

in it fiercely, as children do with their games. It was magic created solely by imagination and it was beautiful.

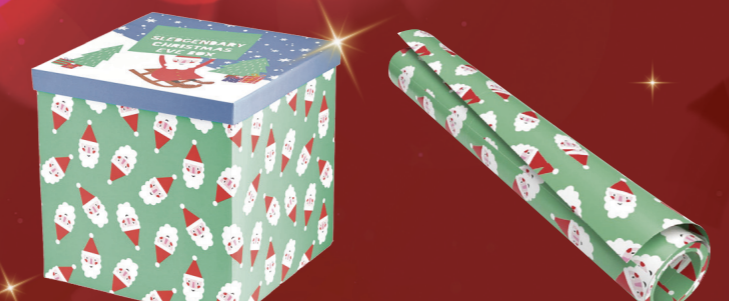

As I got older, I was less inclined to play with toy mice. As a teenager, I would have died if a friend had found Prissy sleeping in a tangle of lights. But I still set her up in the tree and sometimes I had glimpses of the imaginary world I'd left behind.

I got older still and left home. And then a different kind of magic took over. It was traditional now for the mouse to go to the

tree at Christmas. The rest of the Sylvanians had been given away. But Prissy and her backpack lived among the tree decorations full time, returning to the loft before Twelfth Night. The magic was the tradition created by me and my mum. It's something happy that makes us both smile.

A child's imagination is full of magic and wonder. It can turn a Christmas tree into a huge landscape. It can fill objects with life and personality. A child's play also creates joy in families that endures down the years.

I'm 43 now, and my mum is the one who puts Prissy in the tree. One of the first things I do when I step through the door is to go and look for her. When I find this year's campsite, my mum and I will stand and look together, arms around each other.

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