

HOW TO SURVIVE CHRISTMAS

'There is no doubt . . . that being prepared is the secret of a more harmonious Christmas. If Joseph had booked a room in advance, Jesus would not have been born in a stable.'

'Remember that Christmas is not a culinary competition between mothers, daughters, sisters-in-law and (now that most men cook) sons-in-law as well. Women tend to behave as though they're taking a degree in Christmas and that the world will end if they get a third in sprouts, a fourth in bacon rolls, and fail bread sauce totally.'

'“Christmas drink” is a word like “duck”, “lion”, or “pheasant” that implies the plural.'

'The most intelligent garment for a girl to wear to an office party is a wet suit.'



HOW TO
SURVIVE CHRISTMAS



JILLY COOPER

AN XMASOCHIST'S GUIDE *to the*
DARKEST DAYS OF THE YEAR

with drawings by Timothy Jaques



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to William and Susanna Franklyn
with love

Also by Jilly Cooper

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INTRODUCTION TO THIS NEW EDITION

I AM PARTICULARLY PLEASED THAT *HOW TO SURVIVE Christmas* is back in print again in this lovely new edition because I think Christmas needs all the help it can get. What should be such a happy time for families to get together and enjoy themselves is so often regarded with unholy dread.

I have only made minuscule changes to the text where things were inaccurate or seemed totally out of date. This is because I think one must remain loyal to one's prejudices.

Flipping through the pages, however, I did notice that life has changed so much since the book was written that it already seems like a period piece. There are no chapters, for example, on how to cope as a working wife or a lone parent, or who should shoulder the burden of cooking and putting the fairy on the Christmas tree in a gay relationship, or how to stop animal-rights campaigners lobbing bombs into Santa's Grotto because his reindeer aren't being paid double for working the Christmas night.

But if things have changed, problems remain. In a spirit of goodwill, my favourite divorcé asked a woman who'd been kind to him in New Zealand to spend Christmas in his tiny Chelsea flat. A week later she rang to ask if it was OK for her father, who was nearly eighty, to come and stay as well. As soon as this was agreed, she asked if Daddy could bring his new boyfriend. As it was Christmas, my divorced friend said yes – and a riotous time was had by all.

I was amused when a much younger friend of mine pointed out that it was such bad luck for Jesus having a birthday so near Christmas. But how many of us, as we bellyache about taxpayers' money and Dome-improvements, remember that the millennium is supposed to be celebrating the birth of the Prince of Peace?

Just as a new-born baby was the centre of attention 2,000 years ago, it is vital not to forget – as the whole fabric of marriage collapses, to be replaced by serial stepfathers, single mothers, extended families, live-in lovers, gay and lesbian relationships and goodness knows what other permutations – that it is the children who matter at Christmas. And as they loathe adults fighting, do try and wait until Boxing Day to murder your ex-husband.



INTRODUCTION

A FEW YEARS AGO ON *WOMAN'S HOUR*, I HEARD A farmer complaining about the cruel way in which he was compelled to rear turkeys. Because the housewife wanted a cheap Christmas dinner, the wretched birds were force-fed, and put on weight so quickly that they had to stagger round on legs too weak to support their vast bulk, and often had heart attacks long before Christmas. He was caught in a trap, the farmer explained, because he needed the money, and if he didn't rear turkeys in this way, other farmers would.

Ever since, I have been haunted by this image of the farmer and his turkeys. It seems to symbolize today's family – particularly the housewife – staggering under the unnecessary toil and financial pressures of Christmas, which should be a season of love and joy, but which many of us dread, feeling only passionate relief when it's all over.

The reason for this, I think, is that Christmas goes on too long. Not only does the entire country grind to a halt for a fortnight over the actual holiday, but

Christmas starts in the shops in September, so that by the time you get to 25 December you're absolutely fed up to the walnut-filled cavities with the whole thing.

Matters are not helped by journalists – me included – who not only have to write their Christmas pieces weeks, or even months, before Christmas week and before the full horror has started, but who are all so frantic for a new angle that they make their readers feel madly guilty if they are not disguising unsightly loo chains with homemade tinsel, and fricassee-ing burst balloons and cracker mottoes on Boxing Day.

Christmas is also an uneasy mingling of festivals. Originally, midwinter and the return of the sun after the shortest day were celebrated by a prolonged booze-up, a mixture of the Roman Saturnalia and the German Yule, in which people decked their houses with evergreens, exchanged presents, visited friends and generally made merry. It was only later, in about the fourth century AD, that this midwinter holiday was chosen as the most suitable time to celebrate the birth of Christ, with its message of peace on earth and looking after those less fortunate than ourselves.

The conflict thus comes because we feel that we deserve – like the early Romans – to be enjoying ourselves and having a blow-out, but feel – like the early Christians – that we ought to be doing good to others at the same time. Alas, those we should invite to spend Christmas with us – widowed Rich Great Aunt Phyllis who grumbles all the time or the lonely friendless colleague at work – are often the people who bore and irritate us the most.

Stress is also added these days because so many people are out of work; and the only thing most of



Noël and Scarlett O'Aga

them can afford to do over Christmas is to watch television, which bombards them with images of plenty and exhortations to spend more and more. But Christmas in any family is a time of financial pressure, when breadwinners feel they are falling short. Any family can do without a holiday, or a new carpet, or central heating, but at Christmas, because everyone is doing more or less the same thing at the same time, comparisons are inevitable. If you can't afford a turkey, a tree or presents, you can't run and hide. This applies whether you are on the breadline in Belfast, or being badgered by your wife in Belgravia to give a party for 300.

One comfort, however, despite the journalists' constant harking back to the good, old, simple, non-commercial days, is that nothing has really changed. Thus we find poor Lord Fermanagh, on 12 January 1712, wearily writing how relieved he was that Christmas was at last over: 'It has been a troublesome time, every day with the noise of either drums, trumpets, hautboys, pipes or fiddles, some days 400 guests, very few days under 100, so that, besides the vast expense, it has been very tiresome.

Having decided to write a book about surviving and simplifying Christmas, which would at least help myself, I was then faced with the problem of research. Looking back through my diaries from 1971 to 1984, I found a distressing number of blank pages between the beginning of each December and the middle of each January, because Christmas itself always took over and I was too frantically busy or knackered to chronicle events.



The O'Aga Family

HOW TO SURVIVE CHRISTMAS

Last year, whether exhausted, elated, drunk or sober, I made a point of writing my diary every night, right through December and into the New Year; and I hope that this book, drawn largely from these observations, will perhaps help people to avoid some of the pitfalls, or at least realize that their disasters are shared by others, and thus have a happier Christmas.

In the pages of this book you will meet a Christmas family. They consist of a housewife, Scarlett O'Aga, so called because she is always bustling about not very efficiently, saying she's 'got to get on', and has a shiny red face all Christmas from toiling over the Aga. Like many women, Scarlett is an Xmasochist, who only feels she is doing the festive season properly if she worries herself into the ground. Scarlett is married to Noël, so called because he is absolutely no-elp-at-all. Noël has a Scroogian attitude towards Christmas, a mistress called Ms Stress, and an undemanding job in the City, which he feels justifies his spending most of the festive season slumped in front of the telly, or boozing with his cronies in the Dog and Trumpet. Noël and Scarlett have two teenage children, Holly and Robin, two little ones, Carol and Nicholas, and a dog called Difficult Patch.

Finally, if this book appears a little jaundiced, I must apologize. It is simply that, having lived through Christmas 1985 from October to December, I then had to relive it all over again from January to March, as I wrote the book; and two Christmases in six months is rather too much.

Bisley, 1 April 1986

1



CHRISTMAS *is* COMING



WHERE ARE YOU GOING TO SPEND
CHRISTMAS THIS YEAR?

‘THERE WAS A POINT THIS CHRISTMAS,’ SAID A GIRLFRIEND, ‘as I was struggling to get the turkey out of the oven, and my husband was sweating away over the roast potatoes, when I asked myself for the hundredth time whether it was all worth it. The eager little faces all round the table – knife and fork at the ready in each tight little fist – were not those of the children but of the collection of geriatric grandparents, great aunts and uncles we seem to feed each year.’

The reason why so many couples resort to home fixtures – knackerings as they may be – is that away fixtures are often infinitely worse. At least at home you can drink as much as you like, keep warm and not worry the whole time about your children breaking the place up.

At first sight this might not seem like a major issue; but the problem with Christmas – rather like having a baby – is that it occurs infrequently enough for us to be able each time to blot out the horrors of the previous one. Let me refresh your memory.

If you're newly married, or married without children, the Christmas fixtures row begins in October and goes as follows:

Wife: 'We're not going to your parents. No drink, paper napkins used twice, and plates whipped away before you've finished your last mouthful.'

Husband: 'We're not going to *your* parents. No central heating, no washing-up machine, and those bloody dogs.'

Whatever decision is taken, the row then continues until Twelfth Night.

The arrival of children in a marriage complicates things even more. Away fixtures, unless grandparents live nearby and are used to the children, can be an utter nightmare. If Grandpapa puts his hand on his somewhat dicky heart, he will admit how much he is dreading the visit; Granny is more hypocritical.

'Such fun to have a houseful,' she flutes, upstaging her bridge friends. 'All the grandchildren are descending.' (Rather as though they were coming down in a spaceship. As a matter of fact, if you don't see your grandchildren very often, they can seem as alien as Martians.)

The day of the visit dawns. Suddenly there's the bang of the Volvo door and three under-threes with frightful colds, snot cascading in parallel lines from their nostrils, erupt into the beautiful, ultra-tidy house, and start destroying the place far more effectively than any bulldozer.

Grandpapa shouts a lot, because having so many people around makes him nervous, and this unnerves the children even more. Soon Ribena is spilt all over the new lemon-yellow sofa, sticky fingers are

edging towards the Rockingham, and at lunchtime a precious glass (belonging to a complete set, given as a wedding present forty years ago) is dropped and smashes on the flagstones. Finally the Virgin Mary goes missing from the crib, and, after the whole house has been up-ended and World War III has broken out, is discovered under the spare-room bed in the gross clasps of a lascivious Action Man.

Almost worse for grandparents than the helplessly permissive mother is the progressive daughter-in-law, the *Après-Spock* health freak, who goes into orbit if poor Granny slips little Carol a few Smarties between meals, or gives her Coke, fried beefburgers and bubble-and-squeak for lunch. Then, having been gratuitously beastly in conversation about the *Daily Telegraph*, the progressive daughter-in-law proceeds to whip out a long grey tit and breast-feed in the middle of a Boxing Day drinks party.

And if the visiting mother gets uptight because her children are behaving badly or being spoilt by Granny, her husband will soon be complaining about his father-in-law. 'Mine's so mean,' admitted one son-in-law. 'He not only waters the logs, and keeps turning the light off outside the children's bedroom at night, but, worst of all, he winces if I open another bottle of wine from the two crates I've brought him.'

Even if you do take your own booze, you don't want to appear a soak in front of your in-laws. 'One year,' said a friend, 'we took up a crate of claret to my in-laws in Lancashire and, having polished it all off, were asked to bury all the bottles in the garden, as my mother-in-law was so embarrassed by what the dustmen might think.'

On this subject I have never forgotten a hideously shameful occasion when my children were very young and my in-laws were staying. Having announced sanctimoniously, and untruthfully, that I never drink at home at lunchtime, I then laced my orange juice with gin to get me through the ordeal of grandparents' and children's lunch. My daughter, then aged two and a half, seized my glass, and, thinking it was straight orange juice, took a great swig. She swiftly spat it out all over her grandmother and declared that she'd been poisoned, whereupon Granny took a tiny sip, and recognized gin.

Some grandparents love and enjoy their grandchildren, and it seems sad that others only meet theirs at Christmas when everyone is at their most overwrought. One devoted grandmother said to me this year, 'We had Christmas for the first time in thirty-five years without children or grandchildren; absolute heaven, out to parties every day – result total exhaustion.'

Another equally devoted daughter-in-law told me: 'This year was the best Christmas I've had for sixteen years, because I finally plucked up courage to tell my extended family of in-laws and step-parents to get knotted, and that they couldn't all bum a free holiday off us. I hardened my heart, and in the process lightened it considerably.'

If you feel compelled to invite both your parents and your parents-in-law to spend Christmas with you, do consider asking them on alternate years or at least staggering the visits. This is because there is invariably rivalry between the two sides, caused by a very natural desire to be the most popular grandparents.

If there are two widowed grandmothers staying at the same time, the problem becomes even more acute and there's bound to be granny-mosity. There are also likely to be battles over who is the most helpful granny. A friend, faced with the unedifying sight of two grey-haired old ladies in dressing gowns battling over the kettle early on Christmas morning, slipped a Valium in both their cups of coffee and had a very peaceful day.

If you're determined to stay with people other than relations at Christmas, do make a recce first. Their place may be ravishing in summer, sitting on the terrace, drinking Pimms with all the roses out, but winter can be a very different proposition.

A friend described Christmas in Yorkshire, 'where thermonuclear underwear was *de rigueur* to keep *rigor mortis* from setting in. As soon as dinner was announced, there would be an uncontrolled scramble upstairs by the in-house guests, ostensibly to wash their hands. Only when the lights on the Christmas tree dimmed to half their normal brightness did it click with our host that throughout the house every electric blanket was being turned on to Regulo Nine. The decanter of whisky in all the guest rooms (or gust rooms) was not just a sop for the sots; it was as essential as Kendal mint cake and a day-glo anorak is to a Lakeland climber, simply to propel oneself from the bedroom to the bathroom.'

Patrick Lichfield told me that when he was a child the butler always served Christmas dinner in an overcoat, and used to gauge the temperature by the icicle hanging from the chandelier. I'm sure that the upper classes have such a reputation for bed-hopping

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because vigorous sex was the only way you could keep warm in large country houses.

Finally, when it comes to the decision of where you're going to spend Christmas, let your head rule your heart. If you're weak-willed, from September onwards stick a large sign up by every telephone in the house which reads: 'WHAT A MARVELLOUS IDEA, BUT CAN I RING YOU BACK WHEN I'VE TALKED TO MY FAMILY/HUSBAND/MY LOVER/MY CAT?' and read that out to *everyone* who rings up about Christmas arrangements.

And curb the spirit of altruism. Before inviting another family to stay, spare a thought for your own poor children who may not enjoy having to entertain younger children or being patronized by older ones. The great mistake is to suddenly feel guilty and, after three vodka and tonics have given you the illusion that you have the patience of Job coupled with the strength of Hercules, ring and invite your entire extended family plus in-laws for a week. Keep invitations short: two or three days are quite long enough. Invite or accept in the cold light of sobriety in front of your partner, then you cannot be accused of pulling a fast one later.

COUNTDOWN

I can call spirits from the vasty deep freeze.

My most depressing and abiding Christmas memory is of Bentalls of Kingston on Christmas Eve 1978, when a fat woman charged the men's toiletries counter and having bought ten bottles of Brut aftershave,

which were reduced because of battered packaging, announced in satisfied tones that that was all her menfolk's presents sewn up for Christmas 1979. Almost as frightful is the behaviour of eager beavers who rush off to sales on 27 December to buy Christmas cards and wrapping paper at half price for next year; or of the *Observer* Woman's Page which in December 1985 was telling its readers the best place to order their 'corn-fed gobblers' for Christmas 1986.

There is no doubt, on the other hand, that being prepared is the secret of a more harmonious Christmas. If Joseph had booked a room in advance, Jesus would not have been born in a stable, and as most of us, like Mary and Joseph, are taxed out of existence and very short of funds, it's better to spread the cost of Christmas over a few months.

My own Christmas preparations start half-heartedly in late August when I plant the indoor bulbs, in the faint hope that they will bloom by Christmas and I won't have to fork out fortunes in flowers in all the guests' bedrooms. Aware that it is common to have different coloured bulbs in one bowl, I divide them into neat little piles of one colour, only to have the dogs chase one of the cats straight through the lot, muddling them irretrievably so the bulbs emerge in tricolour – generally just about in time for Easter. Do remember to keep the bulb fibre bag, which has instructions printed on it telling you how far the bulbs have to protrude before you remove them from their dark hiding place.

From September onwards experts in the media will provide you with countdowns on Christmas activities:

HOW TO SURVIVE CHRISTMAS

Six weeks before Christmas: make 550 tartlet cases and freeze (in our house you freeze anyway).

Five weeks before Christmas: make 550 kiwi-fruit possets and freeze.

Four weeks before Christmas: construct festive dinner-table centrepiece from gilded fir cones and milk-bottle tops and freeze.

Our hero, Noël, is so fed up with reading about Christmas preparations and listening to his wife Scarlett's endless recitation of tasks ahead that he fantasizes wildly about a countdown à la Crippen:

Twenty days before Christmas: mother-in-law pops in with Xmas gifts, batter her to death and freeze.

Ten days before Christmas: father-in-law arrives in search of mother-in-law, batter him to death and freeze.

Seven days before Christmas: Holly and Robin return from school and receive ditto treatment.

Two days before Christmas: batter Scarlett, Nicholas, little Carol and Difficult Patch and freeze.

Christmas Eve: buy one-way ticket to Rio.

I myself am not capable of a countdown routine. But the thing that saved us last year, when we had a continuous stream of people staying – most of them for several days – between Christmas Eve and 2 January, and we gave, in addition, a huge New Year's Day lunch party, was cooking in advance. This is elementary to most organized housewives, but it was the first year we'd had a proper deep-freeze. Consequently, we made a list of meals for those nine

days, and spent the weekends leading up to Christmas cooking and freezing massive shepherd's pies, steak and kidney pies, fish pies, soups and oxtail stews. Unfortunately I kept sabotaging the plan by forgetting to tick things off as I took them out of the freezer.

There is absolutely no need, unless you find relaxation in cooking, to make mince pies, sausage rolls, Christmas cake or Christmas pudding. Bought ones are just as good, particularly if you inject the latter two with brandy in the run-up to Christmas.

Never buy drink in advance because it's cheap; you just drink it in advance. For the same reason, hide boxes of chocolates.

Try not to waste time being over-elaborate. The December issue of one magazine had a ludicrous recipe for crackers made out of puff pastry stuffed with mincemeat, with cracker petticoats made of rice-paper rectangles trimmed with pinking shears. If you served those in our house, people would be so drunk that they'd try and pull them.

Remember that Christmas is not a culinary competition between mothers, daughters, sisters-in-law and (now that most men cook) sons-in-law as well. Women tend to behave as though they're taking a degree in Christmas and that the world will end if they get a third in sprouts, a fourth in bacon rolls, and fail bread sauce totally.

30 November: don't forget to buy children Advent calendars and sparklers for Christmas dinner. Order logs and new cheque book.

9 December: grouse shooting ends and Christmas grousing hots up.