

One Special Christmas

All the autobiographies of famous people suggest they remember every nanosecond of their childhoods. I actually remember very little only a few rare events, sufficiently unique to engrave themselves into my memory

My family lived in a council-house on an early 1950s housing estate. My eldest sister, her husband and their two young children, lived in a new build 'sixties estate in the wilds of Warwickshire. Traditionally, we spent many of our Christmases with them. The journey to their home meant taking a two-bus ride via Birmingham, or a three-bus ride via Oldbury and West Bromwich. My parents never had a car and we could not all fit onto dad's motor scooter that he used for work. Both journeys felt endless particularly to a ten-year old.

On this particular icy cold, winter's day waiting for the different buses to arrive was even more chilling despite the bright sun and clear, pale-blue sky. There had been no snow at all and it felt nothing like Christmas Eve should, according to all the stories.

I could remember as a primary pupil, wading waist deep through snow drifts to reach school. One especially bitter winter our goldfish froze in its round bowl on the window ledge in the hall. Mum thawed it out slowly on the gas cooker and miraculously it survived for another fifteen years. But this particular year was a snow free disappointment. Santa and his reindeer sleigh had no icy skyway to slide along. I spent the whole journey looking through the scratched and steamed up windows of the buses hoping to see huge clouds form but they stubbornly refused to appear. We left the final bus at the side of an unlit country lane. Dad hefted our suitcase and we walked in single file along the roadway against the hedgerows until we reached the pavement outside the new houses. We were close enough to see the flashing

fairy lights on the tall Christmas tree, in my sister's lounge, through the huge picture windows. Around its base was a grand heap of gaily wrapped gifts for all the family. Inside was central heating warm and welcoming. The large lounge smelled of real pine needles, from the glittering tree, cinnamon and hot mince pies.

The light outside began to fade swiftly into darkness, while we sat drinking hot tea and eating sandwiches, but still it was dry and clear. How could it be Christmas without snow? The curtains were finally closed shutting out the darkness.

I was told it was time for bed just as my brother-in-law arrived home. His dark hair was damp and the shoulders of his coat glistened. He pulled back the long curtain and pointed.

Against the midnight blue bright sky were a million puffs of fragile white shimmering and swirling to earth. The palm sized flakes kept falling, silently smothering the pavements, painting concrete and grass the same pure colour. Trees, shrubs and formed white frozen outlines against the night. Christmas had truly arrived.