

MERRY BIRTHDAY

BRE EATON contemplates the affliction known as the December birthday.

Elliott Robinson is no bully. He's not the class biter. He's a caring, creative, outgoing boy. So when his mother invited 15 of his friends to his birthday party at the family's Middletown home when he turned 5 last year, why did only three kids show up?

He was born three days before Jesus Christ, that's why. How's a kid supposed to compete with that? He can't.

"Elliott has never complained about his birthday being so close to Christmas. He thinks that it's great that he gets tons of presents at once," Nicole Robinson, 31, said of her son. "But it adds a lot of stress to me."

"I have another son whose birthday is November 17th, so I barely have time to catch my breath before I have to plan for the Christmas season — gift buying, tree buying and decorating, cookie making, gift wrapping. Planning a birthday party on top of things gets tricky to schedule. Everyone is so busy that I feel like I'm imposing and adding to their stress if I ask them to another party."

And that's why this year Elliott's mother isn't even bothering to throw him an official birthday party but instead will observe her son's turning 6 when her family gathers to celebrate Christmas Eve. At least then she can guarantee a full choir singing "Happy Birthday."

Christians have been celebrating the birth of Christ since Roman Christians somehow decided Dec. 25 was his birthday to offer an alternative holiday to the pagan festival of Saturnalia, thus dooming all December babies who came after to never have their own cowboy- or princess-themed birthday party. Jesus may be others' personal savior, but the December birthday boy or girl tired of getting birthday presents wrapped in red and green paper might feel a little overlooked. Candles in a fruitcake anyone?

My dad was born on Christmas Day, 1954. As a child, though, I envied him. How cool was it to have Santa deliver your Christmas presents and



Birthday boy. Nicole Robinson's son Elliott turns 6 on Dec. 22. But he gets his cake on Christmas Eve when enough family can gather to sing him 'Happy Birthday.' PHOTO BY JACQUELINE MARQUE

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NICOLE ROBINSON, whose son Elliott's birthday is Dec. 22

your birthday presents? All on one day. But that's the point. His one day to feel special, to have everyone singing to him, wondering what he was wishing for when blowing out the candles, never really happened. Everybody was too distracted shaking their own presents under the tree to care about what he was unwrapping.

Which is why when he turned 40 we decided to make up for decades of un-birthdays

by throwing him a surprise birthday party — in July. We invited family and friends to a "summer barbecue." Following our plan to get him out of the house, we played Wiffle ball at the park. My uncle played the decoy by entreating my dad to help him find his "misplaced shoes" while the rest of us hurried home. Despite the ridiculous cover, my benevolent father, though sweaty and ready to eat, went along, only to

return to our house — now decked out with birthday décor — 10 minutes later, having found the "missing" shoes in the car.

"Surprise!" we exclaimed. "Happy birthday!"

For a moment, he was completely baffled — it was 92 degrees outside and there wasn't a Christmas tree in sight. Either his mother had confused him with one of his other seven siblings. Or maybe we all really were as crazy as he assumed all along.

"I never really felt gypped," he later revealed, which is why he was surprised to have an extra party in the first place, let alone in July. As a kid, receiving a present at all was special, as was being the *only* person who got to blow out the candles on the holiday dessert. It wasn't until he was married that he admitted to my mom he'd prefer to never see red and green icing on his birthday cake again.

The purposeful use of "Happy Birthday" specific decor, along with a summer party, will help parents make sure their "holiday babies (don't) get the short end of the peppermint stick," according to Amazingmoms.com. The Web site also warns parents to avoid the kill-two-birds-with-one-stone gift-giving strategy. Or worse, emphasizing the lesser amount of "birthday presents" by using Christmas wrapping paper and stacking them with all their other holiday gifts.

Non-December birthday readers may cringe, realizing they've committed such insensitive holiday-birthday combos. This year, instead of complaining about how many candles are on your own birthday cake, try being happy that at least it's not a Yule log.

December birthdays may miss out on a few gifts, but they're not doomed to live uncelebrated lives. Emily Dickinson (Dec. 10, 1830), Beethoven (Dec. 16, 1770) and Sir Isaac Newton (Dec. 25, 1642) also share the same birth month as Jesus and they seemed to turn out OK. Well, Dickinson never left the house. But they strived for greatness and finally earned the attention they

deserved. The world might have missed out on their literary, musical and scientific genius if they were distracted by warm birthdays in August.

Sarah Sturgis, 22, the Adventure Challenges program manager for the international child welfare charity Flying Kites in Newport said she never had complaints about her Dec. 30 birthday as a kid. In an effort to keep her day special, and unrelated to the holidays, her parents made sure that every Christmas decoration was put away on Dec. 26.

"I always get a second wave of gifts," Sturgis explained. While others sadly finished opening presents on Christmas, she looked forward to opening more just five days later.

But maybe we've had it wrong all along. It's not really the December birthdays that get ripped off. Just ask Casie Sullivan, whose birthday is Jan. 4.

"If you're born on Christmas Day, you feel like the whole world is celebrating you," said Sullivan 26, a service coordinator for Child & Family.

But after the climax of the holiday, everybody is partied out, she said. Nobody is interested in stuffing themselves with more sweets or buying more gifts.

Though her gifts were wrapped in paper that may have had been covered in snowy mountains rather than Santa, she was never fooled. "My dad rationalized saying, 'Well, your birthday is during the winter,'" Sullivan said.

Honestly, though, there are far worse things that could happen to a person than being born around Christmas.

"Having a December birthday isn't that bad," my father said. "The way I see it is that everyone else gets their one day, while people get to take vacation time each year in honor of *my* birthday!"

Through writing this article, Bre finally realized that her grandmother didn't really find her father in a stocking on Christmas morning.