

*you, our favourite  
follower!*

**TWOCHUBBYCUBS**





# DEAR READER

I hope that you are keeping well. It has been a quiet year for us Andersons. Elsie continues to be troubled by her game leg and the East wind brought nothing but calamity for Susan on her voyages.

Nah I'm kidding, but I've always wanted to write a 'round robin' Christmas letter. Hello! The idea behind this little booklet is to present a small collection of random recipes that you can squeeze into the time-taint between Christmas and New Year. Of course, we have reason to celebrate with 'Full On Flavour', our newest cookbook, hitting the shelves on December 28th. If you're still on the fence, know this: if you order it via WH Smith and use the code FLAVOUR50, you'll get it for £10! Online only, mind. We hope you love it. Naturally, we've also included a Christmas themed 'blog' to entertain yourself with as you rid yourself of your Christmas over-indulgence. We think of everything!

But listen: recipes are lovely and books are terrific but Christmas does only come once a year. If you're sitting there all mopey because you're not your ideal weight, or you're worried you'll put on a bit of heft over Christmas, then mope no more. Life is far too short to not enjoy yourself, after all, and you have a whole year ahead to reverse any gains. Not that you need to. Have a read of the blog at the end for more biting psychology. And anyway: you look amazing, you know that.

Remember, too: take photos. Because for the first ten years we were together Paul and I were always various stages of overweight, we hid away from photos. Hence having to include these snappy little photos of us celebrating Christmas as children instead.

Though let's be honest, we were adorable.

Everyone - have an amazing Christmas, whatever you do!

**JAMES & PAUL**

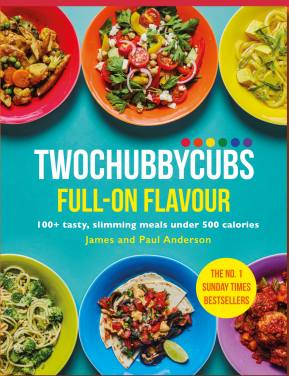




(totally unbiased)

# A <sup>^</sup>GUIDE TO OUR <sub>v</sub>BOOKS

(triple Sunday Times Bestselling)

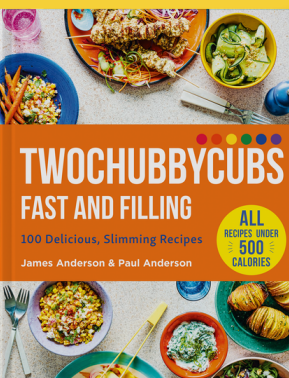


## TWOCHUBBYCUBS: FULL ON FLAVOUR

Our newest book, available to pre-order now, features over 100 healthy and delicious slimming recipes with a focus on simple, tasty meals. No fuss, no gimmicks: just healthy eating done right with meals you'll want to try over and over again. We've made every dish sing with flavour and, for good measure, desserts and breakfasts also make a triumphant return!

## TWOCHUBBYCUBS: DINNER TIME

Our third book concentrates on the most important meal of the day: the evening meal. Dinner, tea, supper - doesn't matter what you call it (although to be clear, it should be tea), this is the meal you look forward to the most. So make it an absolute dinner-winner (sorry) with 100+ low-calorie delights to soothe the soul. All 100+ meals come in under 500 calories, of course, and they are A-M-A-Z-I-N-G.

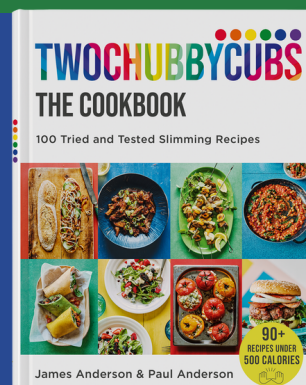


## TWOCHUBBYCUBS: FAST AND FILLING

Our second cookbook concentrates on getting the food from the cupboard to your gob as quick as possible, because in these trying times of fast living and easy pleasures, speed is of the essence. Not actual speed, we can't put that in our recipes, though think of the weight loss. These meals are - as you would expect - fast, filling and other f-words. Fun? Fabulous? First-rate? All good.

## TWOCHUBBYCUBS: THE COOKBOOK

Our first baby might not pop with as much vim and colour as the others but it contains some of our absolute classics that you'll make again and again. We should know, we've seen the photos of people doing just that. Over 90+ 500-calorie-or-less meals and some 'naughty' recipes for when you just don't give a toss about the calories and want something warm and delicious!



## REMEMBER!

All of our books guarantee three simple things: easy-to-cook meals, food that doesn't taste like 'boring' diet food and, most importantly, no gimmicky or hard to find ingredients. There's also a very good spread of vegetarian recipes and all recipes are clearly marked with their calorie count, freezability and suitability for GF diets. Plus we have one more difference: we don't take anything seriously.

**NEW  
ARRIVAL**



# TWOCHUBBYCUBS

## FULL-ON FLAVOUR

100+ tasty, slimming meals under 500 calories

James and Paul Anderson



THE NO. 1  
SUNDAY TIMES  
BESTSELLERS

## RELEASING 28 DECEMBER 2023!

Full-On Flavour is the brightest, cheeriest cookbook you could possibly hope for to see you through a new year of healthy eating: over a hundred 500-calories-or-less delicious meals that are easy to cook and perfect for any occasion!

Order online at the wonderful WH Smith and use the code **FLAVOUR50** to drop the price to a bargain £10!

Voucher is active now and expires on Sunday 14th January 2024. To redeem online, simply add a copy of FULL-ON FLAVOUR to your basket and apply the voucher code FLAVOUR50 in the promo code box. It can't be used in conjunction with any other promotion codes, vouchers or discount code. Offer excludes delivery costs. Full T&Cs available at [www.whsmith.co.uk/terms](http://www.whsmith.co.uk/terms)

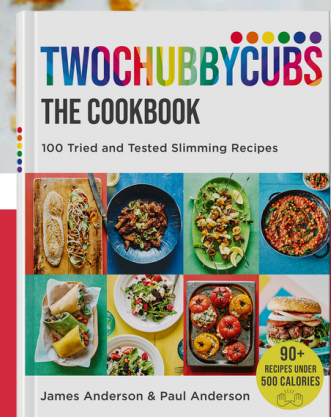




Our most recent comparison photos, taken five years apart in Copenhagen. Around 10 stone loss each, and a beard you could slice your Christmas ham with. We follow our own recipes: we are what we eat!







# PERFECT ROASTIES

- Maris Piper potatoes – 2 medium ones (about 360g) will make enough for one person, and scale up accordingly
- vegetable oil (nope, not olive oil or sunflower – go old school!)

Peel the potatoes perfectly. Then cut them on the diagonal into decent-sized chunks. Put them into a pan of salted water so they're covered, and boil for 7 minutes

Drain off the water, then pop the lid on and give the potatoes a good rough and tumble until they fluff up – if some break apart, it doesn't matter – more crispy bits later. Let them sit in the pan with the lid on for an hour.

Preheat the oven to 200°C fan. Take a shallow roasting pan and pour in about 1cm (1/2 inch) of vegetable oil. Pop it on the top shelf of the oven for 10 minutes, to heat up.

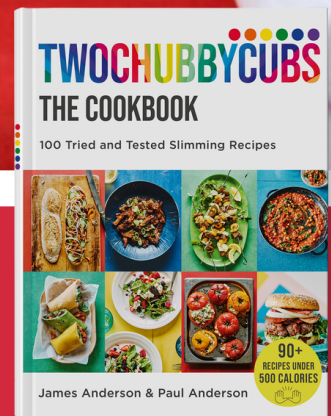
Working quickly and carefully, place the potatoes in the hot oil, giving each one space to breathe and coating them with the oil – add the bits of potato that fell off too, they'll be like potato crackling – then straight back into the oven for 20 minutes.

After 20 minutes, out comes the tin, turn and baste the potatoes, and back in.

Repeat after another 20 minutes. One more turn and baste, then leave them in for another 10 minutes.

After 10 minutes out they come, assuming they're golden and full of crispy edges!





# CHERRY BAKEWELL SHOTS

- 4 digestive biscuits
- 100g (3½oz/½ cup) extra-light soft cheese
- 100g (3½oz/½ cup) fat-free Greek-style yoghurt
- a few drops of almond extract
- 1 small tin of cherries in juice

Get together some fancy long shot glasses if you have them, or swap them out for wee ramekins.

Crush up your biscuits (in your old tin-can) and line the bottom of each glass.

Mix together the cheese, yoghurt and almond extract.

Before spooning the mixture on to the biscuit crumbs, take some of the juice from the cherries and swirl it through – don't aim to turn the whole lot pink, but to have some nice swirly-does through the mix.

Spoon it on, and top with the cherries.





# TURKISH POACHED EGGS

- 600g (1lb 5oz) fat-free Greek yoghurt
- 4 cloves of garlic, crushed
- a pinch of salt
- 40g (1½oz) butter
- 1 tbsp dried chilli flakes
- 8 eggs

In a bowl, whisk together the yoghurt, garlic and a pinch of salt, and set aside (at room temperature).

Gently melt the butter in a small saucepan and add the chilli flakes, then keep warm.

Fill a large pan with water and bring to the boil, then reduce to a simmer.

Crack an egg into a small bowl, carefully pour into the water, and cook for 3–4 minutes.

Remove with a slotted spoon and drain on a tea towel. Repeat with the remaining eggs.

Divide the yoghurt among four plates and top with 2 eggs each. Drizzle over the butter.







# LAMB BOLLOCKS

- 1 onion, finely diced
- 3 cloves of garlic, crushed
- 2 tsp ground cumin
- 1 tsp ground coriander
- 1 tsp dried chilli flakes
- 1 x 400g (14oz) tin of chickpeas, drained
- 400g (14oz) lamb mince
- 2 tsp mint sauce

Heat a small frying pan over a medium heat and spray it with a little oil. Add the onion and cook for 3–4 minutes.

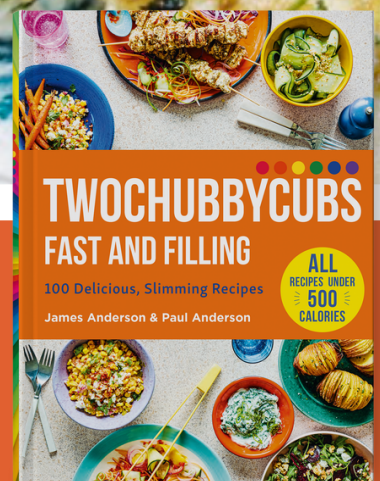
Add the garlic, cumin, coriander and chilli flakes and cook for another 2 minutes, then remove from the heat and set aside to cool.

Pop the chickpeas into a food processor and blitz until smooth.

In a bowl, mix together the chickpeas, cooked onion mix, lamb mince and mint sauce.

Spoon out about a tablespoon at a time of the mixture and roll it into balls. Repeat until you've used all the mixture.

Spray a large frying pan with a little oil and place it over a medium heat. Add the balls to the pan and cook until brown and cooked through, about 10–15 minutes.







# CHEESY MEATY TACOS

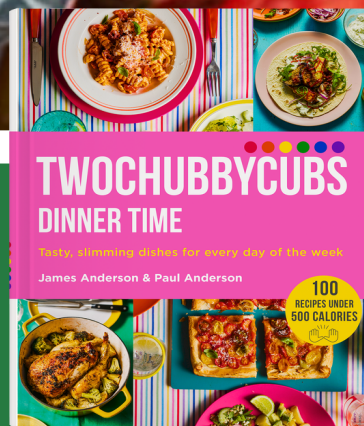
- 1400g (14oz) lean beef mince
- 1 brown onion, finely diced
- 4 sesame seed buns, sliced in half
- 4 tablespoons reduced-fat Thousand Island dressing
- 1/2 an iceberg lettuce, sliced
- 16 sliced gherkins (or as many as you like)
- 75g (2 1/2oz) Cheddar cheese, grated

Spray a large frying pan with a little oil and place over a medium-high heat. Add the mince and cook for a few minutes, until browned.

Meanwhile, bring a small saucepan of water to the boil and add the onions. Simmer for 30 seconds, then drain in a sieve and set aside.

While the mince is still cooking, divide the dressing between the bun halves and spread. Add a couple of slices of gherkins to each bun half and sprinkle over the lettuce and diced onion.

When the mince has finished cooking, spoon on to the bun halves and sprinkle over the cheese.







# JAMES' STICKY BELLY

- 500g (1lb 2oz) pork belly
- 2 tablespoons + 2 teaspoons rice wine vinegar
- 1 tablespoon + 1 teaspoon dark soy sauce
- 1 shallot, finely diced
- 2 tablespoons light soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon honey
- 1 cinnamon stick
- 2 star anise
- 3 spring onions, sliced

Slice the pork belly into small strips. Place in a sandwich bag with 2 teaspoons of rice wine vinegar and 1 teaspoon of dark soy sauce, and leave to marinate for an hour.

Place a frying pan or a wok over a medium heat and spray with a little oil. Add the shallot and fry for 3–4 minutes, until lightly browned.

Add the pork belly strips and cook for 5 minutes, until they too are starting to brown, then add the rest of the rice wine vinegar and dark soy sauce, the light soy sauce, honey, cinnamon stick and star anise and mix well.

Add 200ml (7fl oz) of water, stir and bring to the boil, then reduce the heat to low and cover with a lid. Leave to simmer for 1 hour, then remove from the heat.

Serve the pork over rice or noodles, sprinkled with the sliced spring onions.







# SAUSAGE TART

- 2 red onions, finely sliced
- 1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
- 4 reduced-fat sausages
- plain flour, for dusting
- 1 × 320g (11oz) sheet of light puff pastry
- 2 teaspoons wholegrain mustard
- 100g (3½oz) reduced-fat soft cheese

Preheat the oven to 200°C fan/425°F/gas mark 7.

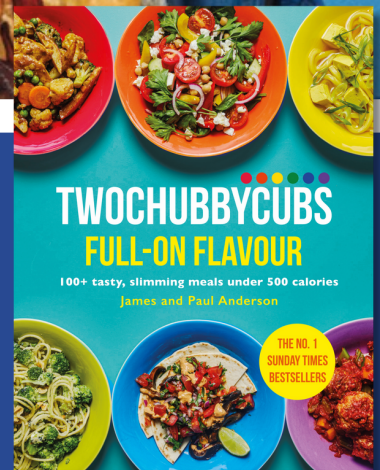
Spray a large pan with a little oil and place it over a medium heat. Add the onions and cook for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally, until softened, then add the balsamic vinegar and cook for another 2–3 minutes.

While the onions are cooking, score the sausages with a knife and remove the casings, then gently break the sausage meat into chunks.

Sprinkle a little flour on your worktop. Lay out the pastry and score a 1cm (½ inch) border around the edge, then place it on a lined baking sheet.

Mix together the mustard and the soft cheese and spread it over the pastry, making sure not to go beyond the scored edges, then gently top with the caramelised onions and the chunks of sausage meat.

Bake in the oven for 15–20 minutes, until golden.







# RETRO PRAWN COCKTAILS

- 1kg (2lb 4oz) peeled raw prawns, cleaned and deveined
- 4 tablespoons light mayonnaise
- 1 tablespoon tomato ketchup
- 1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
- 1 iceberg lettuce and 1 cucumber
- 1 avocado
- 1 lemon
- 1/4 teaspoon paprika

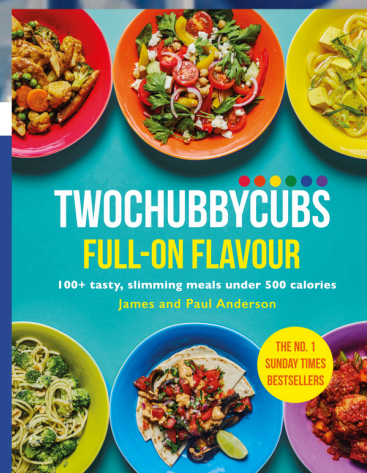
Bring a large pan of water to the boil. Add the prawns and poach for 2–3 minutes, until they turn pink, then drain and leave to cool.

In a bowl, mix together the mayonnaise, tomato ketchup, Worcestershire sauce, and a pinch of salt and pepper.

Chop the lettuce and cucumber into small pieces and place in serving glasses or bowls. Slice the avocado and remove the stone, then gently scoop out the flesh and dice into small pieces. Add to the serving bowls.

Add the prawns to the bowls and squeeze over the lemon juice.

Finally, spoon over the sauce and chill for at least 30 minutes. Serve with the paprika sprinkled on top





# OUR CHRISTMAS

One of my earliest Christmas memories involved being crowded into our tiny village church on Christmas Eve for a carol show with my sister. You must understand that we weren't raised as god-fearing sort, but simply two kids who knew that there was a free selection box given to any of the village children who would stand up and bang out a few lines of 'O Come All Ye Faithful' before the old guard settled in for the night. In the somewhat austere age I grew up in such a freebie could never be overlooked and if it meant sitting in a draughty village church for an hour picking at the seams of a dusty hassock, well, needs must.

I had done my bit of Little Donkey, sat through nine hundred verses or so of The Holly and the Ivy and was just starting to get fidgety when the huddled audience were asked if anyone else would like to come up to the front and sing. The relief I felt that I'd soon be home working my way through a 99p Woolworths chocolate selection (the gift-card 'with love from your good friend, Jesus' popped straight into the bin) whilst I watched the special kids edition of the Crystal Maze was short-lived. From the back of the church a tremulous voice replied 'I'd like to give it a go' from an old woman who, even to my innocent little eyes, looked as though she may as well stay in the church after the service because she wouldn't be long coming back, albeit not to the jolly tune of Good King Wenceslas played by Evelyn on the piano. She shuffled down the aisle at a glacial pace, eyes fixed firmly on the rector. Rector? It almost killed 'er - she had COPD, a weak heart, a gammy leg and a luxurious moustache and it was a fair distance to the chancery, god bless.

But when she sang, it was beautiful. Maybe it was the acoustics of the old church, maybe it was delirium from the fumes off the old gas heater, who can say - but her voice singing Silent Night by herself in the candlelight was just incredible. It just felt so...Christmassy. In the thirty or so years that followed that night, I've never once felt the inclination to head back into a church aside from familial obligation. Once for a wedding, and once again when my nana died, and even then I got a dirty look for laughing when we had to sing '...the purple-headed mountain' from All Things Bright and Beautiful. That was a lot of judgement from a vicar who spent the first five minutes of the eulogy espousing the life well-lived of a woman called Elsie, instead of the legend that was Dorothy. But now, when I think of Christmas, I often think of that night in the church, and I mention it now because it speaks to the wider message I want to bring up at the end.





# OUR CHRISTMAS

Now before we continue, this is of course a twochubbycubs booklet and therefore you might expect the intro to deal with both of our Christmases, but well, no. Paul's contribution to memorable Christmases extend to exactly one: the time the electrics blew and his mother's boyfriend, presumably finding a moment between running the waltzers and picking his tooth with a cocktail stick, decided to fix the situation himself. He wasn't an electrician. In doing so, he managed to put the lights back on but also rendered the cooker 'possibly' live to the touch. Not wanting to risk electrocution and death, the two things all but guaranteed to put a dampener on festivities, they made do with microwave meals by the light of the Christmas tree, the hairs on the back of their neck buzzing with a little more than festive cheer.

There were no such flirtations with death in our house, though granted my sister and I didn't grow up in the Dickensian workhouse that seems to be the mainstay of Paul's stories. There was the Christmas my parents had a little too much Christmas cheer on Christmas Eve and, when returning home, my mother tumbled in the living room and struck her head off the fireplace. In any other world this would be the start of the Christmas episode of Eastenders but not us: we simply had most of Christmas upstairs in their bedroom whilst my mother sat with an ice-pack on her noggin. You may think such an accident should have necessitated a trip to hospital but us Northern folk are made of stronger stuff: the remedy my parents came up for me bursting my nose, bouncing my head off a doorframe or falling off a bike onto my face (all separate accidents) was always the same: a tea-towel and an order to 'get on with it'.

Of course, we can't pretend that presents didn't matter to us growing up, because everyone likes a gift when they're young. Christmas morning meant a quick snout through our stocking to see what chocolate we had been given then downstairs to start opening presents: dad with the bin-bag for the paper, Mum with her tribute-to-William-Wallace-in-Braveheart hairdo making sure my sister and I took turns and played fairly. One year I received a Spectrum ZX, another year a Mega Drive: both parents doing their utmost to make sure I stayed in my room for the next twelve months. A favourite family memory was the receipt, from a long-addled but cherished aunt-of-an-aunt, of a plastic violin-shaped clock that burst into tinny song every half hour. Not on the hour as you'd expect, but instead twice as much joy. Quite literally, actually, as it was Beethoven's Ode to Joy that burst asunder for a solid minute. It was one of those gifts you see advertised in those slight magazines that fall from Sunday newspapers, chock-full of wide shoes, discreet containers to urinate into and those awful tan and coral chinos that men of a certain vintage live in.





# OUR CHRISTMAS

Please don't think us awful, but that little violin clock was chucked onto the coal fire 'accidentally' by the time five renditions had played out. In what was perhaps what we deserved, we'd forgotten to take the batteries out of the clock before hurling it into the flames, something we only realised a few minutes later when there was a loud crack from the fire and a lump of burning coal tumbled onto the fireside rug.

Writing about the worst gift I ever received makes me sound a little snitty – be gracious in receiving and all that – but we've all had something that left us mystified or worried we had somehow upset the sender. Mine was a badge-making set I received from another distant aunt (I don't so much have a family tree as a forest riddled with Dutch Elm disease) which perhaps would have tickled my creative pickle at six or seven, but not at fourteen years old. I remember it clear as day: a straight-outta-Saltaire child no more than five years old grinning that toothy, manic smile reserved only for those children who shut spiders into matchboxes, holding up a selection of gaudy, plastic badges. The badge adornments included such happening phrases as 'YOU'RE IT' and 'RADICAL' and 'My father has a hedge-fund portfolio and I ASSURE you he will be hearing about this'. OK, so I made the last one up.

I looked at it and wondered out loud why someone would think a bearded teenager (I blossomed early, like a springtime snowdrop soused in Lynx Atlantis) whose main interests at the time were masturbating, finding a free moment to masturbate and hiding evidence of my extensive masturbation could possibly find a use for it. Perhaps if I had been able to print a badge saying 'Knock first, for the love of God' or 'Don't lift up my mattress without protection' I could have found a use for it, but no such luck. I wish I could say I gave it away to a more willing recipient but alas, as time travel back to the 80s hadn't then been invented, I couldn't. It went in the bin.

Unlike other situations in my life, I've always preferred to give rather than receive. I was like this even in childhood: I'd save whatever money I could from around September onwards so I could get a really good Christmas present for everyone at Christmas. It meant a lot to me that everyone had something they would want, or use, or at least smile politely at me about when I asked where their gift had disappeared to in January.





# OUR CHRISTMAS

It helped growing up in a village where the only chance to spend pocket money was when the ice-cream van came, and that wasn't exactly a common occurrence once the schools went back. My sister and I, together with a daring duo of friends, would spend the Autumn washing cars (badly) and cutting grass (appallingly) and selling apples and gooseberries we had been allowed to pick (stolen) from people's gardens around the village. The last part was a sweet deal actually: we'd sell whatever fruit we had picked from the top of the village to those at the bottom, and vice versa. Must have caused havoc when it came to making pies for the harvest festival and the ladies would go out into the garden to pick their wares only to find them picked clean.

On the 1st December I'd earn another fiver from my mother by delivering all of the family Christmas cards around the village, although we had one year where half of our friends must have thought we hated them as they received no card at all. That was due to me dropping a clutch of cards into a puddle as I power-minced around the village and then hiding the soggy evidence of my crime inside my beanbag at home. I know, I know: I too am surprised I didn't have an ASBO.

Having squirreled away what I could, my nana (you remember, don't you – Elsie from earlier) would take me and my sister up on the bus to Hexham to buy gifts. It was never anything flashy but it was all well-earned and so it meant that much more. I remember buying my mother a tin of Quality Street and a watch from the Argos catalogue – a little yellow heart-shaped face on a strap that I'm fairly sure turned her wrist the colour of badly-cooked sprouts by Boxing Day. I hid them both in my bedroom. Of course, as I was a greedy little sod, I spent the next few days taking one sweet at a time (though, on the hour, every hour) out of the tin, realising I could seal it back up with Sellotape, until the time came a week or so later to wrap all the gifts up and I had to confess ashen-and-sticky-faced to my nana what I had done when she picked up the tin only for it to all but float back down to the table as it was so light. After quite the telling off she bought me another, though she did make me wrap it there and then. My mother must have loved that watch: she clearly never wore it just in case it got scratched.





# OUR CHRISTMAS



When I moved out at the age of eighteen (not saying my parents were keen on my departure but my birthday card came with a Pickfords business card attached) Christmas changed again. After a year or two of sowing my wild oats around the country I bumped into Paul (pun intended), we became a couple and moved in together all within the space of about two weeks. We had absolutely no money for the first two years but we didn't need it: the flush of young love gave us plenty to do on those cold, winter evenings, I promise you. And for the other 23 hours and 57 minutes? We'd watch TV.

The lead up to our first Christmas was magnificent though: with barely any money between us, we decorated our flat with the sorriest little Christmas tree you can ever imagine: it looked (in fact, I think it was) like the top of an actual Christmas tree that someone had lopped off to get it into their car. You've seen more festive arrangements in a funeral parlour's window. We decorated it with some tinsel from the market that I'm fairly sure has given us both popcorn lung and some equally dire baubles: the type that fall off and crack if you so much as give them a passing glance. Didn't matter though, we were together and it was all we needed. Still is, to be fair.

Paul mentions that no Christmas at all would have still been preferable to the Christmas immediately before our first, which he spent in his rented room in a mansion in Portsmouth. He had moved there for work and had to stay close by in case he was called in. His hosts lived in the mansion and they spent the day reminding him of how fabulously wealthy they were (although fun-fact: they weren't, they just pretended to be – we found out later they were up to their eyeballs in debt and had their Range Rover repossessed) and how thoroughly unwelcome he was. They broke off for an orgy after Christmas dinner – his hosts, not Paul – which I have to give them some credit for. My notion of post-prandial sloppy Dickens is falling asleep in front of A Christmas Carol and pouring Baileys down my Christmas jumper. Paul took himself back upstairs to his room and watched the Eastenders special, using cheek slaps to drown out the cheek claps. Poor lad!





# OUR CHRISTMAS

With the above in mind and given his mother has talked to me about seven times in sixteen years, going to my parents for Christmas was always going to look like a good deal. My parents have been incredible with Paul since day one, welcoming him into the family like an old friend. My mother likes to refer to him as her second son, if only because she knows it gives me the shudder. I get my revenge in similarly petty ways: hiding tiny ducks around the house, turning her photos around, piping carbon monoxide through the letterbox whilst she sleeps. I knew Paul was nervous about his full first day with my parents, but I also knew he'd love our Christmas, so he had no cause for concern.

Not least because it was actually me who managed to land myself in hot water almost immediately. See, in a fit of wheezy whimsy a couple of years previous, I had taken up smoking. It had started off as a reason to go outside in my first job working in a call-centre to flirt with a fit lad who worked in a different team and then developed into a full-blown, twenty-a-day habit. Luckily Paul also smoked so I didn't have to hide it, although I could never fess up to my parents because I'd have been thoroughly told off, although I maintain it's more than a little hypocritical to point your finger at someone in admonishment for smoking when that very same finger is yellow with nicotine.

We had been chatting for about half an hour, always a treat in itself as I got to watch Paul nodding sagely at my father who, thanks to his deep Geordie accent, may as well have been talking in Gujarati. Even now I'll occasionally catch Paul scrunching his eyes up in concentration as my dad rattles off a story and I just know he hasn't caught a single word. He's a good actor though, so no harm no foul. I was in the middle of what was doubtless some fabulous entertaining anecdote (I don't save them all for these intros, you know) when I reached for the cigarettes we had kept in Paul's bag and lit up without thinking.

Whoops. Bearing in mind I'd spent the previous twenty years obnoxiously coughing whenever they smoked and giving pained and concerned lectures about how they should give up, my status as Golden Child was now in severe jeopardy. My mother asked me what the hell I was doing – more shock than anger, I reckon – but I managed to smoothly and immediately course correct by explaining that Paul had peer-pressured me into smoking. He was furious with me in the car ride home, but I managed to smoothly and immediately course correct by explaining that my mother had a weak heart and I didn't want her stressing out. She, of course, does not have a weak heart, given it is hewn entirely out of granite.





# OUR CHRISTMAS



*nana*

And so, with my status as Golden Boy newly reinstated, our first Christmas passed in a blink. We had a wonderful time, and this would repeat over and over for the next decade or so. It would be remiss of me not to mention the time my nana died at the Christmas table, of course. For the first six or so years that Paul and I were visiting my parents for Christmas dinner, my mother would grimly warn us that this was probably my Nana's last Christmas given her age, and we 'should all make the most of it', although in the end she made more Christmas comebacks than Dr Who.

Each year we would pick her up in the car to drive her the 400m or so up to our house, then sit her down in 'the good chair' so she could officiate the present opening and explain, at considerable and almost unending length, how we had all spent too much on her and how she didn't need anything and how she used to walk uphill both ways to work back in her day and all they received for Christmas was a box of stones and how she had to climb 9ft snow-drifts just to use the toilet, and so on, and on, and on. I tease only because she would have loved it, and I miss her with all my heart.

Despite my mother's warnings about this being my nana's last Christmas, she always seemed in rude health, save for needing everything said to her in a volume ordinarily reserved for someone trying to rouse the sleeping inhabitants of a burning home. Then, as I mentioned, she died over Christmas dinner. We had all thoroughly enjoyed a table heaving with everything you could want from a dinner – plus parsnips – and were in that mindless hour where you're chatting politely and wondering at one point you can excuse yourself to raid the bathroom cabinet for Rennies and have a doze. Then we spotted my nana, lightly slumped forward and not moving.





## OUR CHRISTMAS

Can you remember in Neighbours when Helen Daniels died on the sofa and only Hannah realised but didn't want to say anything? They played the classic Sad Neighbours theme tune as it faded out on a static shot of Helen's greying lips. It was exactly like that, but with everyone round the table with crackers hanging in mid-air. We called her name, and there was nothing. We all just knew, and it was devastating. My mum's grim prophecy had come true, albeit at the worst possible time. Or maybe, on reflection, the best possible time – because what a time to go, surrounded by family and full of good food.



*not my nana*

After sharing despairing looks, it was my dad who went to double-check. He very gently laid his fingers on her neck like they do in Casualty, only for the shock of his ice-cold fingers to startle her awake with a snort like a stuck pig. It was like someone had run a live wire through her chair. Turns out that all the excitement of the day had been a little overwhelming and she had chosen to have a doze instead, thoughtfully clicking her hearing aid to 'mute' before doing so. I've never felt such a feeling of relief since, although it was tinged with a touch of greedy regret as there was a box of All Gold in her bag I couldn't help but covet. She stayed with us for a couple more years after that and you best believe we never let her live that down.

And so, the cycle repeats. There were some new additions to the family – a nephew and a niece which increased the volume of Christmas to an extraordinary level, our dog which meant we had a neat excuse not to stay past the point where our ears bled, a giant gazebo bought by my parents and filled with Christmas trees and cheer. For the last couple of years Paul and I have had Christmas to ourselves and we've gone down the route of taking the dog for a walk and building Lego in front of the soaps and it is just wonderful. We do of course still pop in and see the family because if my nana taught us anything, you never know when might be your last. That's a cheery note to end the reminiscing on, isn't it?





# OUR CHRISTMAS

Back to present time, then. I recently went over to see my parents to drop off their free copy of our newest book *Full-On Flavour*, with my mum's delight at not having to blow the dust off her purse entirely unhidden. I mentioned that I was writing about Christmases past in this little book and she said, with a touch of uncharacteristic sadness, that she always felt like they were unable to get us the 'best'. I, with similarly uncharacteristic sincerity, told her the truth: I've never had a bad Christmas. Never felt like I missed out, never felt like I did without. There may have been times when they struggled but we never knew because the food was good, everyone was happy and memories were made. Whether it's a smouldering violin clock, a singing granny, a shocking oven or when someone 'died' at the table, it's the time you have and how you spend it that matters the most.

When we think back to Christmases we remember, it isn't the presents we receive that stick in our mind. An exception can be made for those poor souls proposed to at Christmas, as though the pressure of pretending you like a gift you've received isn't quite enough to make your soul ache. Don't succumb to the pressure to buy buy buy, unless of course you're buying our books, nor spend time with folks who don't matter. And heck, if you don't like Christmas, if your idea of a good time is to draw the curtains and tell the carol singers to eff off, then that works just as well. Christmas is for you.

Anyway, must dash. There's delicious food to be made (by Paul), good cheer to spread (by me), and most importantly of all? Paul's badge-making set to wrap. Christmas this year will be RADICAL, and we hope the same goes for you.

Merry Christmas from your ho-ho-hoes,  
twochubbycubs x

