

Relative Clauses

Family misadventures can make Christmas memorable, says **Charlotte Reather**, especially when Santa's involved

HAVING come from a long line of only children on one side and a belligerent bunch on the other my immediate family is now rather small. Many relatives have either died or emigrated to Canada – I'm not sure which is worse. At Christmas there's usually just four of us – Mum, Dad, me and Bandit, the labrador. So when you're rolling your eyes or tittering at an annoying relative, spare a thought for me and my rentals (parentals) trying to eat our way through a whole turkey and playing charades with the dog.

How I would love to have an inappropriate uncle or a dotty granny to celebrate with. Lord B's elderly mother, Lavinia, who became wonderfully dramatic in her old age, was a great source of entertainment. One Christmas, there was a wail from the drawing-room. "Help! It's finally happened, I've gone blind," howled the dowager. On closer inspection Lord B shouted in her good ear: "No you haven't you silly old bat, you've powdered over your glasses."

Another of Lavinia's elderly misadventures was to break wind loudly. At a pre-Christmas drinks party she let a particularly robust one go – everyone turned round. The butler whispered: "Have this one on me, Your Grace," before dramatically grabbing his stomach and excusing himself from the room.

A mad great aunt of my mother's, who at 105 was losing her marbles, came to stay a few years ago and proved immense fun. Especially when the vicar popped by and she announced that there was "a man with a broken neck at the door". The vicar loves to drop in on my parents because they're non-clients (well, very occasional ones) so he can get "out of his tree" without fear of reproach.

Comb Over Man (COM), my older boyfriend, had an embarrassing uncle with a penchant for hookers. He even sported a tasteful bangle with the words "too many women, too little time" engraved on it. "As the children unwrapped their presents, he would nonchalantly flick through a top-shelf magazine," says COM.

Everyone has a stingy relative who buys things that appear to have come from the

Pound Shop. And let's face it, many of these presents end up in our gift cupboards ready for someone else – don't pretend you've never done it.

However, a friend of my father's wins the Scrooge prize for effort. So appalled was he by the lavish presents bestowed upon his nephews and nieces by their recently rich father (he sold half the estate to make way for a motorway) and recently titled stepmother, that while they were revving up the new sports car, Cecil sneaked back in and gathered up the presents he'd given them. He knew they'd received so many gifts that his "were good for another year". Besides, the lack of thank you letters from the previous Christmas more than justified his actions.

In a small family you just couldn't get away with such boomerang Scroogery but my parents did once pull a fast one on me. I was young, but at 21 I really should have known

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Father Christmas was a pack of lies and a very strange myth to perpetuate given the growing fear of paedophiles. My parents had stored my presents in the loft. When Mum came to wrap the gifts, she found to her horror, that the mice had nibbled everything. Being Scottish, she wasn't going to buy any more presents so she did what any mother would do – she lied.

On Christmas morning my parents sat me down and told me there had been an accident. I blanched. Father Christmas's sleigh had crashed in the drive. They walked me outside where they had recreated an accident scene with skid marks in the snow and lots of debris. Apparently Rudolph's leg had become tangled up in my coral scarf (the most mouse-eaten item), causing him to fall and bring the other reindeer down with him and Santa had been



launched out of the sleigh. This was one of the most magical Christmases I'd ever experienced and I took great delight in telling the other students at university what had happened – which didn't help the bullying.

But at least I'd experienced the magic of Christmas. COM's daughter wasn't so lucky. When she was five, her father, dressed in red pyjamas, wearing a white beard and stinking of the brandy she'd left for Father Christmas, burst into her room with a pillowcase of presents. He tripped and scared the night-lights out of his own child who never believed in the fat man from Lapland again. For she had discovered not only was Santa a drunk but her closest living relation – a double whammy.

So, when your relatives are embarrassing this Christmas, remember at least they're real. And, genes being what they are, it's just a matter of time before you turn into one of them. ■

Charlotte Reather is winner of the Gloucestershire Glamour Award 2008