

## Tommy's Birthdays

Tommy did not like birthdays, particularly his own birthday.

One day, about a month before his seventh birthday, Tommy said to his parents: "I'm not having any more birthdays. I hate them; I don't want them."

"Why?" they asked him in surprise.

"Because they make you get older," Tommy explained. "You get a year older each time. I don't want to get older. I want to stay six."

His parents laughed and told him not to be so silly. But when he screamed and tore up any seventh birthday cards that arrived early, they realized he was serious about it.

"I don't want a party," he shouted, "because it won't be my birthday. I don't want any presents either. I'm not going to get a year older."

"You can always say you're six again," said his Dad, trying to be helpful, "just like Auntie Jane who's always 21 each birthday."

"But she's only trying to cheat," said Tommy, "and it doesn't work. Anyone can see she's getting older. She still has *birthdays*, that's her problem. Birthdays make you get older."

"Don't be silly, Tommy," said his mother. "you still get older. Why look how much taller you are than you were a year ago."

"That's because I eat," said Tommy. "You can't help growing upwards if you eat. But getting older, means you stop growing upwards and get fatter instead. I don't want to grow outwards; I want to grow upwards."

His parents sighed not knowing quite what to say or do. They canceled the party because they were worried that Tommy would refuse to attend or he would scream or do something foolish. They hoped that when the presents came, Tommy would change his mind.

But he did not. He saw the presents in their wrappings and said: "They aren't mine, because I haven't got a birthday. I don't want them; throw them away!"

Tommy's parents wondered what to do. People might be upset if the presents were just sent back to the them. They wondered about giving the presents to a charity shop but they were worried that someone might recognize a present they had given to Tommy. What were they to do?

Tommy's older brother, Ben, had an idea.

"Is it true," he asked innocently, "that the Queen has two birthdays each year?"

"Well, sort of, Ben," they said.

"What do mean 'sort of'?" Ben asked.

"Well," they explained, "she has her real birthday on April the 21<sup>st</sup>, but she has an 'official' birthday each year in June."

"I see," said Ben, who actually knew that already. "My real birthday's in November, but my *official* birthday is the 14<sup>th</sup> of May."

"But that's Tommy's birthday," they said.

"I know," replied Ben. "But Tommy doesn't have birthdays any more, remember. It seems a pity to waste the day, so I think it would be best if it was my official birthday."

"I see," said his Dad. "you're just trying to be helpful."

"That's spot on, Dad," said Ben. "Just don't want to see the day going to waste."

"And," said his Mum, "it wouldn't have anything to do with Tommy's presents, I suppose."

"Tommy's presents?" said Ben. "Yes, I forgot those. Well, if it helps, I could have those as my official birthday presents, I guess."

His Mum and Dad grinned.

"I suppose," said Dad, "that you'll expect real birthday presents on your real birthday."

"Well, yes," said Ben. "that's what people get on their real birthdays. I bet even the Queen gets real presents on her real birthday."

So it was. Ben had two birthdays that year and Tommy had none. His parents had hoped that when he saw Ben with *his* presents, Tommy would change his mind and decide to have a birthday after all. But he did not change his mind.

He looked at the presents; there were one or two he would really have liked. But he did not want to get older. He was just cross that Ben had them.

"Ben's stupid!" he shouted. "He's going to get old faster with two birthdays a year!"

So it went on. Tommy had no seventh birthday and no eighth birthday. He would not go to other children's birthday parties either; he simply refused and his mother had to politely turn down the invitations with one excuse or another. Soon hardly anyone even bothered to invite him to a birthday party at all.

His parents had been worried that he might insist on staying in the same class at school as well; but he did not.

When his Mum had said that going up a class showed he was getting older, Tommy had replied: "No it doesn't. I could have stayed in the same class if I had wanted to; but that would be boring - doing the same stuff all over again. I thought I might as well go up with the others. But I'm not going to get old like them. They still have birthdays, the silly things."

Then one day, his teacher explained to the children how it was that the earth turned round each day so that each country took its turn facing the sun and then moving away from it. The teacher used a lightbulb for the sun and turned a small globe around with his hands; they had pulled down the window blinds so they could see the light from the bulb more clearly and how that light fell on the globe. Tommy watched fascinated as he saw Britain coming into the light and then going away and turning into the shadow, then back into the light again.

The teacher explained that this is what caused day and night and that it took twenty four hours for the earth to turn round on itself - or 'rotate', as he said.

Tommy had wondered about day and night before. He had thought it was something to do with the sun moving through the sky but he could never understand why the sun took longer in summer than it did in winter.

Now he saw that it was not the sun that moved, but the earth that rotated so that each county moved in and out of the sun's shadow. But he still did not understand why there was a difference between summer and winter.

He asked his teacher.

"That's a very good question, Tommy," said Mr Hamilton. "I'll try to explain."

So Mr Hamilton explained that the earth did not sit upright but rotated at an angle; and he showed them this with his small globe. Then he explained how the earth did not just rotate but that it circled round the sun, and that caused the different seasons.

So Mr Hamilton moved tables and chairs back and he slowly went round the light bulb and showed how in midwinter Britain was not in the light very much but in the shadow for much longer. Then he stopped quarter of the way round to

show what happened in Spring, then half way round to show the Summer and how Britain was in the light longer than it was in the shadow and then round to Autumn and back again to winter.

Tommy was absolutely fascinated and asked if he could take the earth round and rotate it. Mr Hamilton was delighted to find somebody so interested and let him do so.

“So,” said Tommy afterwards, “that's what makes the different seasons and that's what makes a year - the time it takes for the earth to go around the sun.”

“Exactly,” said Mr Hamilton, “and we go around the sun on it. Think of that!”

Tommy did think. Light was beginning to dawn in Tommy's mind and he was beginning to feel a bit foolish, but he did not want his teacher to know this.

“So, Mr Hamilton.” he said, “my Auntie Jane is silly saying she is 21 each year; she goes around the sun with the rest of us, so she must get one year older each time.”

“Exactly!” said Mr Hamilton, laughing. “Exactly! No one can escape the arrow of time.”

That phrase, “the arrow of time”, passed over the heads of most of the pupils; but it stuck fast in Tommy's.

When Tommy got back home after school that day, he said casually to his Mum: “I've been thinking, Mum, maybe I would like to grow up a bit - just to see what's like - growing up, I mean.”

“Oh,” his Mum replied, slightly surprised.

“Yes,” said Tommy, “just to see what it's like. But I have a bit of catching up to do. I mean, I ought to be eight and I'm only six, as you know.”

“Um,” his Mum murmured.

“Well, I thought,” continued Tommy, “maybe if I have a real birthday and an official one each year like Ben, it might help me catch up.”

His mother laughed; but from then on both Tommy and Ben had official and real birthdays each year, at least they shared some presents on each other's birthdays and thought they were rather special doing this.

From then on nobody enjoyed birthdays more than Tommy did. He was the life and soul of any party he went to and nobody ever thought of having a birthday party without inviting him.

Of course, Tommy did grow up. In fact, he became a famous physicist. But he never let a birthday go by without throwing a party; and Professor Tommy Hetherington's birthday parties became famous. People counted off the days to his birthday each year. No one ever wanted to miss one of Professor Tommy's birthday parties.