

Hello, Little Me: Maggie Henfield

We are approaching the time of year that excited you most. When you were 10 years old, in 1959, Christmas eclipsed even your birthday.

It was because it lasted so long that it became so special. Who would get the plum parts in the school nativity play? That never bothered you, because you were taller than the other girls, and bigger too. So you wanted to fade into the background.

No, that wasn't the highlight of Christmas. The spine-tingling moment came when Daddy came home with a real Christmas tree, planted in a plastic bucket and covered with bright red, crinkly wrapping paper.

Then came the cardboard box. Every year you and your younger sister teetered on chairs to hang the baubles it contained, along with wispy bits of tinsel, onto the branches. The crowning glory came when Daddy switched on the lights - and the fairy was placed at the top of the tree.

She was so beautiful, clothed in the kind of material you only saw in books. And she had a magic wand.

For weeks, before and after Christmas, you sat in front of a roaring fire, constantly studying the fairy while watching Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers on the tiny black and white TV set in the corner of the room.

This was perfection. The unimaginable glamour of Hollywood, combined with the magical fairy, meant you could escape into a fantasy world, where you would be light and dainty and live in a house with a sweeping staircase, while sleigh bells tinkled outside in the snow. You wished the fairy could wave her wand and make life like this every day. You would be happy forever.

Each December the dream would be re-kindled. You went to big school. You left and went to work. You married. For decades, you became the provider of Christmas for the family. And those rituals of dressing the tree, sitting by the fire and watching old movies never dimmed.

And you learned, as you clambered through life, that the fairy had sprinkled her magic dust because she created, not the grand mansion, or the horse-drawn sleigh, but the love of family and friends that enveloped you with warmth and happiness for ever.