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45 TV GUIDE

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Siobhan McNally

DIARY OF A  
SINGLE MUM

Wishing you all a  
smelly Christmas

All this unseasonably warm weather is playing havoc with my Christmas shopping. I can't even buy anyone a Christmas jumper, in case they keel over from heat exhaustion on the big day.

And without the usual suspects of gloves, scarves and woolly socks to fall back on, my prezzie list is beginning to look a little gift-set heavy.

In hindsight, perhaps Grandpa doesn't need body lotion and hand cream with his shower gel, but it would be churlish to split up a box set that's been so carefully selected by the retailer to make maximum profit.

I did once make the mistake of asking in a well-known smellies' shop if perhaps I could choose the contents of my gift box.

"No," said the sales assistant unhelpfully, "the Lily of the Valley bath oil only comes with matching bath salts and foaming bath soak."

I argued: "But no one under 70 years of age uses bath salts, and no one over age six chooses bubble bath unless they want to sit in chemical soup. I just want the bath oil and body lotion in a presentation box."



Jesse, Siobhan and Boris

The assistant snapped: "If you want the body lotion, it comes with five mini soaps and a special edition foot massager."

I also find it helps to be armed with a translation guide to packaging terms when buying gifts at this time of year.

Extra-value or special-edition pampering sets means random items have been added to bulk it out. An essentials range invariably means it contains pointless products, such as toning lotion. And 'indulgent' or 'luxury' mean it's made with so many preservatives, your skin will burn and peel off.

Mind you, I once decided to avoid the high street altogether and make my own gifts. After spending twice as much money on the ingredients and little hamper baskets, I then ran out of time to make them, and had to rush out on Christmas Eve for last-minute gifts.

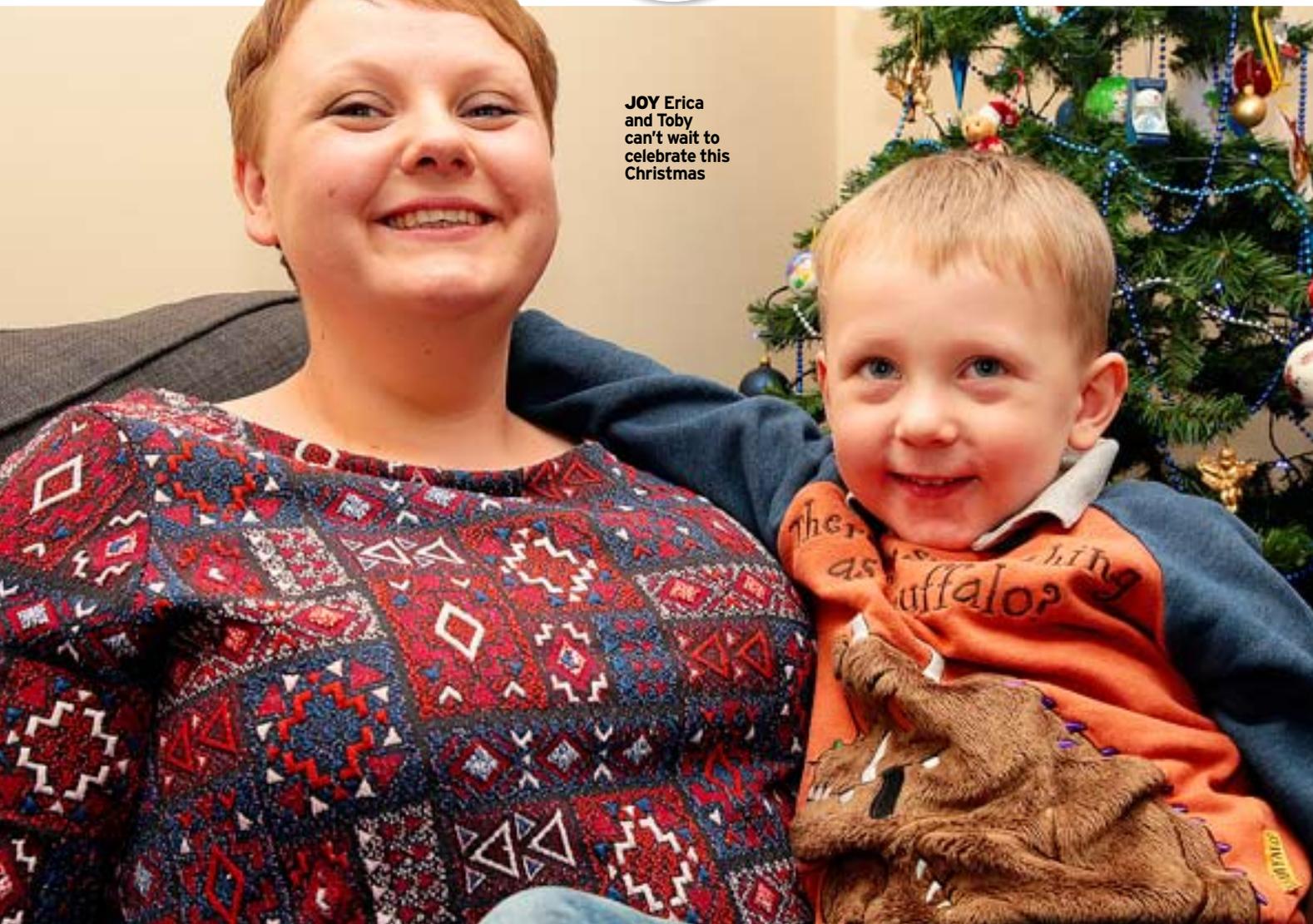
I'm not sure Robert Dyas was the ideal place to purchase them all, but practically everyone remembers the peg bag or suet bird balls I got them.

Then there was the year when I received five pairs of gloves from my family. Considering I wear the same old black leather pair every winter, I can't imagine what made them think I needed a whole new glove wardrobe.

It's the same with scarves - even if I live to be 100 and grow an extra two necks, I will never get round to wearing my entire collection.

Perhaps my six-year-old Jesse had the right idea for Christmas shopping this year. She bought chocolates for everyone from one of the pound stores - and they've even got until February to eat them.

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JOY Erica and Toby can't wait to celebrate this Christmas

wanted to help him," says Erica, who comes from Leeds.

"Ben was emotional but I just wanted to get on with fixing Toby. I knew that childhood leukaemia could be beaten and, having just been diagnosed myself, I knew they would put a treatment plan in place pretty quickly.

"I wanted to know what it was and for the doctors to get started on making him well again."

Toby spent five weeks in hospital having gruelling chemotherapy while Erica continued her treatment at Leeds Cancer Centre over at St James's University Hospital, two miles away on the other side of the city.

"It was really tough because I wanted to be with Toby all the time, but on the days I'd have my treatment, Ben would insist I rested at home," Erica says.

"We took it in shifts to make sure someone was with Toby all the time, but we also had Jake at home and wanted to spend time with him too.

"Thankfully, my mum Jennifer came over from Bolton to stay with us for weeks on end so we had extra help. Without it, I don't know how we would have coped.

"Ben had to stop coming to my treatment sessions - he needed to be with Toby so that was tough but I have a lovely friend who came with me."

Erica says she and Ben barely spoke about either diagnosis as they took turns to be with Toby and Jake.

"We just had to try and carry on as best we could," she says.

"There was nothing else to do but get on with it. It was our only option. I had just started my cycles of three-weekly chemo when Toby started his treatment. In some ways, it was actually helpful to know what he was going



INSPIRATION Toby stars in the TV ad

through. Initially, Ben and I were going to hide my cancer from the children for as long as possible, but when Toby was ill it meant I knew exactly what he was going through.

"I knew how tired he felt after treatment, I knew how hungry he would get when he was given steroids and I could show him how I had a permanent line fitted into my chest to administer drugs when he needed something similar.

"I saw the way he dealt with his cancer and how he never flinched when his hair fell out and it gave me an unimaginable amount of strength.

"The doctors said because Toby was so young, he probably thought having cancer was normal for every child his age. He didn't know any different so in some ways that was a blessing.

"Toby and I were already incredibly close, as I am to Jake too, but now we share this special bond because we are both survivors."

In November last year, Erica had a mastectomy and four more cycles of chemo to get rid of a small amount of cancer cells.

"When Toby and I were both having

medication, I would encourage him to take his daily medicine by telling him I had to have mine too," she says.

As Toby's intensive chemotherapy came to an end, the family were told his body was free of cancer cells. But the youngster still needs to take chemotherapy medicine and will have monthly chemo sessions until he is seven, to keep the leukaemia at bay.

"It felt tougher for Ben than us because we were actually going through it. He could only watch and I think he must have felt helpless.

"You never think cancer will happen to you. I knew cancer rates were almost one in two, but I always thought it was something older people got. Then I was diagnosed and Toby too.

"What's the chance of us both being diagnosed? It was probably more likely we would win the lottery. It feels unfair, but then who would this be fair on?"

Erica knows her family have been incredibly lucky to beat cancer so far, but knows that the future still remains uncertain.

As Toby plays on the carpet with his little brother Jake, now two, she says: "We know nothing can be taken for granted. My cancer was aggressive and could always come back.

"Toby is still having some treatment, but we've made it this far

“When we first saw the ad, we were so emotional and proud of Toby. Chemo is never nice and he was so brave”



BROTHERS Jake and Toby make a great team

■ Watch Toby in the advert tomorrow night on ITV during Emmerdale. Erica and Toby are supporting Cancer Research UK's campaign to beat cancer sooner. Cancer is happening right now, and you can do something to help right now. Visit cruk.org to find out more.