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## 6

*Giving the gift of giving:  
the PR of presents*

We all know how it goes: before you knew your young man he was a reasonably well-functioning individual. He could wash and dress himself (with varying degrees of success); he could hold down friendships; and he (mostly) remembered to remember birthdays and that Christmas is usually celebrated by the giving and, if necessary, the posting of presents. He even knew that this had to be done before the last Christmas posting date, which, to be fair, can be tricky for us all.

But the second that you come along, all of this independence and ability to function relatively autonomously goes out of the window, and your lovely boy has been reduced back to a state of near infancy. As if by some sort of magic only conjured by matrimony, control over many aspects of his life are now in your hands, and gifts are one of the first things you'll find on your plate. But, for the sake of your own sanity, this is an element of his life that needs to remain his.

Let me present you with the saga of Christmas past, present and future if you let him give you the poisoned chalice that is presents:

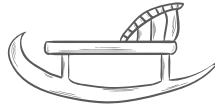


## CHRISTMAS PAST

Each Christmas begins with lists. First there is the list of your family who need to be bought presents for: brother, sister, parents, maybe a grandparent or aged aunt or two, assorted nephews and nieces. Plus associated hangers-on in the form of neighbours, work colleagues and friends. Perhaps your total is around fifteen Christmas presents to buy. Not forgetting husband too, of course – haha! So sixteen. Good grief, no wonder we are all broke and exhausted by January.

Now, husband's list is obviously not quite so long, and if he had his way would probably extend to Mum, you and, er, that's it. And he might forget you, or his mum (it could be either really, but you mustn't take this personally). However, he is aware that he cannot actually leave out brother, sister, grandparents, aged aunts, nephews, nieces etc. He will certainly cut out the non-essentials, e.g. 'What do you mean we need to buy a present for the neighbours?', but it still leaves up to nine presents from him that need to be chosen, bought and delivered.

This he used to do each year before he met you, often quite badly, usually selecting overpriced things because they were bought in a mad rush with little thought taken over them, and generally late, but the job would be (sort of) done. But now, guess who is around to do it instead – muggins!



## CHRISTMAS FUTURE

Here's how the conversation goes:

**You:** *What shall we get for your brother/parent/aunt/niece this year for Christmas?*

**Him:** *Oh, I don't know. Something nice.*

*Nah, really?*

**You:** *Well, they like biking/cooking/eating their own nasal hair, what about we get them something from one of those cool gadgety catalogues or websites?*

**Him:** *Brilliant idea!*

**You:** *OK, I'll have a look and see what's new.*

**Him:** *Great!*

And that's it! You have foolishly managed to turn the 'we' into 'I' and are now stuck with getting Christmas presents for all of his family for the rest of time. And will they even thank you for it? They will not. They will thank him for the presents, assuming, not unreasonably, that he had at least something to do with them as they are his

relatives not yours. And will he thank you for it? Certainly not enough.

And don't forget it's not just Christmas – it's birthdays too. Now you have saddled yourself with the task of remembering all of the assorted brothers'/sisters'/parents'/nephews' etc. birthdays as well! And planning what to get, and posting the presents and, and ...

Hang on.

Step back from the edge of the abyss.



## CHRISTMAS PRESENT

You need to make sure this nightmare vision of Christmases to come doesn't happen. The first and best way of making sure of this is by never getting yourself into such a mess in the first place. Never have the 'What are we going to get for X?' conversation. Rather, be very strict with yourself: the question to ask instead is 'What are you going to get for X?' Or better still, never have that conversation. Talk about what presents you are getting for your brother/sister/decrepit uncle etc. and see if he can join the dots in his own mind to his own family.

## CHRISTMAS PRESENT (ROUND 2)

If, as is likely, you have, however, fallen into what Frank Sinatra memorably called 'the tender trap' of buying his presents for him, then the task is how to get yourself out of it. I'm afraid I only have one answer, and it is one that won't be very popular with him, or with his family, but it is the only solution: cold turkey. Way before Boxing Day.

Mid-December you have to launch the bombshell that you are not buying his Christmas presents for him this year. I'm not suggesting you just come out and say that, of course! (Haha, the very idea of just coming out and saying it!) No, you can either use the subtle approach, or the outright lie.

### THE SUBTLE APPROACH

The subtle approach is that you just stop using 'we' language and start using 'you' language and hope for the best:

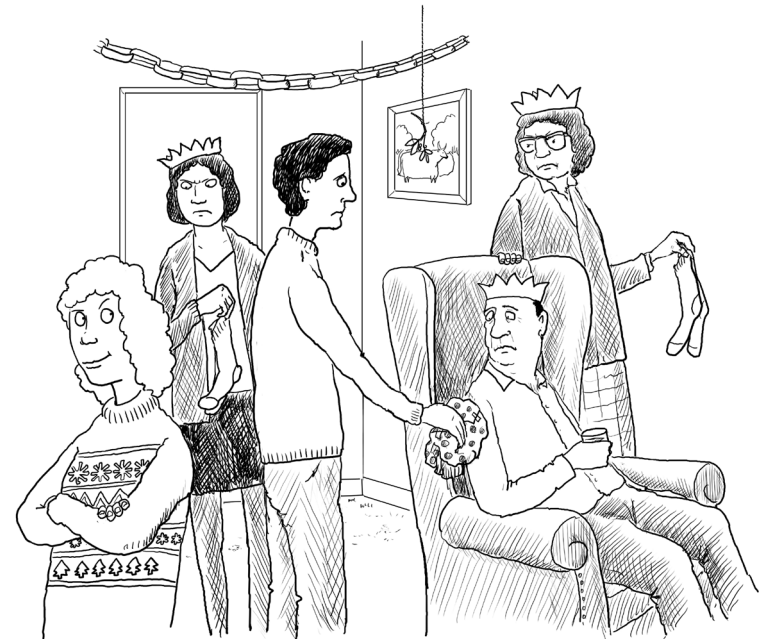
**You:** *What are you going to get for blah for Christmas this year?* **[Spoken with innocence in your voice but with no eye contact.]**

**Him:** *Errr ...* **[Watch as the panic sets in.]**

Repetition is now essential, and eye contact is permissible, but you must be prepared for the look of horror/utter confusion in his eyes and not break down (either in your iron will, or into fits of giggles) in the face of it.

**You:** *I just wondered what you were going to get blah for Christmas this year?* **[Then swiftly exit the scene, with a hurried 'Just got to pop out to—' and leave him in his semi-apoplectic state. And see what happens.]**

There is a small, but perceptible, chance that this may work. So it could be worth a go. But if you fear it will lead to more questions than answers, then I suggest that the outright lie is for you.



## THE OUTRIGHT LIE

No matter what your economic circumstances, or the global situation, you can always find some kind of justification in any given year since time began for the following statement:

***'I think we ought to have an austerity Christmas this year.'***

This is a genius masterstroke that cannot fail. It doesn't matter at all if you actually follow this through (unlikely) or if you fail to observe it completely, other than to fail to buy any of 'his' presents. All you need to do is follow it up with:

***'So, I don't think I'll get anything for your side of the family, you know, from me. Of course, if you want to go ahead and get them something from you, then that's fine.'***

Once husband has fully absorbed what you are saying, he will realize that – as long as you do not flinch and buy them something last minute, which you mustn't – he will have to pull his finger out or suffer the wrath of his family. The probable outcome of your move is that half of them won't get anything this year, hence your unpopularity with them as they now realize that it was you who got their presents all along. Trust me, this won't result in their thanking you for this post hoc, and it will result in them resenting you a tiny bit. But the precedent will have been set and they will have forgotten by the New Year anyway.

Your boots are no longer on the ground of this

battlefield, and so any problems his family have with their lack of presents are not your problems. You have won the PR war of presents.

## THE GIFT OF GIVING

Now you have also given him back the gift of giving – ahh, smiley face. He will thank you for it in the long run. OK, he won't thank you for it, but at least you won't have to buy all those Christmas and birthday presents for his family year after sodding year, and that's the main thing.

Aslsay, this masterplan does not at all mean that you have to actually have an austerity Christmas. And when you chatter about how you have bought so-and-so such a lovely doo-dah, bit expensive but lovely, and he says the inevitable 'But I thought we were having an austerity Christmas?!' you simply reply, 'Well, yes, I did start off with just little presents, but John Lewis has such lovely things this year ...'

### *Top Tip*

One of the difficulties here is that you may like buying presents sometimes. It's quite fun to choose these things you can't really afford and won't actually get to use yourself. But you really must resist this temptation! Otherwise that's it forever. You will be Mother Christmas for ever more. Be strong.