

# THIRD EYE EDITION

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## A Christmas long ago

Like *Bohag*, Christmas, too, is a state of mind. It is the time to return to your childhood delusions, revive the nostalgia of a lost past and dream again of a baby nestled in straw under a midnight sky, as the wise men follow a star and come bearing gifts of frankincense, myrrh and gold. One sheds cynicism and the brisk practicality of one's daily life to step back a moment and see the ring of children's faces raised up in wonder at the glittering Christmas Tree, and feel the heart gladden as one hears carols, voices lifted to an exquisite pitch, from one's television set, or a church nearby. Christmas, as it were, weaves a magic wand over the world, and behold, everything is softer and more beautiful.

Long, long ago, when the world was young and I was in braids and frilly frocks, Christmas always brought in full display one of my seven deadly sins – envy. My envy was reserved for Rosie, my closest buddy and unchallenged champion of the sack race. Rosie was all arms and legs, sniffled with a year-long cold and always found her exam question papers as mysterious as Egyptian hieroglyphs. But Rosie had something that I didn't, and I wanted it real bad – her Christian faith. Rosie, her parents and two siblings went to the beautiful cathedral every Sunday. They read the Bible, listened to the sermons from the polished pews, went for confession (Rose was particularly talented in reporting dramatic crimes) and generally, had a swell time, compared to my own humdrum existence. Due to some unfair circumstance of birth, Rosie got to see the beautiful stained glass windows at the cathedral that told stories of the Bible, while I only imagined her admiring them. Envy mushroomed like a grey cloud in my heart at Christmas time. Rosie's mother, a jolly, garrulous Keralite, not only created a beautiful Nativity scene in their living room, but baked the most amazing marzipan cakes and star-shaped cookies I had ever tasted. We were always invited to their warm, boisterous Christmas parties, where I would eat my heart out at the sight of the gift-wrapped presents at the foot of their Christmas Tree. In this dank state of misery, I once even hoped for the impossible. Unlike Rosie's house, our house had a chimney with a big stone fireplace. What if, winging his way from the North Pole, Santa spied our chimney and decided to slide into our home, mistaking us to be believers of Christ? Stranger things have been known to happen, haven't they? And once he was in, I could certainly sweet talk him into parting with his sack of goodies. But God must have had this computerised gig up in heaven, for no Santa ever slid through our chimney by mistake. A couple of years later, when the State of Meghalaya was formed, I left my dear Rosie behind forever and shortly after that, they too moved to the sunny climes of Kerala. I often imagined her house and mine, being lived in by other people, strangers, and I realise that if you don't have Christmas in your heart, you will not find it under a tree. Rosie, her wonderful generous family, with their laughter and thick slices of cake, their sudden breaking into boisterous song, gave us the joy of welcoming the Saviour in our often dark and difficult world. We were living through Indo-Pak wars, food shortage, rationing, bitter winters, not to speak of mumps and growing-up angst, but in Rosie's living room, among the roomy, sagging sofas, worn carpet, bunches of paper roses, framed family photos, sandalwood elephants and the Nativity scene in one corner, we awakened to an anticipation of better things. I don't know where Rosie is today. That is her real name, and I do wish somebody in our old girl's network shows her this piece. Meeting her again will be a Christmas miracle I long for to happen.

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But before that, I must tell you how that mushroom cloud of envy vanished. One Christmas Eve, as we were pulling on our mittens and donning caps, coats and mufflers to trot off to Rosie's party, I suddenly realised that being a Christian kid did not automatically qualify you to get a gift. Far from it. It was like reading the small print with the very big catch. You had to not only be a Christian, but also a good person. Not good for a day or two, but the whole year through, day in and day out. That was a really tall order for me, a little girl who fibbed and pinched her baby brother, pretended to be asleep when she was not, had her homework done by someone else, laughed at drunks and was envious of someone else's religion. There was no way I could stop doing all those things at once and reach that amazing state of grace that would enable me to receive shiny be-ribboned gift boxes. After this epiphany, I went so far as to feel even a little sorry for this lass Rosie, for she had to labour through the seasons to be good, and fear being disqualified. And as if to make up for not belonging to her faith, celebrated in magnificent stained glass windows, in Renaissance paintings and sculpture, I learned scores of Christmas carols at school and the radio and would break out into joyous song before family and friends, as brother dear gamely lent a hand with some impassioned guitar strumming.

Few Christmases were more memorable than those of my early years. But adulthood brought with it the perception that Christmas was more about giving than receiving. A few years ago, we had a dark, bug-eyed girl come and live with us. She was a Santhal. Generations ago, her folks came from central India to work in our tea-gardens. Julie's parents had died of malaria within a few months of each other. An aunt made her work in the garden and took away her wages. So, here she was, in her new job as a maid. She had never climbed stairs and kept popping her head into the fridge to feel the cold air on her face. She laughed and cried easily and wolfed down food as if she had been hungry for an eternity. Slowly, opening up to me, she told me of the world she had left behind... a world of unrelenting poverty, hardship, illness and ignorance. Most men were drunks and women wore tall-tale bruises on their bodies. She talked of long treks made to the Bhutan foothills to chop firewood and how they sang songs of Jesus to keep their spirits up. On her first Christmas away from home, she missed her hard-hearted aunt, her little cousins, her village folk. She talked of the huge bonfire in the middle of the field, the pig being roasted over it, the long deep swigs of *hura*, the local brew that they all shared, and the pleasure of arms interlinked and feet stomping in rhythm, of whoops of joy and throbbing drum beats, the flowers on long hair and ebony skins gleaming, of the glory of being alive. Her eyes glowed as she tried to transmit that reality, that world to me.

One Christmas day, as a special treat, I took Julie to the St. Joseph's Church in Panbazar. She gaped at the lights, at Mother Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus. She squealed in delight when she lit candles and turned indignant when pushed and shoved by the crowd of revellers. We were separated in the rush and I saw her elbow her way through and reach out to clutch my hand. That was a perfect Christmas moment, when this little stranger transformed into the daughter I never had. I had been good, kind and gentle with her, patient at her shortcomings, and now, this Christmas gift was mine. Maybe this was what Christmas was really all about.