

mutterhood

a community of thought one idea at a time



2017

holiday countdown

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1. advent calendar

Tiny windows open to reveal one perfect treat. Felt pockets hide bright, sequined ornaments. Hand knit baby stockings, machine-stitched cornucopia, Santa holding a tiny chalkboard, red and green tissue paper wrapped packages numbered one to 25: The advent calendar tradition is alive and well, and this year it's come to mutterhood with our very own version.

Advent calendars as custom date back to the 1800s, when German Lutherans adopted the idea to mark the beginning of the Advent season, anticipating the birth of Jesus. These early calendars were religious in tone, featuring Bible verses, artwork depicting the nativity scene, poems, devotionals and hymns.

Today, advent calendars range from religious to culinary to Elf on a Shelf, with a lot of variation in between. Most popular are the ones you buy featuring a Christmas scene on the front with punch-out windows holding tiny chocolates, starting with day one to 25 (average Advent calorie count: 250). Others involve ornaments, puzzle pieces, books — really anything you can think of to count down 25 days. (One year I knit tiny mittens and hats for my kids, and filled one each day with candy, a note, a gift card and other stuff I came up with that for two kids equalled 50 items and that's no small task, my friends.)



This year, we thought why not do our own? So we created the first ever *mutterhood* advent calendar, and we'd love for you to join our countdown. There'll be 25 days of words and pictures, all original, that celebrate different traditions of the holiday season, plus stories and hopefully a little humor to help us get through it together.

We hope you enjoy it, and we wish you all the most joyful of holiday seasons.

~ ckb & efh

2. oh Christmas tree

Oh Christmas Tree, in four scenes:

The day after Thanksgiving, bring down the box from the attic. Place in usual corner. Open box, pull out three pieces of pre-lit artificial Nordic pine. Screw the middle section to base, then attach top section. Gently pull apart branches to form conical pine tree shape and tuck in lights. Insert plug into outlet and stand back. Smile at white lights at bottom and top of tree; frown at dark middle section. Unplug lights, drive to Home Depot for box of white lights. Return home, tuck new lights among middle-section branches, plug into new extension cord also purchased at Home Depot, reattach top section, plug pre-lit strand into extension cord, plug extension cord into wall, stand back and admire. Notice new lights are LED while pre-lit strands are not. Decide it's good enough and move on to ornaments. Finish decorating and admire. Eat leftover pie.

Or

Thanksgiving weekend, get the kids up early and load everyone in the car. Stop at Dunkin Donuts on the way out of town. Drive three hours to the Christmas tree farm you went to when you were a kid. Pull into the parking lot, buy more hot chocolate and apple cider doughnuts, hop on the horse-drawn carriage and ride out to the trees. Carrying the hack saw, walk the rows to find the perfect tree. Lay belly-down on the cold, frozen ground and start sawing. Timber. Drag the tree by the trunk back to the wagon and ride back to the parking lot. Tell kids to use the bathroom while you and the guy tie the tree to the roof of the car. Start home. Check the rearview mirror after half an hour to see everyone asleep. Arrive home, untie the tree, drag it up the front stairs, set it up in the red and green stand, add water, admire. Decorate, then take a nap.

Or



The first Saturday of December, pile everyone into the SUV and drive to Bob's Tree Farm, the temporary tree lot in the abandoned greenhouse and nursery four blocks from your house. Pull into the lot, park next to the dirty white mini-trailer where the guys stay warm, pile out and walk the aisles of balsams, spruces and frazier firs. Touch branches, estimate height, gasp at price. Let kids pick one out; ignore bare spot in front. Find the guy to give it a fresh cut and tie it on top of the car. Back out carefully, avoiding the family standing behind your car and the empty beer cans scattered on the gravel. Drive home slowly while the tree rolls around the roof. At home, untie the tree, pull it off the car, drag it up the front stairs and into the living room. Prop it into the red and green stand, spend 20 minutes getting it to stand up straight, sweep up needles, arrange tree skirt. Comment that the pine smell always reminds you of Christmas. Decorate, then watch college football.

Or

"Screw the tree, I'm too tired to put it up this year." — Mom.

3. say cheese

'Tis that time of year - the annual holiday photo shoot.

Over the years I've approached this tradition with the zeal of an art director on a blockbuster movie.

I've sifted flour over my kids to make it look like snow. (It didn't.)

I've made them wear reindeer antlers and Santa hats on their heads. I've wrapped them in Christmas lights, glued light bulbs to their noses, and made them stand in the snow, the rain and one year, sleet. I've posed them in front of enough Christmas trees to open our own lot, and they've sat



on Santa's lap in a sleigh full of ways — with their cousins, with and without props, in matching shirts, matching pajamas and in festive holiday sweaters. They've role-played everything from elves to rappers to the actors on the Stepbrothers movie poster.

Without fail, every shoot served up side dishes of tears, frustration, anger, swearing (me), threatening (me again) and more tears (yup, also me.)

So during this Thanksgiving break, each day after their 14-hour REM cycles were complete, I greeted my two college kids with elaborate plans for this year's holiday card picture. And each day they mumbled excuses, until we were out of days.

These boys were done with my photo shenanigans.

My final threat — to send out a drawing of them as stick figures — was met with shrugs and offers to forward me selfies. So I called it.

Our 2017 holiday card will be a blurry photo of us being photobombed by a stranger at a summer wedding. It's the best I can do. That's good enough, right? It's not a competition, is it?

But just in case, can anyone Photoshop together a bunch of selfies and make it look like it's snowing? Asking for a friend.

4. love

A few years ago I discovered the perfect balm for holiday stress: The Hallmark Channel's Countdown to Christmas.

Turns out I'm not the only one. Last year alone, Hallmark's Christmas programming drew more than 70 million total viewers — so while some of you might not want to admit it, I know that, like me, you too started watching these uplifting romances (twenty-one new ones this year!) back in late October, when Hallmark kicked off the 2017 season.



There's something comforting about the formulaic sameness of these servings of holiday cheer, which typically go something like this:

A woman, always single/divorced/engaged to the wrong guy, is sent as part of her job to a town named something Christmasy, like Holiday Town or Angel Falls. She may also have a Christmasy name, like Holly or Noelle.

In order to keep her job she must do something she knows is wrong and will forever ruin the town and all the wonderful people she has come to love. The

person who stands in her way turns out to be a single/divorced/engaged-to-the-wrong-gal guy deeply in touch with his feminine side. He'll pose no threat whatsoever to the woman and also passionately supports a woman's right to be a career gal if that's what she truly wants.

The woman and man are of course attracted to each other but because of a total misunderstanding/being on opposite sides/a shameful past they aren't able to admit it. Eventually, a wise older person/child/family member helps them overcome the obstacle, save the town and its people, and finally share several chaste kisses.

The end.

In our (okay, my) defense, these mindless, uplifting, love-conquers-all sweet treats are the Christmas gifts that keep on giving. These folks live in pretend worlds, where everyone is nice and kind, and they all get their happily ever after. These days, that seems like something we can all wish for.

Plus, where else can you find not one, but two movies about a gal's passion for ice sculpting?

5. reflection

Chicago after a snowfall, exactly one year ago today. The weather has finally turned cold, bringing with it a reminder of stillness and beauty in the reflection of light.



6. cookie party

Driving home from my nephew's birthday party last December we passed the Fannie May Candy House. We'd never stopped there before, but this time I told my husband to turn left, into the parking lot. My friend Lisa's holiday cookie exchange started in one hour, and I had nothing to bring — no cookies, no candy, no cupcakes, nothing.

I had no excuse. I'd known about the party since the invitation arrived in early November — longer even, because this was an annual event — but for whatever reason I hadn't left enough time that morning to bake my grandmother's molasses cookies. I wasn't above buying professionally decorated cookies, but the one bakery we passed on the way home was closed. I had to improvise, so Candy House it was.

"I didn't know they sold cookies here," my husband said, shutting off the engine.

"They don't, I'm buying peppermint bark," I said, opening the door and sprinting inside. Three tins and \$60 later I stood in my kitchen contemplating the seven-by-nine-inch rectangles of dark chocolate topped with white chocolate flecked with peppermint candy.

"What's your plan?" my husband asked. I had 35 minutes until the party started.

"I'm going to break it into small pieces and put them in these!" I said, emerging triumphantly from the pantry holding a package of red and white striped cupcake liners. I needed to bring three dozen somethings to the party; I figured there was more than enough bark to gather that much in broken pieces. I searched for a knife.

Looking not a little like Norman Bates in *Psycho*, I stabbed the bark over and over. But because it was so thick, instead of bite-sized morsels I ended up with either big pieces or shavings, none of which fit in my festive holiday cups.

"Maybe you should cut it in squares," my husband said, edging away.

Ten minutes to go.

Desperate, I took his advice and started chopping. Better, but as I filled the cups the heat from my fingers caused the chocolate to melt. I rushed through all 36 cups, licked the peppermint chocolate off my fingers, grabbed my coat and car keys, and waved goodbye.

"Are you going to tell them you bought the candy?" my husband asked.

It was an innocent-enough question, but it brought up a real moral dilemma. See, my mother was a big Christmas baker. Every year, she made her own sugar cookie dough (with lemon zest to brighten the flavor), as well as fudge, peanut brittle and seven-layer bars. She decorated homemade gingerbread boys and girls for each of us, plus our friends and neighbors. One year, she slaved over a traditional buche de noel that looked exactly like a fallen log with white meringue mushrooms and piped holly, sprinkled with confectioner's sugar to look like snow.

She would've been aghast at my store-bought shame.





At the party, I added my platter to the dozens of trays, baskets and plates that covered Lisa’s dining room table. Overall, the Christmas treats looked beautifully homemade, like they’d taken people a lot of time to make. I spotted a plate filled with expertly frosted ornament cookies (obvious bakery purchase) and a couple of platters with Pillsbury slice-and-bake Rudolph and Christmas tree designs. I edged my platter closer to the Pillsbury cookies and walked into the kitchen.

I thought it would be easy to dodge the question, but “What did you bring?” turns out to be the No. 1 conversation starter at a cookie exchange. Everyone likes to hear stories about holiday baking, and other people’s family traditions from childhood. Lacking the cozy backstory to Fannie May candy, I hedged as best I could.

“What did you bring this year?” my friend Jenny asked, as we returned to the dining room and surveyed the cookie table. I pointed to my platter, which now held fewer than half the original number of peppermint-bark filled muffin cups. They were going fast, a fact which filled me with undeserved satisfaction. Jenny reached for one, and asked the question I’d dodged for the last hour:

“Did you make this yourself?”

It was the moment of truth: Would I confess, or would I end up with coal in my stocking? I thought for a second, but I just couldn’t do it.

“I wish,” I said, “but no. It’s Fannie May.”

Jenny popped a piece in her mouth. “It’s delicious,” she said. “I’d totally tell people I made it.”

7. let it snow



I step in frozen footsteps and make my way past a patch of dry blacktop where the car was parked. A sudden gust of wind dances loose powder snow across the bare pavement to remind me of the task at hand.

We're old-school (or cheap) when it comes to clearing our 120 feet of driveway — no gas-guzzling, snow-throwing machine for us. Instead we shake our fists at snowstorms, grit our teeth at blizzards, and double-layer extremities to face sub-zero temperatures head-on. We're the ones shoveling every two hours during a storm just to keep up with it, alone among our snow-blowing neighbors who opt instead to wait it out.

Satisfaction is short-lived at best, what with city plows that careen down the street and overturn piles of snow back onto the driveway, disturbing the order I've just created. I hear the rumble as they start down the block and despite myself I stop what I'm doing and watch the snow tumble back into the driveway, staring at the driver and shaking my fist (in my mind) at the unnecessarily Sisyphean task.

The character of the snow churned up by those steel blades is different than regular driveway snow. When it's cold enough the snow piles up like sand, with an airy sugar layer topping more compact, dense powder. Beneath that, a layer similar in weight to a damp mix of butter, sugar and cinnamon tints the snow light brown like chai or a creamy latte. Then it's two feet of ice, frozen solid.

The strategy is shovel by striation: take the sugar layer off and let the snow below turn its face to the sun and melt, which if all goes well means you're getting to slush and soon you'll hit pavement. Pavement yields access to the street grate, slush turns to water, and you can use the shovel to push, not scoop, the snow right into the sewer below the street.

If you listen hard enough, you hear actual water running somewhere below where you're standing, echoing beneath the snow-covered street. Rivulets of water carve tiny rivers through the ice on the curb, creating frozen ledges that I smash with my boots. Those too get shoveled to the grates, and finally there's the concrete, and I straighten up, hand to back, and stretch.

I sigh, pull my hat back down on my head, and turn back to the work that remains. Section by section, scooping sugar to sand to ice then slush, then out to the street and stomp it to water, then push it to the grate and trickle and plop. It sounds like water running down a well.

I hurry, because I know that in an hour or so the puddles will freeze to slush and then to ice, and the mailman's boot tracks will freeze in place. I'll step in them tomorrow morning as I make my way down the driveway after the plow comes again.

Spring seems far away.

8. handmade

I learned traditional domestic arts at an early age, taught by great aunts and uncles who were our official babysitters while our parents worked. My siblings (both male and female) and I learned the basics: how to sew, cook, bake, and clean. But we also learned office and warehouse work in the family business and how to use tools to build and fix things. It was early gender neutral camp.

Beginning in my teen years I employed those skills in making Christmas gifts for family and friends. I've given hand beaded evening bags, needlepoint Santas, seasonal quilts and assorted crocheted items. I've designed and built decorative objects, baked sweet treats and made personalized ornaments. Through it all I've maintained a well-known aversion to being pegged as anything resembling a traditional domestic arts practitioner. And I kept my craft addiction mostly on the down low.

As the years went on, the pressure I put on myself to be Santa's best crafting elf went from simmer to boil. Each year I tried to one-up myself, either in quality or quantity or both. The circle of recipients grew. Quality control standards became more exacting for items to be deemed "gift wrap worthy." I deadlined myself so that personalized ornaments had to be distributed to dozens of people at Thanksgiving in order to be displayed on holiday trees. It stopped being fun. And well beyond domestic, it became a chore.



Thankfully, hundreds of seasonal markets touting one-of-a-kind and handmade items, and websites like Etsy that sell small-production goods, have filled the void. Crafting of all types has become popular again, and women in traditional roles and those in the workforce can all meet, say, at a knitting circle, without judgement on either side. Christmas has never been craftier. Or more domestic.

Now I purchase handmade items from a wide range of people to supplement my Christmas list. But I haven't completely gone cold turkey. I'd love to talk more about it, but I have to finish two dozen monogrammed Christmas stockings. No pressure.

9. holiday reds

Remember the I Spy books? We do. Here's our I Spy challenge for holiday reds:



I spy a house, a wagon, and bows,
a white button mitten, a puppy who knows;
A snowman, a bell, a red glitter star,
nine Santas, a wreath and bright peppermint bars.

10. Krampus?

Like most families, we have certain traditions we enjoy during the holidays. One of them is heading to the Walnut Room in what used to be Marshall Field's for a holiday lunch and a day of shopping. When they were young, my kids visited Santa to list out what they wanted him to bring. Nice, right? We joke about who's been naughty and nice and maybe even buy some of that chocolate or licorice coal to indicate someone is on Santa's bad list. Harmless.

Here's a tradition I hadn't heard of until this year: Krampus. Apparently Krampus is one of Santa's friends in certain Alpine countries like Austria and Hungary. While Santa rewards those on the good list, his friend Krampus finds those on the naughty list and punishes them. With spankings from switches. If they're super naughty, he carts them off to drown. Or he eats them.

No roly-poly apple-cheeked fat man, Krampus traditionally has horns, one goat foot and one human foot, and is hairy all over. Today there are Krampus parades all over these countries, where young men dress as Krampus and drag chains and whips through the streets, scaring onlookers. For those intrigued, the 2015 Krampus movie can be added to your Frosty and Elf holiday films rotation.

Anyone out there celebrate Krampus? Personally I'm sticking with lunch and chocolate coal, but no



11. Christmas stories, a gift guide

There's no better gift than a good story, so with that in mind we offer a few bookish ideas for the people on your holiday shopping list.

Before Turner Broadcasting turned "A Christmas Story" into a Christmas Eve movie tradition, humorist Jean Shepherd told the charming tale in his memoir *In God We Trust: All Others Pay Cash*. In this funny, nostalgic book Shepherd spins tales from his post-war childhood in Hammond, Ind., with the same dry wit that marks Ralphie's quest for that Red Ryder BB gun. (Don't miss Shepherd's soliloquy on driving to the Indianapolis 500 every year with his father and neighbors.)



For kids, Ellen recommends Harvey Slumfenberger's *Christmas Present*, by John Burningham: Santa returns home after delivering presents on Christmas Eve to realize he forgot Harvey, whose present still sits at the bottom of his sack. Harvey lives at the top of Roly Poly Mountain which is far, far away, so Santa and his reindeer set out on an epic journey to deliver Harvey's present before he wakes up on Christmas morning.

Cathi's favorite read this year was Gail Honeyman's *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*, a novel which gives voice to a socially awkward woman while revealing the past that made her and the present that remakes her.

Up next is *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me*, National Book Award winner Sherman Alexie's memoir about his complicated relationship with his mother, and how his family shaped the man he became. Also on her list: *Improv Nation: How We Made a Great American Art*, Sam Watson's chronicle of the rise of improv comedy, its Chicago beginnings and how it spread into an influential art form with reach into all areas of art and society.

For those interested in visual storytelling, we suggest two gorgeous books: *Obama: An Intimate Portrait* by Pete Souza, masterfully captures the heart and soul of an American president and presidency; and *Annie Liebovitz: Portraits 20015-2016*. Liebovitz's portraits are beautifully lit and staged, and while this is her latest release any of her books provide ample photography inspiration.

Finally, if photography is your New Year's resolution, *Read This if You Want to Take Great Photographs* by Henry Carroll teaches the basics through plain talk and examples from some of the medium's best.

12. elves

It started as a whim one November day when, walking through Barnes and Noble, I spotted a pile of white boxes stacked against a wall. The sign said 30 percent off, so I wandered over and there it was: the Elf on the Shelf gift set. Looking at that distinctive red elf peering out at me through the clear plastic window, I made a snap decision. Why not, I thought, and bought it.

(Turns out I'd purchased the Spanish language version of the book, which is why there were so many, but whatever. The story's the same.)

Elf on the Shelf was a late addition to our family's holiday repertoire. I'd dismissed it before as too commercial: cute story, but the whole idea of hiding a doll in your house and telling your kids he was spying on them in order to report back to Santa? Kind of creepy.

Now however, the appeal to me was in the prankster aspect of the story. Our kids were teenagers when I brought home our elf, long past the mystery of Santa. I saw the elf, who we named Jerome (you have to give your elf a name in order to activate the magic), as a way to put some mystery back into December. In other words, I did it for me.

(A quick aside about the Elf on the Shelf phenomenon: Written and self-published in 2004 by a mother and daughter team, the book was originally promoted at toy trade shows and book signings. It began to pick up awards (I know) and sales went through the roof. In 2011 CBS aired "An Elf's Story," a 30-minute animated special; one year later, the elf made its debut as a float in the Macy's Thanksgiving parade. Which just goes to show that yes, there is a Santa.)

As for what to do with your own elf, 30 minutes on Pinterest is all you need to get started. There you'll find ideas for places to hide the elf, funny scenes to create for him, and ideas for pranks (gift wrap your kids' toilet, write messages on mirrors with lipstick, hang your elf



from the ceiling on a chain made of candy canes).

That first December with Jerome, I came up with more elaborate stunts (covering bedroom doors with gift wrap, sticking bows on mirrors) and scenes (Jerome making snow angels in powdered hot chocolate, or burying himself nose down in a bag of holiday M&Ms). Jerome became legend.

When our daughter went to college, I texted her a picture of Jerome's shenanigans each morning; this year, Jerome appears via group text to the whole family. Next December our son will also be away at school, and I'm confident Jerome will adapt to that as well. He's cool like that.

Recently I came across another display in Barnes and Noble, a familiar white box with (this time) an elf wearing white staring back at me: Elf on the Shelf: A Birthday Tradition. This one is a hard pass. Spying on kids for Christmas is one thing, but for their birthdays? Nah. Besides, there's only one elf for us.

Jerome will never share the spotlight.

13. Hannukah helper

Chag Sameach everyone!

That means Happy Holidays in Hebrew. I know this because I Googled it in honor of Hanukkah, which started yesterday and ends Dec. 20.

I also Googled the order in which candles on the menorah are lit and what's appropriate Hanukkah food, because I was sure it wasn't the pork tenderloin I marinated before I realized what day it was. I knew potato latkes were a go but what else? Doughnuts and other things cooked in oil. Nice!

When this raised-Catholic girl married into a Jewish family, I learned bits and pieces of their celebrations but left the heavy holiday lifting to my in-laws. My mother-in-law in particular organized, cooked, decorated and explained each holiday, and I learned early on that Hanukkah was just a supporting character in the Jewish playbook. Their rituals and traditions were dutifully explained at

each annual celebration, not only to me but to their own children, who weren't particularly religious either. It was beside the point really. Gathering as a family was the real tradition.



My boys were interested in Hanukkah for the reason that children usually are interested in something, the lure of presents. When that didn't really pan out for them they dutifully lit candles on the Noah's Ark menorah, a gift from my mother-in-

law, but their hearts weren't in it. The few chocolate gelt coins they got at Hanukkah dinner were nothing compared to the shiny lights and trappings of Christmas, which we celebrated with my side of the family.

Now that my in-laws are gone there are really only two rituals we never miss. We light memorial candles on important days for those who are no longer with us. And, surprisingly, my boys insist we light the candles on the Noah's Ark menorah as part of our annual holiday celebrations. My in-laws would be thrilled. Who cares if we have to Google the details?

14. not about holiday parties



Today we were going to write about holiday parties (office, school, neighborhood) but given the somewhat fraught environment we find ourselves in these days we decided to post this pretty picture instead. Isn't it lovely? Imagine your favorite festive gathering taking place behind those softly lit windows. It's probably better that way.

15. he didn't listen



Ignoring our advice, Jerome wakes up this morning wishing he'd skipped the office party this year.

17. an evening in perhaps



We're in the holiday home stretch, that weekend before the final weekend before it all ends on Christmas. If days spent shopping, merry-making and working are taking their toll, perhaps a quiet evening at home is in order. In that spirit, we offer our recommendations for The Best Movies to Watch That May Not Sound Like They're About Christmas But It's There Somewhere:

"Die Hard." Off-duty New York City police officer Bruce Willis fights his way out of a Los Angeles skyscraper during a Christmas Eve bank heist. First of the Die Hard series, this 1988 film was just this past week selected to be preserved in the National Film Registry. (You be the judge.)

"The Family Stone." Funny, sad, poignant, great clothes — this sleeper film has it all. The eldest son of a free-wheeling family brings his uptight girlfriend home to snowy New England to meet them at Christmas. They clash, she calls in her sister for support, he wants to propose but no one wants him to, someone's critically ill, there's an awesome bar scene, you'll cry at the end. Perfection.

"The Holiday." Two lonely women decide to swap houses to escape man trouble and then find love with two new men they meet during the swap. Bad casting aside (who has Kate Winslet and Jack Black in their catalog of all-time romantic movie couples?) there's something undeniably appealing in the fairy tale ending and slapstick comedy that brings it about.

"While You Were Sleeping." Lonely Sandra Bullock, a token-taker on Chicago's CTA elevated line, admires dreamy Peter Gallagher from afar. He gets mugged, and while he's in a coma she pretends to be his fiancée but (plot twist!) falls for his brother instead. Pure rom-com fun, plus seeing Chicago at Christmas time is a holiday bonus.

"You've Got Mail." Meg Ryan owns an independent bookstore (ha) and Tom Hanks owns a chain of big bookstores (ha) and they fall for each other on AOL (haha) through dial-up (LOL). Set at Christmas peripherally. May become relevant again if repealing net neutrality becomes the law of the land.

"Trading Places." Dan Akroyd and Eddie Murphy trade places as part of an evil plan hatched by two rich, ghastly brothers. Released in 1983, there are probably 10,000 inappropriate things about the movie and not in a funny way. It was the 80s, after all.

"Lethal Weapon." Danny Glover and Mel Gibson, mismatched police partners, set their sights on drug smugglers. It's funny, but you know, Mel Gibson. Happy Holidays!

18. Rudolphology

Did you know that Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer was born in Chicago?

Most people know that Santa's reindeer were originally named in Clement Moore's 1823 poem, "The Night Before Christmas." But Rudolph as we've come to know him wasn't born until 1939 when the Chicago-based Montgomery Ward company asked one of its copywriters, Robert May, to come up with a story they could print and distribute as a Christmas giveaway for their customers.

"Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer," the story of the plucky underdog reindeer and his shiny red nose — with illustrations based on drawings sketched at Chicago's Lincoln Park Zoo — was a hit. In 1946 Montgomery Ward distributed six million copies of the storybook; a few years later May left the company with the copyright to the story and a windfall for his family.

Rudolph really took off when May's songwriting brother-in-law, Johnny Marks, wrote the famous "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer" song, which was recorded by cowboy crooner Gene Autry. In 1958 Marks co-wrote a second ode, "Run, Run Rudolph," made famous by Chuck Berry. What followed was a host of books, comics, movies, cartoons, songs and merchandise that cemented Rudolph's star in the Christmas orbit.



19. sweet tooth

“We elves try to stick to the four main food groups: candy, candy canes, candy corns, and syrup.” — Buddy the Elf

I have a theory about Christmas candy.

See, when you think about candy holidays, the first one that pops into mind is usually Halloween, because trick-or-treating at its core is nothing more than a candy grab. Sure, people dress in costumes, but candy’s

pretty much the whole point for the 8th-grade-and-younger set — collecting it, sorting it, trading it, eating it. Sweets are a commodity, the end in itself.

Christmas candy is much more complicated. While no less abundant than at Halloween, and also pretty much handed out freely, holiday treats are more fraught because they carry more emotional weight.

Every December, folks hunt through cook-books and recipe boxes looking for the fudge recipe grandma used to make, or something close to mom’s peanut butter buckeyes. There’s a definite nostalgia to the peanut brittle, toffee, divinity, Corn Flakes wreaths with red cinnamon dots, and homemade caramels for which you gather your kids in the kitchen and insist they learn how to prepare.

That Christmas crack you make by pouring hot caramel over saltines and cover in chocolate? Easy production line. Same with the pretzel rings with Rollo candies melted inside. More complicated are the praline pecans, homemade marshmallows, rum balls, truffles, and white-, milk- and dark-chocolate barks with nuts, dried fruit, popcorn and candy cane pieces pressed in, either alone or together in one sugary mess.



Candy thermometers, baking sheets slathered with butter, crushed pecans covering the counter — it’s all worth it in the end for that nod to tradition and a sweet taste of the past.

Which of course can also be purchased ready made at gourmet shops, bakeries and department stores near you. You’ll find no judgment here.

20. what's your wish?



Wishes both big and small.

21. holiday light

Snow fell gently that Christmas Eve, covering streets and sidewalks in white. People spilled out of church, quiet after the candlelight service, tightening scarves and pulling on gloves. Noticing the snow, they gently took elbows or held hands in case someone slipped.

Families stepped carefully down the stairs and looked for their cars; neighborhood parishioners followed the sidewalks home, their paths lit only by streetlights and the soft glow of stained glass windows. Very few people talked, as the snow and warmth from the service left a calm hush over the evening.

In front of us, a father bent over to pick up his daughter, who was maybe three or four. She wore a pink coat and white hat, but her tights and black Mary Janes were no match for the inch or two of snow so he scooped her up and she snuggled into his coat. We followed them around the corner, where they abruptly stopped. So did we.



In the dark winter night, stretching down the street as far as we could see, luminaria lined the sidewalks — seemingly hundreds of paper bags with candles inside, spaced every couple of feet, glowed soft against the snow. It was a beautiful site orchestrated perfectly by neighbors or maybe just one person who chose to light the way for strangers on their way home from church.

“Daddy, it’s so pretty,” the little girl said, light reflecting in her eyes.

“Do you know why those lights are there?” her dad asked, tightening her hat.

“Why?” she whispered.

“They put out the lights so Santa knows where to land his sleigh,” he said, hugging her closer. “He sets it down right on the road, then brings the presents to all the houses.”

“Really?”

“It means he’s almost here, so let’s hurry home so we can get ready.”

They hurried to the car, and we walked past them to ours. The street glowed yellow in the white night. It was quiet. We followed the light.

22. family fun



Ice skating. Sledding. Building a snowman. Eating. Playing board games. Decorating a gingerbread house. Watching the Yule Log on TV. Drinking egg nog. Drinking mulled wine. Deciding if you like mulled wine. Decorating the tree. Caroling. Shopping. Pictures with Santa. Ugly Christmas sweaters. Office parties. Friend parties. Lots of parties. Christmas movies. Popcorn. Decorating. Baking. Jigsaw puzzles. Visiting. Going to see "A Christmas Carol." Holiday concerts. Kris Kindle Market. Holiday parades. Fireworks. More shopping. Driving to see Christmas lights. More games. Some bickering. Hot chocolate. Bonfires. Skiing. Hiking. Still shopping. More eating. Opening presents. Christmas Day. Day-after-Christmas sales. Together.

23. silver & gold



I spy three snowflakes and lots of gold dots,
a small silver bell and pink in some spots;
one shiny bow, two rings and a star,
three holiday wishes for those near and far.

24. good tidings

We once had a neighbor, the father of three little girls, who cast a spell every Christmas Eve.

After he and his family returned home from church, and late enough that all little children would be in bed, he bundled up, ventured outside and slowly walked around the perimeter of his house, shaking a bridle of sleigh bells.

The sound carried in the cold, quiet night, and our children, who were little too, would hear them from where they lay in bed, snuggled in new Christmas pajamas, pretending to sleep but waiting for Santa. We'd already set out cookies and milk by the fireplace, along with some carrots and a bowl of water for Rudolph. But the sound of those bells off somewhere in the night — that father's one perfect detail for his girls — made Santa seem real not only for them but for everyone within earshot, leaving all of us with a memory to treasure on Christmas Eves since.

As we settle in for our long winter's nap, we wish you all the magic of the season. (And just like that, as if on cue, outside my window it just started snowing.)



25. a wish for the season



Families have gathered, Christmas presents exchanged, and now comes the calm before the returns/shopping/vacation storm. This space will be quiet for a bit while we enjoy time with our families, but in January we'll return with new stories, essays and pictures centered around the idea of home.

Thank you for joining us during this holiday season. We wish every one of you happiness and peace in the new year.