

Mrs Christmas

1. If you met a person called Carol Christmas, you might think one of two things. Either, you might think this was a person who loved Christmas and was the most fun person to be around during the Christmas period. Or, instead, you might think that this was a person who was so tired of everyone assuming she loved Christmas just because of her name and was fed up of all the jokes and assumptions and by now was well and truly sick of Christmas and had become a proper old scrooge when Christmas was even mentioned.

2. Well, actually, Mrs Carol Christmas was neither of those things, though it was true that Christmas was not her favourite time of year. It had been once, when she was young, when she had been just as enthralled to the magic as everyone else. Back then, her name had been ordinary Carol Jones. She had become Carol Christmas on a beautiful July day when she had married Eric Christmas, her handsome, loving fiancée. Despite his name, she always associated him with warm summer days, filled with hot sunshine. Even the day she had received the telegram, one month later, telling her that he had been killed in action, had been a perfect summer's day. Eric Christmas had given her a Christmassy name but hadn't lived long enough for them to celebrate Christmas together as a married couple. They had talked about it, and planned all the fun they were going to have as The Christmases. But by the time Christmas had come, Carol Christmas was a lonely, grief-struck widow and Christmas was never the same again.

3. Her family and friends had helped her through the dark days of anger and grief, looking after her when she had really needed it. But then the war finally came to an end, and people began to live ordinary lives again. Her elderly parents' lives came to natural ends. Her brother emigrated to start a new life in New Zealand. Gradually, her friends started new families and careers which took them away around the country. She kept in touch, but it wasn't the same. Even though she had been very young when she was widowed, she never met anyone else that she thought she could love as much as she had loved Eric, and so she stayed as Carol Christmas, getting lonelier every year, starting to dread the Christmas cards that came each December, reminding her that while everyone else was getting on with their lives, her own had stopped in 1944 when Eric died.

4. Fifty years later, and Carol Christmas wouldn't say she was unhappy. She had a nice house in a nice part of town, a good job that kept her busy and satisfied, and colleagues at work with whom she could have an interesting conversation. Out of work, she kept herself occupied with her favourite hobbies, reading and gardening. There was always something to do in the garden, and when it was too cold or dark to go out, there were always plenty of good books to read. Mrs Christmas could quite happily spend a whole weekend busy with these pastimes and not speak a word to another human being. The only creature who shared her life was her cat, a beautiful big black feline called Bailey. He would follow her around the garden when she was out working, or he would curl up on her lap when she sat down with a book. Without Bailey, Mrs Christmas might have felt lonely, but with him around, she felt she had all the company she needed. In fact, the cat even proved a useful way of avoiding company. She had long ago realised that the secret to being alone was to not tell anyone; once people found out she was on her own, they felt obliged to invite her to join them, which then became awkward and uncomfortable. So Mrs Christmas didn't talk about her private life, and if anyone ever found out by accident and invited her out somewhere, she would say she couldn't leave Bailey

5. Her plan of avoiding company had worked so well for so long that people had stopped asking her out, and Mrs Christmas stayed at home, glad not to be causing anyone any trouble. This was especially good at Christmas. Even people who knew she was alone for Christmas stopped asking her to join them. And so to Mrs Christmas, December was no different to any other month of the year. She didn't go to parties, so she didn't need fancy clothes. She didn't have any friends or family to buy presents for so didn't go Christmas shopping. There was no point cooking a turkey just for herself so she didn't bother with Christmas dinner. There was no-one to pull crackers with, or drink a toast with, or sit and listen to Christmas carols with by candlelight, so she didn't do any of those things. Each year, she put up a simple Christmas tree, just so her neighbours wouldn't think she was odd, but the only present underneath was for Bailey.

6. Years passed and Decembers came and went with nothing special happening, until one year, when Mrs Christmas noticed she was getting new neighbours. It was a Saturday in early December. The house next door to hers was been empty since the previous occupiers had moved away. But then, finally, a van had pulled up outside and she saw new people unloading belongings. She peeped through the windows with curiosity, and decided that they must be a family – a dad and a mum and three children. She felt a bit sorry for the parents, having to move into a new house so close to Christmas. She watched them going in and out with their stuff, shouting to each other and making such a fuss that she could even hear them inside through the walls that connected to her house. She hoped that they weren't going to make this much noise all the time. Later that day, she went out for a short walk, and when she came back, the new family were just finishing their unloading. It seemed that the last thing they were bringing in was a large Christmas tree.

7. The mum of the family noticed Mrs Christmas at her gate and smiled. "Hello," she said. "We're your new neighbours."
"Welcome to the street," said Mrs Christmas. "I hope you'll find it a good place to live. I've lived here for forty years and I've always liked it."
"That's nice," said the mum. "But I don't think we'll be here very long. We're just renting this house until we find somewhere more permanent. You see, we had to move here at very short notice, due to my husband's work. We've come from Australia."
"Good grief, that's quite a dramatic change," said Mrs Christmas, "especially at Christmas."
"It was," said the mum. "But as you see, we are determined to make the most of it." And she pointed at the Christmas tree. "We've even had to buy a whole new set of decorations."
Mrs Christmas thought that was a strange thing to prioritise buying when you had just arrived in a new country, but she nodded politely.

8. The mum then introduced herself and the family. "I'm Jackie Reynolds, and this is my husband Bob. These are our children, Katy, Samantha and Nicholas. Katy is thirteen, Samantha is eleven and Nicholas is nine."

"Pleased to meet you," said Mrs Christmas politely, because even though she didn't want to make friends, she still believed in good manners. "My name is Carol Christmas."

Mrs Reynolds gave a big grin. "What a fantastic name," she said. "Hey, kids, our new neighbour is Mrs Christmas. How cool is that."

"Not just Mrs Christmas, but a real Christmas Carol," said Mr Reynolds. "I bet you know them all, don't you. And is there a Mr Christmas too?"

"No, it's just me," said Mrs Christmas, who had heard all these things many times before. "My husband was killed in the war." She found that telling people this usually made them embarrassed and leave her alone. But Mrs Reynolds wasn't so easily deterred.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said. "Do you live here all by yourself?"

"I have my cat," said Mrs Christmas.

"Ah, a cat can be a marvellous friend," said Mrs Reynolds. "We had a cat back in Oz, but of course, we couldn't bring her with us. Our Nicholas was real upset about leaving her."

9. Mrs Christmas looked at the boy. Out of the all the family, he was the only one who didn't look jolly and friendly. He had a sulky look and he didn't even look excited about the Christmas tree.

"Poor Nicholas really didn't want to move to England," said Mrs Reynold. "He hated leaving his friends and his school, as well as Moggy. We keep telling him that he will make new friends, but he just says he doesn't want new friends."

"I don't blame him," said Mrs Christmas. "Well, I mustn't keep you, you have a lot to do." And she said goodbye and went inside. Bailey met her at the door, wrapping himself around her ankles and purring.

"We have new neighbours," she told him. "Better stay away from the garden next door for now. Though I suppose we won't have much to do with them, if they're planning on finding somewhere permanent next year. Well, that won't bother us, will it Bailey."

10. Over the next week, Mrs Christmas found herself paying more attention to her new neighbours than she had anticipated. They made more noise than she was used to. It seemed that there was always someone in the family shouting or laughing or singing or crying. And there was so much coming and going through the front door. Mrs Christmas watched them through her front window. Mr Reynolds went out to work very early in the morning. A little later on, the two girls left for school; she could tell by their uniforms that they were going to the local secondary school together. Then Mrs Reynolds came out with Nicholas, who obviously went to the primary school. He still didn't look very happy, stomping down the street behind his mother. Mrs Reynolds seemed to be going in and out throughout the rest of the day, often carrying shopping or things for the house. In the afternoon, the process was reversed as they all came home, first Nicholas, then the girls, and finally Mr Reynolds. Then the singing and laughing and shouting started up again. As Mrs Christmas sat to eat her quiet evening meal, she could hear them gathered together doing the same, in a much noisier way. It seemed strange to think that they were so close, and that she knew so much about them already.

11. When the weekend came around again, Mrs Christmas was glad for a spell of dry weather so she could get out into the garden to do some work. It was more a time for tidying and clearing rather than planting and gardening, but Mrs Christmas had plenty to do. It was a cold day, but she kept warm by raking fallen leaves and digging out dead weeds. Bailey was there as usual, pouncing on stray leaves and prowling along the low wall that separated her garden from the neighbours. She left him to it while she did some tidying up inside her shed. He usually followed her when she did this, getting in the way when she was trying to move things around, but today he did not. When she came out, she saw that Bailey was no longer alone. The boy from next door was out in his garden, and was standing stroking Bailey at the wall. He looked startled when he saw her and stepped away, as if he had been caught out doing something forbidden.

12. Mrs Christmas remembered what she had been told about the boy missing his own cat that had been left behind in Australia.

"Hello," she said in what she hoped was a friendly manner. "It's Nicholas, isn't it?"

The boy nodded.

"I see you've met Bailey," said Mrs Christmas. "He's very friendly, you know. He loves to be stroked." Hearing this, Nicholas started to stroke Bailey again. For the first time since he had moved in, he didn't look so sulky and miserable.

"Who's looking after your cat in Australia?" Mrs Christmas asked him.

"My aunt and uncle," said Nicholas. "I know they'll take good care of her, but it's not the same. I don't know why we couldn't bring her with us. It's not fair."

"Well, I suppose Australian cats wouldn't settle very well to living in England," said Mrs Christmas.

"Neither do Australian boys," said Nicholas. "Definitely not this one, anyway."

13. "I'm sure you'll get used to it," said Mrs Christmas. "England isn't that bad."

"Are you kidding?" said Nicholas. "It's so cold and grey. Everything is damp and dull. I haven't seen the sun shine once since we got here."

"That's because it's winter," said Mrs Christmas. "It won't be like this when spring comes around."

"But it still won't be as nice as spring in Australia," said Nicholas. "Did you know that it's summer in Australia now? It was so hot when we left that I wore shorts all the time. Now I'm always cold."

"Christmas in the summer!" said Mrs Christmas. "How strange."

"Not really, not when that's what you're used to," said Nicholas. "To me, Christmas and summer go together."

"How so?" asked Mrs Christmas.

14. “Well, in Australia, we could go for a swim on Christmas Day,” said Nicholas. “We had a pool in our garden, and we would all go out and play in the water. Mum would let us have breakfast by the pool.”

“Fancy that,” said Mrs Christmas. “You definitely won’t be doing that this year in England.”

“I know,” said Nicholas. “But that wasn’t even the best part. You see, we lived near the ocean, and every year, Mum and Dad took us to the beach for Christmas dinner.”

“Christmas dinner on the beach,” said Mrs Christmas. “I bet that wasn’t turkey and roast potatoes and gravy.”

“No, we had a barbeque,” said Nicholas. “It was much nicer. We had to eat the ice cream first before it could melt.”

“Ice cream for starter,” said Mrs Christmas with a laugh. “No wonder you prefer Australian Christmas.”

15. “Maybe your mother will let you have ice cream for starters this year,” said Mrs Christmas. “We do have ice cream in England too.”

“But Mum wants to do a proper Christmas dinner this year,” said Nicholas despondently. “She says our first Christmas in the UK should be traditional. I don’t see why. She even wants sprouts. Yuck, I hate sprouts.”

“Well not everyone likes the sprouts,” said Mrs Christmas. “But the turkey is nice, and roast potatoes, and stuffing, and gravy, and cranberry sauce. Actually, my mother used to make bread sauce, which was lovely. And she would cover the turkey in slices of bacon, and there would be sausages inside the bird, so everything was juicy and tasty. When I was your age, I used to look forward to that meal all year round.”

“It does sound good,” said Nicholas. “But I bet Mum’s won’t be like that.”

16. “I’m sure your mother’s Christmas dinner will be delicious,” said Mrs Christmas. “And don’t forget the Christmas pudding and mince pies. Didn’t you have those in Australia?”

“We did,” said Nicholas, “but they weren’t that exciting.”

“I think it must have been too hot in Australia for those kind of foods,” said Mrs Christmas. “A mince pie is best eaten warm, when it’s cold outside, and the dark is knocking on the windows. And Christmas pudding is the richest, sweetest pudding of all. You just need a small helping, with thick cream or brandy sauce. After all the turkey and bacon and sausages and pudding and mince pies, you think you might never eat again, until someone comes round with brandy snaps and chocolate liqueurs and suddenly you’re eating again. And then there’s the Christmas cake. It should be dark and heavy, full of fruit and nuts, and covered in thick layers of marzipan and icing. After you’ve eaten all that, you’d be glad not to be on the beach. It’s much better to be at home by the fire, with nothing to do but sit around with your family.”

“I’ll ask Mum if we’re having a Christmas cake,” said Nicholas.

“Tell her, it’s definitely part of a traditional English Christmas,” said Mrs Christmas. But she remembered that it had been many years since she had bothered with Christmas cake for herself.

17. “And it’s not just the food,” said Mrs Christmas. “Some things just work better in the cold and the dark. Like carol singing. Most churches have carol services. You have to wrap up warm because it can be quite chilly in a church, but when it’s full of people, it doesn’t feel cold. The best bit is going into the church in daylight and coming out to find it has gone dark while you were inside. Then the church windows are all lit up from the inside and it looks so beautiful when you look back at it. Then you hurry home to warm up by the fire, and have another mince pie, if you’re lucky.”

“Is there a carol service like that near here?” asked Nicholas.

“I think there is, at the church around the corner,” said Mrs Christmas. She remembered seeing posters up for a carol service, but as she never went, she hadn’t paid much attention to them. She decided to find out next time she walked past.

18. “What else is good about Christmas in England?” asked Nicholas.

“There’s the Christmas shopping,” said Mrs Christmas.

“We have that in Australia too,” said Nicholas. “Shopping is just boring.”

“But were the streets all lit up with lights?” asked Mrs Christmas. “And did the shops all decorate their windows with Christmas displays? I suppose they did, but nothing beats the way they do it in England. London is famous for it. You should ask your parents to take you to see the lights. Tourists come from all over the world to see them. And now you have a chance to see it for yourself.”

“I would like that,” said Nicholas. “But it still doesn’t sound as good as Christmas in Australia.”

“But Nicholas, have you ever seen real snow?” asked Mrs Christmas.

19. “It never snowed where we lived in Australia,” said Nicholas. “I’ve seen it in pictures and films, but never in real life. What’s it like?”

“Magical,” said Mrs Christmas. “When it starts to fall, everyone gets excited. I think even people that grumble and moan about it still get a little excited when they see the first flakes. It’s quite hypnotic, watching them fall. And it is so quiet. It falls and falls but never makes a sound. And when there’s a thick blanket of snow on the ground, everything else is hushed. The loudest thing you can hear is the strange crunching noise that the snow makes when you walk through it. There’s nothing else makes a noise like that. When it’s thick and soft like that, you can fall over in it and it doesn’t hurt. That’s why sledging is so much fun, hurtling down the side of a hill and being flung into a big soft mattress of snow.”

20. “Do you think it will snow this year?” asked Nicholas. He sounded so excited and hopeful that Mrs Christmas didn’t want to disappoint him.

“It could,” she said. “You’ll just have to wait and see. It’s just something else to look forward to.”

They both looked up at the sky, which was light grey with high clouds. The sun was a white disk behind the clouds and already the light was fading.

“Well, it will be dark soon,” said Mrs Christmas. “You’ll see for yourself how cosy and Christmassy it will feel when it’s dark outside and all your Christmas lights are on.”

They both looked back at their houses. The Reynolds’ house was brightly lit at every window, but Mrs Christmas’s was in complete darkness. That made Nicholas look at Mrs Christmas with a quizzical expression on his face.

“Are you really Mrs Christmas?” he asked.

“Yes I am,” said Mrs Christmas, though at that moment, she could hardly blame him for being confused. If she could remember all those wonderful things she had told him about, why wasn’t she going out and enjoying them for herself? Her husband Eric had given her a wonderful name but she had failed to live up to it.

21. “Well, I must be getting in,” said Mrs Christmas. “It was nice to meet you Nicholas. I hope your Christmas gets better. And please do say hello to Bailey whenever you see him. He likes company.” And so she hurried into her house. It had never seemed so lonely and bleak as it did then. Even Bailey had stayed in the garden to play with Nicholas. The small, boring Christmas tree in her living room did nothing to cheer up the place. Mrs Christmas looked at the few Christmas cards that were lined up on the mantel piece. There was one from her brother in New Zealand. Even though it had been decades since they had last seen each other, he still sent her cards every year, with photographs of his family and a letter with all his news. She wondered if his Christmas in New Zealand was like Nicholas’s Australian Christmas.

22. A week later, three days before Christmas, Mrs Christmas was sitting down with Bailey to enjoy a glass of mulled wine while she listened to a new record of Christmas carols that she has just bought herself. Then there was a knock on the door, and as she went to answer it, she heard singing outside. It had been many years since carol singers had come to her house, but Mrs Christmas smiled as she opened the door. Outside were the whole Reynolds family, well wrapped up in scarves and woolly hats. They were all singing “Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer” with Nicholas at the front, singing at the top of his voice. When they were done, they shouted merry Christmas and Nicholas held out a present to Mrs Christmas.

“Thank you,” said Mrs Christmas brightly. “I’m so glad to see you, I have presents for you too. Please come in and have a mince pie.”

“Are they warm?” asked Nicholas.

“Of course they are,” said Mrs Christmas, “with brandy butter to go with them.”

23. The Reynolds family gathered in Mrs Christmas's sitting room, where an extra string of Christmas lights was hung around the mantel piece, along with bunches of holly and ivy and mistletoe. Mrs Christmas rummaged under her tree and pulled out presents for each member of the family. Then they all sat down to open their presents. Mrs Christmas's present from them was a big, illustrated book about Australia.

"It was Nicholas's idea," said Mrs Reynolds. "He wanted to share his country with you. And we wanted to thank you, for helping to cheer him up. Since you told him all about Christmas in Britain, he has been much happier, telling us all the things we have to try."

"We went into London yesterday and saw all the lights," said Nicholas enthusiastically. "It was amazing."

"I told you so," said Mrs Christmas. "I was there myself the day before, doing my Christmas shopping."

"And we checked at the church to find out when their carol service is," said Nicholas. "There's one at three o'clock on Christmas Eve. We're definitely going to go. Would you like to come with us?"

"Well, that would have been lovely," said Mrs Christmas, "but I have other plans on Christmas Eve. In fact I have plans for the whole of Christmas, this year."

24. "You see, I am going to New Zealand to visit my brother," said Mrs Christmas. "I haven't seen him for forty years. But hearing everything Nicholas had to say about Christmas in Australia made me think I should go and try Christmas on the other side of the world for myself. And I can meet all the nieces and nephews and great nieces and nephews that I have never met before. My brother was very surprised when I phoned him up and asked if I could come for Christmas, but he was very welcoming. So I fly out tomorrow."

"Wow," said Mrs Reynolds. "Did talking to our Nicholas really inspire you to do that?"

"Yes, absolutely," said Mrs Christmas. "My brother might have forgotten what Christmas in Britain is like, so I thought I would go and remind him. After all, I am Mrs Christmas."

"You'll love it," said Nicholas. "But what about Bailey?"

"Well, I was going to ask if you would like to look after him while I'm away," said Mrs Christmas.

"You and him are quite good friends by now, and I know I can trust you to look after a cat because you have experience. Would that be alright?"

"Of course," cried Nicholas. "I would love that. Can he come and sleep in our house?"

"As often as you like," said Mrs Christmas. "And I have a Christmas present for him. Will you make sure he gets it on Christmas Day?"

"I promise," said Nicholas.

"Good, that's all sorted," said Mrs Christmas. "Now, who wants a mince pie?"