

It's the Thought that Counts

by [Fiona Sinclair](#) (December 2024)



London Christmas (English School)

Divorced decades ago, Anna had come to regard herself as an honorary spinster. Friends made a point of ring-fencing their frenetic social calendars to celebrate her birthday. But, at Christmas, it was an unspoken understanding that these friends did not believe in extended families, and their doors were closed to anyone who was not blood.

A few elderly relatives constituted the tail end of her family. Many years ago, it had been made clear to her that the giving of gifts had ended with her childhood. Anna might have attempted to cook the dinner herself, but this was the jurisdiction of one particular aunt. So she navigated the day with the aid of gin and tonic, that anesthetised the aching boredom of listening to her uncles and aunts relive their former occupations, holidays and, of course, the war years.

Feigning interest with nods and "Oh really!" she would slosh more gin into her glass and comfort herself with thoughts of the Boxing Day sales. Her personal tradition was to queue up in the semi darkness of a winter's morning with other hard core bargain hunters. When the doors were finally opened at exactly 8 am, the stash of money she might have spent on relatives she would blow on herself instead.

Then internet dating, like a modern cupid, sent John her way. He reinstated Christmas. "I go all in at this time of year," he informed her. After decades with a family who regarded the season like puritans, she was giddy at the prospect of brash decorations, feasting on rich food and, of course, the gifting.

Her first seasonal act was to buy John an advent calendar that presented a superior chocolate each day. Decorated the living room with cards whose fate, in previous years, was to be shoved in a drawer. For the first time in decades, a tree arrived. She allowed furniture to be rearranged to accommodate the six-footer planted in a prime spot.

John made it clear that dressing the tree was both a joy and a pain to him. "It's my OCD" he confessed. It seemed that as well as tipsy pictures and miss hung wallpaper testing his sanity, John would notice every irregular decoration on the tree and "it will be bug me until I straighten it out."

Both in their 50s, the couple were old enough to tolerate each

other's foibles. "I'll leave you too it," said Anna, and strategically went upstairs. He nodded absently, thought deep in colour co-ordination.

An hour later he called up the stairs, "See what you think!" Entering the room, she took an in breath. The tree was Christmas captured. Gorgeous purple and silver baubles reflected the matching tinsel. Lights pulsed like a tiny meteor shower. Miraculously, it had succeeded in glamourising a room that was shabby from years of indifference.

Now Anna had permission to seek out and lavish gifts. She had the knack of pairing present to person. The trick being never to buy according to your own tastes but instead to match with the preferences of the recipient. She got a thrill from stalking stores and trawling the internet, became positively breathless with excitement when she found the items she sought.

Over the weeks preceding the 25th, presents piled beneath the tree like a post office warehouse. John and Anna matching parcel for parcel so that strangers walking into the front room would mistakenly assume they had kids.

John disliked towns. That meant shopping. His antipathy did not stem from pecuniary meanness, rather he hated parting with his time. When forced to go to city centres, he preferred guerilla raids in and out. However, Christmas crowds impeded this and he responded to the human herd with scowls and unseasonable language.

He preferred the internet. At the click of a mouse busy little key words did the hard graft. That December he came to be on chatting terms with local delivery men.

However, the last gift had him stumped. He inferred with puffs and frowns at his lap top screen that this was not a mere stocking filler, but the headliner. Finally, with a sigh, he asked, "Can you give me any ideas?" A more confident woman

would have asked what the financial ceiling was, but Anna was always squeamish about discussing money. Neither did she want to appear greedy. Nevertheless, she produced a list of mid-range desirables, even stating, in brackets, in which shops they could be sourced, with the aim of making his inevitable trip to town less painful. Early one morning he hurled himself into his car and drove off wearing the grim expression of the chariot driver on the tarot card of the same name.

He returned some hours later bearing a look of relief and a smallish square package, declaring "Well, I've spent more than I intended, but it's worth it!" These words, although not conventionally romantic, coupled with her glimpse of the square package, would make most women's expectations surge. They screamed jewellery. So Anna went kitchen bound to reward him with tea and a mince pie wearing a huge emoji grin.

The gift, swathed in gleaming red paper, with accessorised bow, was placed with a flourish beneath the tree in pole position. Its wrapping served to accentuate its suggestive box shape. For seven days, as she passed the tree, a jet of excitement flared up in her, each time she glimpsed the package, swelling her expectations as to its contents.

Christmas morning Anna sipped coffee and patiently bore with John's further OCD compulsion to segregate their presents into two distinct His and Hers piles. Nevertheless, her eyes stalked the parcel, noting it was placed on the outside of her stack. Relief that from this position it would not necessitate an ungainly raking through the other parcels to reach it.

Opening their respective presents was to be a decorous business. They were to unwrap alternately to give each gift due attention and praise. "You go first love," John gestured. Curbing her animal desire to spring forward and snatch at the prized package, she demurely pointed "This one please." But John grinned and shook his head. "No, that one must be saved 'till last."

At this point another woman might have deployed a little girl pout, perhaps flirted to change his mind, or exploded into a full-blown tantrum. But Anna's upbringing had instilled good manners, and life had taught her patience. So she swore ripely to herself and concealed her frustration behind a brilliant smile.

John's gifts, in fact, were thoughtful, generous even. She knew she was being spoiled. They should have been more than enough had the red parcel not raised expectations.

"Now this one," he said, as he placed the red parcel into her cupped hands, "is something special."

Despite the primal urge for her hands to turn into claws and rip the packaging off, she instead performed a mini strip tease, unfastened the bow, undid the cellophane and slowly unswathed the gleaming paper, all the while a kaleidoscope of possibilities playing in her mind.

Finally, a box was revealed. A plastic container, in fact. through which ruby and emerald colours glowed. The jewel tones of a box brimming with Turkish Delight.

Anna stared at it, struggling to stop her face from sliding into a sad emoji. Nevertheless, John sensed that her silence did not denote joy. His gift had clearly missed its mark. It was not working as the grand finale he had intended, and perhaps needed context. "It's to remind you of our holiday. You loved the stuff out there."

It seemed that, whilst battling around town with her list in his pocket, he had come upon what he considered to be a far more personal gift. About to enter the department store she had directed him to, he had noticed a market stall selling authentic Turkish Delight, not that commercial stuff that's like glue, but dusted in icing sugar, soft to the palette, and delicately fragrant.

She vaguely caught his tale about a nice Turkish bloke from Istanbul, as if from a dialled down radio, but his “‘It cost me £30 quid, but I wanted to get you the real thing.” hit her full blast. Mind still on the missing bling, her thoughts briefly turned acid “Well I certainly wouldn’t want the cubic zirconia equivalent of Turkish Delight.”

Nevertheless, she managed to squeeze out “What a thoughtful gift!” but in a tone that convinced neither of them.

“You seem disappointed.” His turn to be silent as it dawned on him. “Did you think it would be something else?” He suddenly realised that his well-meant gift, with its verbal teasers and trailers, had resulted in complete misdirection.

John’s face had collapsed into an expression of helplessness, as if by spurning his gift she was somehow spurning him. Anna was winded with guilt. She began to chide herself for being so covetous. After all, fate had already gifted him. And he had put an end to years of fallow festivities. “I’m a spoilt child.” she pronounced. John looked meaningfully at the cache of goodies beside her, then shrugged and grinned “Maybe a little bit.”

Suddenly laughter burst from them like champagne from a shaken bottle. Anna cracked open the tub of candy and popped a vermilion square into her mouth. “You’re right, it is the good stuff,” and offered him the box. “And such seasonal colours!” He selected a vivid green piece. “Worth every penny!” as he chewed. The sugar rush colluded with their merriment as they gorged on the seductive sweets.

In subsequent years this would become part of their Christmas ritual. The last present would always be a tub of Turkish Delight, whose brilliance would rival the baubles and fairy lights. She would always accept with an arch “I wonder what this is?”

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