

# Together if it kills us

## KEEN ON CHRISTMAS

**T**HERE'S A REASON WE drink on New Year's. Put it down to the cumulative effect of all that optimistic build up to the perfect Christmas shot all to hell — again.

I have always been a festive whore. My Christmas decorations, carefully packed and lovingly labelled, rival the substantive festoonings of any middle-aged housewife.

In fact, I probably have more reindeer-handled eggnog cups and tacky light-up Victorian villages than she does. I just don't have the kids to go with them.

"Christmas isn't about children," is my usual defence of the purchase of yet another elfin red and green bauble. That usually shuts them up. They assume I am referring to Jesus Christ. Of course, I am not. And I resent the way that Christians try to take over Christmas. Who let them in?

Christmas is about turning every family into the perfect, cuddly, supportive unit it never was, nor ever could be, damnit. Christmas is about the awesome power of self-delusion and the inability to learn from past mistakes.

Shortly after Thanksgiving, the

mothers begin to make noises about the holidays. This is followed by a round of phone jockeying between four offspring. First, my partner's brother must be considered, along with his wife and four daughters. My sister and her smaller entourage of husband and baby are similarly consulted first in my family.

Finally, the childless lesbians are fit in around everyone else's important, suburban schedules. By the first of December, the battle plan is in place. We will report to my parents on Christmas Day and spend Boxing Day with my in-laws. I should, by this point, know what I'm up against.

Instead, I hoist my mouth into a sickly plastic smile saying, "Great! We look forward to it," then dutifully gear up to enjoy the holidays, dragging my partner down with me, kicking and screaming all the way.

There was the Christmas I tried to recapture the nostalgia of my mother's home baking by giving every single friend and family member an assorted tray of calorific rum balls, whipped shortbread, peanut brittle and gingerbread. As usual, I left it to the last minute and spent 24 hours two

days before Christmas covered in flour and nursing a bug more akin to Ebola virus than flu. When the motor of my hand mixer belched acrid fumes and gave up the ghost half-way through a batch of ornamental frosting, I, frankly, lost it.

My partner hid from me in the basement. It was her only defence. I somehow managed to blame her for the mixer's failure. Not that baking was bliss in my mother's

house. It was more like forced labour. One year she made me construct 17 gingerbread houses. By the time I stuck the final Smartie on the last section of roof, I was about ready to force feed the old lady icing until she choked. Merry Christmas.

The myth of Christmas Eve is a particularly powerful force in my family, created in part by years of hearing "A Child's Christmas In Wales" and "A Visit From St Nicholas" read aloud in my mother's rich ex-pat voice. I have come to the conclusion that Dylan Thomas lied, or at least, embellished heavily on his festive recollections, and yet still I strive stubbornly to fulfil his unattainable yuletide ideal.

One Christmas Eve my father fell on the ice and snapped his tibia before he even had the chance to

pour himself a long rye and ginger. Another Dec 24 found my sister and I in a blinding snowstorm on the 401 at 10pm, hours yet from the bosom of our family. I suggested we pull over and get a motel.

"But it's Christmas!" she whined. "We're getting there if it kills us." She almost got her wish.

The last time I spent Christmas Eve with my family, I left my partner at home to finish up the last "odds and sods" before joining us on Christmas Day. She was up until 4am wrestling with Mylar and Scotch tape. Divorce was narrowly averted. In the meantime, my sister and I had driven off merrily to the mall for our traditional last minute shopping fest, and ended up with a crumpled front fender and a very un-jolly fellow shopper who accused us of stopping deliberately where she couldn't see us before she backed into our car. Season's greetings.

If I were a brave woman, I would throw up my hands and declare our intentions to spend Christmas in Cuba, in Paris, in Regina, hell, anywhere but near our families. I am not brave.

Instead, we jealously guard our one piece of Christmas close to our gay little hearts. We spend Christmas Eve together, at home. No family. Full stop. So far, it's working. We actually do enjoy it. So here's to another ghost of Christmas past. And to all of you who have similarly survived yet another season of familial festivity, cheers. You're in good company. You are in hell. We all are. It's Christmas.

Cheers to the New Year!



**KATE BARKER**