

The Unwrappy Presents

Money was quite tight when I was little, and we were also short of family. My Mum and I were both only children and my Dad had a brother he didn't like.

Christmas was amazing. The centre-piece of room was the Christmas Tree, lovingly decorated with twinkly lights and colourful glass ornaments which I still have. I can still taste the gum of the home-made paper chains and see the Christmas cards hung around the room. Besides Father Christmas coming, a few presents were under the tree, so to eek out the excitement, my Dad wrapped up a small gift for me in layers of newspaper, covered in Christmas paper to make it indistinguishable from the others. It was like a personal 'pass the parcel' – except that my Dad was an expert parcel wrapper. I put it down to his working in the sorting office doing up mail bags. It was pretty fiddly undoing the tightly knotted string round each layer. One year I spent ages unwrapping a particularly large parcel only to find a piece of coal at the end. My Mum exclaimed "Oh John" but being a Daddy's girl we shared the same sense of humour and neither of us could stop laughing.

The unwrappy present tradition carried on, although not the coal, even when I had children and as my parents got older the baton passed to me to do all the wrapping up, saving up newspaper for weeks on end. My Mum had got into the swing of it, although she had the annoying habit of stopping to read something in one of the layers of newspaper that caught her eye. I try to adapt the level of difficulty of unwrapping to the age and ability of the receiver. It is an exact science – especially the amount of sellotape to use. When my Mum got Alzheimer's Disease, I just wrapped a present in a few layers of newspaper with no sticky tape or string so she was still able to join in the fun.

We had strict unwritten rules about the unwrappy parcels. They are the last present to be distributed and no-one can start until I say 'go'. Then the race begins. I love watching my children's faces, even now, as they vie to be the first one to finish. No scissors or shortcuts are permitted and once the whole family turned on a visiting boyfriend who ripped his open in half exposing all the layers. I was very cross given the amount of time it takes to wrap each one up. He didn't last. I didn't think he would.

With eleven parcels to wrap up, I have to start early in December. The pile of newspaper thrown into the middle of the room mounts up and up and the grandchildren love burying themselves under it. I think about the Christmases past as I watch their excitement - in this, the same family home and the very same front room where I grew up.

Marion Witton 06.12.2020