

mutterhood

a community of thought one idea at a time



2018

holiday countdown

2017 holiday countdown

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'Tis the season for ribbons and wrappings and candies and treats, which means we're back for the second annual Mutterhood holiday calendar.

Beginning December 1, we invite you to take a minute amid the holiday hustle and bustle and read along as we present 25 days of holiday gifts, but not the kind you can hand off to a hostess or slide under the tree.

Our gifts are a little different, each one an idea rather than something Santa might stuff in a stocking — a thought or reminder of what the season is about, with a little humor thrown in to hopefully keep us smiling through the crowds and the traffic and the midnight sessions on Shutterfly trying to decide just how bad the resolution of that iPhone photo of the kids will be after that stupid yellow warning sign pops up because it's the only decent picture you have and why didn't you take a family picture when everyone was home for Thanksgiving, anyway.



But we digress.

Whether you're home for the holidays or spending time away with loved ones, we hope you enjoy all the wonderful gifts of the season.

~ ckb & efh

1. do you hear?

We maintain a strict policy at our house: The holiday season begins on December 1 and not a day before. We resist the peer pressure of our neighbors' tree lights shining through their front window; drive past tree lots crowded with people taking advantage of a warm day; and keep a tight lid on the bins and boxes in the basement until it's officially The Holiday Season.

Come Dec. 1, however, we go all in — and there's nothing more fun than pulling out the decorations while holiday songs play in the background. With music being what it is these days, we have more ways than ever to spin a holiday tune.

This year, SiriusXM debuted seven of its 15 holiday channels on November 1, while the local 24/7 Christmas radio station was up and running at midnight just one week later. We stream Christmas carols on phones, tablets and TV screens; even a ride in an elevator, a quick stop at the grocery store or a stroll through the mall fills the air with music we don't even hear but inevitably find ourselves humming once the "Jingle Bells" ear worm crawls into our subconscious minds.

For the first day of our countdown, we thought we'd offer the gift of sound: our very own *mutterhood Holi(daze) playlist*, filled with classics and a few newer songs by some of our favorite singers.

It's the first of many gifts of the season we look forward to sharing with you this year. We hope you enjoy this sampling of holiday cheer.



2. trimmings & trappings

Let's be honest: finding holiday gifts can be a real chore. First there's the list-making: partners and kids come first, of course. Then there's immediate family, extended family, and the friends you think of as family; teachers and coaches; babysitters and neighbors; coworkers and bosses and everyone else who play a part in our lives. Oh, and don't forget hostess gifts. And next week's ornament exchange.

(Did we miss anything? I'm sure we did.)

That's a lot of gifting, and why Black Friday, Small Business Saturday and Cyber Monday exist. But I may have misspoken earlier, about holiday gifts being a chore. Is it really the drudgery that's implied in using that word, or do we maybe go a bit overboard on gifting because it's something that at its heart is really worth doing?

Holiday perfectionism is a thing, with lots of us feeling pressure to find the perfect present, host the perfect party, create (or recreate) the perfect memory. We think that if we don't do these things, somehow everything will be ruined (whatever ruined means). Dr. Seuss's Grinch thought this too, when he raided Whoville on the night before Christmas:

"Pooh Pooh to the Whos!" he was grinchishly humming.

"They're finding out now that no Christmas is coming!"

"They're just waking up! I know just what they'll do!"

"Their mouths will hang open a minute or two,

Then the Whos down in Whoville will all cry BooHoo!"

Of course, we know how that story ends, and it's the same lesson for us as it is for the Grinch. We give gifts for the simple reason that we want to; it shows the people we care about that we do in fact care about them. We think about what they would like, and when we find it we wrap it, attach a tag and then give it. It's a simple gesture that says here is something I think you would like because you mean something to me.

Giving isn't a chore, far from it. At its heart giving is a gesture of love and appreciation. There's nothing that means more than that.



Download your own giftags [here](#)

3. the gift of love (part 2)



Last year I publicly confessed my secret shame – the Hallmark Channel Christmas movies. From Thanksgiving through New Year’s Day they run on a loop, like my own personal elevator Muzak, spinning their soothing, comforting, generic tales of set-in-the-snow happily ever-afters.

Oh, I’ve cheated a bit. In the dark, on my computer, I’ve dabbled with some Netflix Christmas knockoffs, mostly when I should have been working. I’m admittedly sappy and love any kind of romantic gesture. In fact, I was in the middle of writing this when our family had its own Hallmark moment: My nephew surprised his girlfriend with a proposal. (Spoiler alert: She

said yes!) But there’s nothing like the original Hallmark Channel to ramp up my holiday spirit. Celebrate the Festival of Lights? There’s two Hannukah-themed movies scheduled for next year. There’s even an app that lets me keep track of the 37 new movies on their docket for 2018.

But I’m in good company. For me and the nearly 90 million other Hallmark viewers there’s a lot to like this year. Need a break from watching? Download a free book, *Christmas in Evergreen*, from Hallmark Publishing. Want to try your hand at writing? Hallmark encourages submissions here. Looking for employment in the new year? With women comprising 83 percent of all employees and 75 percent of its board members, *Forbes* ranks Hallmark the third-best company in America to work for if you’re a woman.

Hallmark’s movies feature strong female characters with their own careers, minds and dreams of having it all. So I feel guilt-free watching “*The Shoe Addict’s Christmas*.” Again. Now that’s holiday spirit!

4. a holiday palette



On a recent trip to New York City, my husband and I spent a few hours at *The Color Factory*, a pop-up exhibit that explores color, only times a thousand.

The Color Factory comprises a series of rooms, each of which features a different way for visitors to interact with color. It's mostly hands-on, which is weird since color is a visual thing, but the exhibit asks visitors to consider color in unexpected ways: in relation to the taste of food and drinks, for example, as well as psychological theory, music, even in statistical representations of New York city subway riders. The tour ends in a giant pit filled with iridescent balls (like a McDonald's playland) and ice cream treats in a matching hue.

It was really fun for two slightly older-than-hipster age adults who couldn't figure out how to work all the Instagram photo booths.

What does this story have to do with the holidays? While we can't give you ice cream (though I so wish we could) when I saw an article recently on *The Color Factory*, it got me thinking about color and the holidays. What would a holiday color palette look like? And where would those colors be if we took the time to look around and really notice them?

Red, like party lipstick and roses in a centerpiece. Green, during a walk through the woods. The yellow flame from a candle and the stars in the sky above. Blue letters on a dreidel, maybe a shiny ribbon on a package. Black keys on the piano when someone plays Silent Night. White sugar dusted on a gingerbread rooftop, or simply, the snow falling outside.

Colors all around, a palette made for December.

5. the gift of knowledge



Lifelong learners, rejoice! Whether you're looking to gift some knowledge or you just want to treat yo'self, here's a guide to three of our favorite online learning communities.

Masterclass

Combining theory with practical how-tos, this popular site features lots of big names explaining the art of their professions. The unlimited pass gives you access to the entire Masterclass library, with courses taught by writers like Margaret Atwood and Shonda Rhimes; photographer Annie Leibovitz; actor Helen Mirren; conservationist Dr. Jane Goodall, plus many more. (You can even take a tennis lesson from Serena Williams!) While the names seem lofty, the advice they offer inspires even the beginners among us.

Gift options include a single class for \$90, or \$180 for an annual pass that makes the entire library your own. You don't have to take the economics class to realize which is the better deal.

CreativeLive

With more than 1,500 classes available, CreativeLive offers practical nuts-and-bolts instruction in almost any creative field. Categories include photography and video, money and life, art and design, craft and maker, and music and audio — phew!

Take photography, for instance. New camera for Christmas? You can choose from a Fast Start class that shows you what all the buttons do, a comprehensive course on the fundamentals of photography, even one on fine-art printing. The same type of A-to-Z offerings exist in nearly every category.

Free classes are posted online every day, while per-class prices are affordable (and frequently discounted). The annual pass is \$299, which allows you to download any course you'd like.

Your public library

A library card is your ticket to free online learning communities that others pay hundreds of dollars to use. Most if not all local libraries provide free access to popular sites such as Brainfuse, which offers one-on-one tutoring in math, reading, science and writing for kindergarten through university students; lynda.com, a video-based service with more than 2,000 courses in software applications, and creative and business skills; and Mango Languages, which hosts modules in 50 languages. And these are just a few examples.

While it's difficult to wrap a library, we do believe wholeheartedly that library cards make great stocking stuffers.

6. the gift of friends

Christmas came early this week to millions of “Friends” fans when Netflix announced it will stream the mega-popular series through 2019. The company had previously planned to drop the series from its lineup on Jan. 1, but the outcry from fans led Netflix to make the surprise deal.



That means there’s now plenty of time to binge-watch all 10 seasons of “Friends,” which is especially important if you have young adults in your family.

In the spirit of the season, *mutterhood* recently watched all 10 holiday episodes of “Friends,” and rated the best five below. Why do these stand out? Well, first of all they’re funny, but the best ones feature the entire ensemble and in many cases include a sweet twist – which is why streaming a few episodes while you’re, say, wrapping presents isn’t the worst approach to tackling a holiday task.

Here, in descending order, are our picks for the best episodes of holiday “Friends”:

No. 1: “The one one with the routine.” Season 6, episode 10. Monica and Ross fulfill a lifelong dream to dance on Dick Clark’s Rockin’ New Year’s Eve, and Joey shares a sweet moment with a new love. The dance sequence is hilarious.

No. 2: “The one with the holiday armadillo.” Season 7, episode 10. To explain Hanukkah to his son Ben, Ross first tries persuasion but ends up wearing an armadillo costume. The second half of the episode is the best, as is the secondary story about Phoebe buying Joey drums.

No. 3: “The one where Rachel quits.” Season 3, episode 10. Phoebe and Joey sell Christmas trees, Rachel quits Central Perk and Ross sells cookies for a young girl scout whose leg he’s responsible for breaking. The episode ends with a very sweet scene about Space Camp.

No. 4: “The one with the monkey.” Season 1, episode 10. Remember Marcel the monkey? He makes his debut in the very first holiday episode, but that’s not the best part. Everyone is featured in this one: Joey gets demoted to Elf from Santa; Phoebe sings a Christmas song and meets Hank Azaria; and Monica hosts a New Year’s Eve party where the friends end up dateless but together. Again.

No. 5: “The one with the late Thanksgiving.” Season 10, episode 8. Technically not a Christmas episode, but still one of the better holiday ones. Chandler and Monica reluctantly host Thanksgiving but everybody’s late; Phoebe and Rachel enter Emma in a baby pageant; the Bings get a wonderful surprise. Lots of good feels.

Look for “Friends” on cable TV on TBS and on-demand. As for streaming services, Netflix is the only one that offers all 10 seasons.

7. the gift of giving back

When my kids were little, shopping for teachers' gifts was an important part of our holiday preparation. Not only was a gift to my boys' teachers a small token of our appreciation for all they did, but involving my kids in the shopping was a terrific way to teach them the importance of thanking the important people in their lives.



My kids are in college now, but I've found a way to continue to show our appreciation to public school teachers. **Donors Choose** is an organization with the mission to "make it easy for anyone to help a classroom in need, moving us closer to a nation where students in every community have the tools and experiences they need for a great education."

The premise is simple: Educators from all over the country post wish lists for their classrooms on the Donors Choose website, and people donate money to help fund the projects. There are several ways to give: You can search in your geographic area or pledge support to specific subjects like math and science, or the arts; fund specific requests like books, food, computers or musical equipment; or sponsor specific age groups from pre-K through high school. Every dollar counts and no donation is too small.

To date, close to 32 million public school students have benefitted from more than \$1.5 million in donations by almost 3.5 million supporters.

My own family joined the Donors Choose program this year, with each of us choosing our own project to support. If you'd like to do the same, you can spread the love and find a classroom to help here.

8. the gift of tradition

Much of what makes the holiday season special is wrapped up in tradition: the ritualization of an activity, a prayer, a family recipe that continues from year to year.

One of my favorite family traditions is the search for what we call Santa Notes. When my siblings and I were younger, each of us received one gift that always stood out from the rest. This present held a note inside, saying sweet things about how happy Santa was with our behavior throughout the year, and a clue that set us on a scavenger hunt to find where the present (always the best one) was hidden.

We quickly figured out the key to the hunt was that this best gift was always in a smaller, lighter box. Quickly adapting, our parents began hiding the notes in bigger boxes they weighted down with, say, a dozen cans of soup or a few pairs of worn boots. I've long forgotten most of the toys and other things we discovered at the end of the hunt, but I've always remembered the fun of finding the presents, and I dearly wish I'd kept those notes.

I've carried on the clue-present tradition with my own kids. Kicking it up a notch, I write rhyming notes to hold the clues, but sometimes I'm a bit too clever. One Christmas it took them most of the morning to unravel the clue and then they couldn't find their presents. Seems I'd not only created an indecipherable rhyme, but I had also forgotten where I'd hidden everything. We still laugh about it every year.

What traditions do you have? We'd love to hear them. Just share them in the comments. Happy present hunting!



9. say cheese



Actual holiday photo card from a family we love, with the younger brothers in matching Mountain Country sweaters. (used with permission)

Awkward holiday photos: we all have them. The kids didn't smile, someone blinked, that tree branch no one noticed looks like it's sprouting from dad's head.

We say, go find those awkward photos today, pass them around, and give your families the gift of laughter. Because with the holidays ramping up I'm sure we could all use a smile.

10. wish list

It's just before Thanksgiving, 1972. I'm lying on the living room rug, propped up on my elbows, sunlight streaming through the window. My brother is next to me; we're seven and nine, and we are psyched. Open on the floor in front of us is the Sears Christmas catalog, and mom says it's time to make our Christmas lists.

I remember this particular year because Winnie the Pooh was on the cover, but other than that it's not a distinctive memory as much as a general one of flipping through page after page of Christmas wonder. Inside these catalogs is everything that anyone could want: telescopes, snowsuits, dress-up costumes, pipes and lighters, sewing kits, a dishwasher, Craftsman tools, coats of arms, bar accessories, bedding and sleeping bags, TVs and radios, Christmas decorations, candy and fruitcake, jewelry and wrapping paper, encyclopedias and sleds. Hockey nets, tennis rackets and ice skates! Oh my.

Then there are the toys: page after page of dolls, Hot Wheels, tabletop hockey, board games, art sets, train sets, microscopes, bicycles, books and guitars, ViewMasters, and everything made by Mattel. It's every kid's nirvana.

We turn the pages slowly, and when we find something we like we circle it and fold over the top corner of the page. It takes hours to go through everything; we check and recheck the dog-eared pages, crossing out what we don't absolutely want (we don't want to be greedy) and keeping what we truly covet. We write down our selections and the corresponding page numbers in our very best printing on a piece of paper titled Christmas Lists and give it to our mother to mail to Santa. Then we wait for Christmas morning, when we find out if Santa shops the Sears catalog too.

These days, I miss those memories when I read an email from a family member with an Amazon link, but if Sears is adapting then I think I should too.

In 2010, Sears published its Christmas Wish Book online for the first time then promptly discontinued it a year later. The company brought it back in print and digital form in 2017 and published it again this year, despite filing for bankruptcy. Sears hasn't yet announced its catalog plans for 2019.

In the meantime, a 1972 Sears Wish Book will set you back about \$35 on ebay; for page views, www.wishbookweb.com archives hundreds of catalogs from Sears, JC Penney, and other retailers, for you to take your own stroll down memory lane.



11. the gift of books

It's Christmas Eve in Iceland and all through the house not a creature is stirring ... because everybody's reading. It's a tradition called Jólábókaflóðið, or Yule book flood, where people gift each other books and spend Christmas Eve at home with family, reading.

Icelander or not, it's a fact that books make great gifts. While buying a book for someone can be a bit tricky, we have a few suggestions to help in the gift search.



For children and the young at heart, *Merry Christmas, Little Elliot* is a beautifully illustrated story about an elephant and his mouse friend, who set out in search of the Christmas spirit. The entire story will have you saying, aww.

For adults, *The Immortalists* by Chloe Benjamin tells the story of four siblings whose fortunes are told by a mystic when they are children, and the ways in which the prophecies determine the course of their lives. We both have this book at the top of our 2018 favorites.

The book world offers plenty of resources for gift buyers as well. Best-of lists by the New York Times, NPR, The Guardian and Publishers Weekly provide some guidance, as do websites such as Book Riot and Literary Hub.

Or make it easy and gift a membership (or sign up for your own) to the Book of the Month Club; it's \$15 per month and you

get your choice of one of five hardcover books. For a reader, it's the best kind of gift.

12. the gift of gab

Holiday preparation involves lots of idle time running errands, cooking, wrapping, traveling. Why not grab your headphones and put that time to good use?

The number of podcasts exploded in 2018. Today, listeners can choose from more than 550,000 shows with 18.1 million episodes in over 100 languages, and that's just on Apple. That's a lot of listening, so we thought we'd share some of our favorites.

The first podcast we recommend is Fresh Air, the Peabody award-winning National Public Radio show hosted by Terry Gross. In each episode, Gross interviews the newsmakers of the time, including politicians, creative artists, philanthropists and celebrities. Gross is one of the best in the business, and her interviews are always worth a listen.

For folks who enjoy the nuts and bolts of reporting, Two Writers Slings Yang features host and journalist Jeff Pearlman talking shop with reporters and writers about how they research and write their stories. While Pearlman interviews writers in all fields, we like this podcast because it features women working in professional sports, where our voices aren't as prevalent as they should be.

Our second writerly pick is The New Yorker: Fiction podcast, a monthly one-hour show that features famous writers reading their favorite short stories from The New Yorker magazine archives. Host Deborah Treisman, fiction editor for The New Yorker, talks with each writer about the story he or she chooses, and it's fascinating to hear how a writer interprets a piece he or she holds in high regard, and the reasons why.

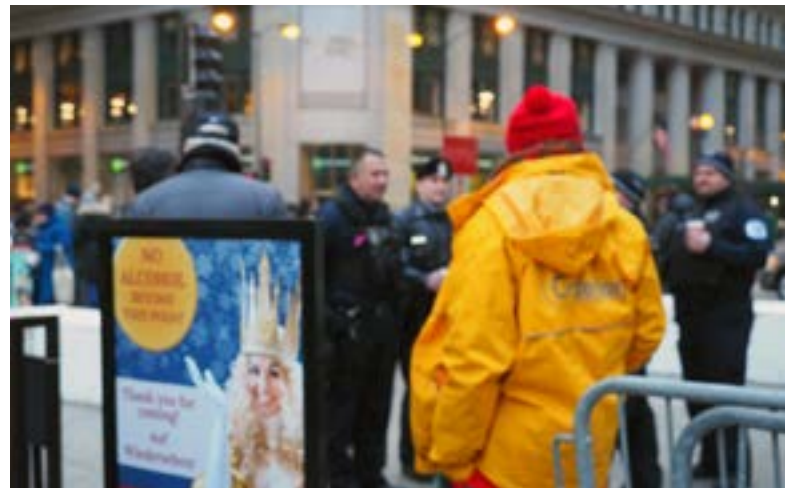


If you're into photography, the best podcast we've found is Master Photography, a weekly (sometimes more) roundtable discussion with five photographers who answer listener questions, report news in the field, and discuss equipment, techniques and tricks of the trade. This podcast is great listening for professional photo nerds as well as regular photography enthusiasts.

What happened to the people of Limetown? That's the question fictional NPR reporter Lia Haddock sets out to answer in Limetown, a suspenseful serial podcast that's perfect if you're just looking for something fun to listen to. The new season explores the mysterious disappearance of Limetown's residents further, and delves into the coverup. It's creepy and exciting and will keep you hooked until the very end. Or at least until you finish wrapping all those gifts.

13. the gift of noticing

One Hour Photos - taken in Chicago on Tuesday, Dec. 11 between 2:30 pm and 3:30 pm.





14. the gift of . . . socks?



When you're a kid, there's nothing worse than opening a pretty, wrapped box only to find socks. I mean, you know deep down that they're under the tree because you got them last year, and the year before, and the year before that from your grandmother or your mom or, even worse, SANTA. Yeah, Santa bringing socks was the worst.

Fast forward to adulthood, and I challenge you to find a person who doesn't think socks are the greatest gift of all. Why the change of heart? I think it's because as adults we think of socks differently: they're practical, relatively inexpensive (some of them, at least) and when you need just one more little gift? Well, socks fit the bill.

Socks these days aren't the ones grandma gifted. Today we can choose from funny socks, colorful socks, sock-of-the-month club, socks for special occasions, cotton socks, wool socks, athletic socks, no-show socks, dress socks, knee socks, and my grandfather's favorite, nylon socks.

I remained a skeptic until recently, when in a white elephant gift exchange my low number two meant that I came home not with the cute earrings or box of spices (a seriously underrated gift) but a pair of grey Smartwool socks. While everyone oohhed and aahhed, I knew for a fact that no one was stealing my gift. I figured I'd just pass them on to someone I knew who skied, or snow-shoed, or lived in Canada.

But then it snowed 10 inches and we had to shovel our 80-foot driveway. The socks I usually wore with my boots were in the wash, so I cut the tags off my new grey Smartwool socks and put them on.

I'd never felt anything like them.

While the outside felt scratchy, the inside was smooth like flannel. They fit perfectly — not too tight, not too loose — and boy, were my feet toasty. I shoveled and shoveled, and then I had an epiphany: "My whole family needs these!"

Now I'm 100 percent on the socks-as-gift bandwagon. These days, I gift fuzzy socks to my daughter and her friends, and white Nike socks to my son. I bought my husband his own Smartwools, and two more pairs for myself. My parents each have a cozy pair of socks from their alma mater, and we always buy my dad socks from places we travel.

Does Santa wear socks? Maybe this year, instead of cookies, we'll leave him a Smartwool pair of his own.

15. a christmas memory

This picture of my mother, Sharon, and her sister Arlene is prominently displayed every holiday season. It was taken around 1944 on a visit to Chicago to see the holiday decorations. In her own words, my mother describes the day this picture was taken, a story we hadn't heard before.



“Every year my mother, my sister and I would take the train downtown to get our picture taken and to see the spectacular windows at Marshall Field’s. Here, I’m three or four, and my sister is three years older. This particular year I was wearing all green velvet — leggings, coat and hat.

“After the picture, we were going down the escalator to go to lunch and of course Marshall Field’s was packed with people. I remember I was fascinated with a woman who had about two pounds of rouge on her face; I was staring at her, and mother said to stop.

“When we got to the first floor, I must have turned the wrong way and got lost in the crowd. After a bit a clerk or a customer picked me up and put me on top of the display counter so people could see me better, and my mother said later that when I was up there people were shouting, ‘I’ll take her!’.

“We always went to lunch at a cafeteria downtown. It was so big, and there were so many people. We thought it was amazing because we could pick whatever we wanted to eat.

“It’s just an awesome memory of going to Marshall Field’s at Christmas.”

Editor’s note: The cafeteria where Sharon, her sister and her mother ate lunch was *The Forum Cafeteria*, at the time the largest and most popular restaurant in Chicago. It operated from 1939 to 1973 at 64 West Madison Avenue, now the site of Three First National Plaza. In its heyday, the art deco-inspired cafeteria served hundreds of people a day, with lines forming as early as 6:00 am. The heavily rouged woman who caught Sharon’s attention was a Forum regular known as The Duchess. A former actress, she was known for wearing fashions from the 1890s, and heavy rouge and makeup to lunch every afternoon.

16. a matter of taste

The Whos down in Whoville enjoyed rare Who roast beast, but that's not the strangest holiday food we know of. Mutterhood recently paged through a few cookbooks from the late 1950s for holiday favorites that may or may not have stood the test of time.

Jell-O molds. Apricot, cherry, orange and pineapple — such are the fruits of this mid-century classic. Stranger are the ones made with vegetables such as broccoli (with consommé and eggs), and others that defy good taste, like Frosted Mint (gelatin, pineapple, mint jelly and sour cream). We also found something called Watergate Salad (crushed pineapple, pistachio pudding, Cool Whip, mini marshmallows and pecans) and while we have no idea what the connection to Watergate is, it did make us smile (and our teeth hurt from the sweetness).

Mincemeat. An English Christmas tradition, mincemeat is a mix of chopped dried fruit (typically raisins, cherries and dates), brandy and/or whisky, spices and finely chopped beef or beef suet (and if you were my grandmother, lots of sugar). It was baked into pies and cookies, which were glazed with a sweet icing. Is this still a holiday thing? Maybe in England.

Divinity. Like traditional fudge, only white and with a lighter texture, this holiday confection makes a lovely contrast to trays of chocolate on a holiday buffet table. For a fancier presentation, rather than slice divinity like fudge, spoon it into white puffs and top with a toasted pecan. Haven't seen this one in awhile, but it may be time to bring it back.

As for recipes, the simple formula for Brandy Hard Sauce seems doable: "Cream butter until light. Gradually beat in powdered sugar and brandy. Add more brandy, if desired. Chill."

The most impressive holiday idea we found comes from *Thoughts for Buffets*, published in 1958, which suggests "Fruit Aflame" as a garnish for turkey. Here's how to do it: Place the roasted turkey on a platter and surround it with sliced pineapple rings. Place half of a canned peach in each ring, then soak a sugar cube in lemon extract and place one cube in each peach half. Just before serving, light the sugar cubes with a match, turn off the lights in the dining room and carry in the platter, aflame.

It's a holiday show-stopper that we're bringing back in 2018.



17. the gift of history

A holiday treasure in Chicago was itself a gift to the Art Institute of Chicago.

The Thorne Miniature Rooms comprise 68 models of European and American interiors that recreate in exact detail the rooms of our past, from the late 13th century through the 1930s. Built on a scale of one inch to one foot by master craftsmen, artists and textile experts, the rooms were commissioned by Mrs. James Ward Thorne of Chicago and gifted to the Art Institute in the early 1940s. They remain among the most popular museum attractions today.

The holidays only add to their appeal. Curators decorate several of the rooms for the season, and while not all 68 rooms are decked out, the number grows each year. Among the holiday rooms are a mid-century California Hallway featuring a menorah by renowned ceramicist Otto Natzler; the English Great Hall with a wassailing bowl and yule log typical of the Tudor period; the Virginia Entrance Hall draped in garland with mistletoe and a wreath; the New Orleans, New Mexico and Pennsylvania Dutch rooms featuring miniature foods and treats; and the French Provincial Bedroom with shoes by the fireplace as well as a crèche and a teeny-tiny jigsaw puzzle.

Perhaps the most Christmassy of the rooms is the Victorian English Drawing Room, where you'll find the only Christmas tree in the holiday collection. The traditional tannenbaum was brought to England from Germany in 1840 when Prince Albert married Queen Victoria. An engraving made a few years later pictured the royal family standing next to a fir tree decorated with toys and candles, and of course then everyone wanted one. Not only did the engraving become an iconic image of Christmas, but the tree-trimming tradition was born.

Getting the holiday rooms ready for their seasonal coming out party is a year-round process. In addition to researching and creating the historically accurate details, preparations include painting seasonal backdrops you can glimpse behind the windows, cleaning glass chandeliers, carpets and tabletops, and replacing broken or worn elements such as candlesticks and finials on furniture.

If you'd like to press your nose against the glass and see this holiday treasure for yourself, there's still plenty of time. The Holiday Thorne Rooms are on view at the Art Institute of Chicago until Jan. 7.



18. let the games begin

We're all about family here at mutterhood, but a little family can go a long way. And while there are always lots of holiday activities to do together, like ice skating, catching a movie, taking a hike or even playing a game of touch football, sometimes all that togetherness can be a bit much. As a gift to anyone hosting family in the next few weeks, here are some ideas we thought sounded like a different kind of fun for (almost) all ages.

Axe-throwing. The new hot hipster craze, axe-throwing venues are springing up about as fast as you can say Paul Bunyan. Basically, you get a team together and experts — or axeperts, as they're called — show you how to throw an axe safely into a target, kind of like darts but way more dangerous. The winning team gets tattoos, or something. Anyway, little kids can't do it but it's an adrenaline-filled three hours perfect for college-aged relatives and older. Plus, you can dress the part in jeans and flannels, and anywhere that comfort-casual is okay by us.



Way more low-key than axes, bowling is the fall-back for any family get-together because anyone, no matter how old or young they are, can bowl. Other advantages: retro shoes, sometimes stuff glows in the dark, there's computerized scoring, and usually they sell nachos and fries. And beer. Everyone knows that bowling is better with beer.

Card games bring the whole family together (unless there's a lot of math, and then I'm out). Adults and children can play and even place bets with pretzels or M&Ms instead of money. A new-to-us game introduced by our college senior and her friends is Phase 10, a progressive rummy-like card game that requires players to complete one phase before they move on to the next. It's fast and frustrating and typically involves lots of swearing.

Then there are board games, which can be very fun unless you have a surprising know-it-all who overtakes your Trivial Pursuit game (hi mom) or a take-no-prisoners

Monopoly shark (I'm not naming names) who hands you a dollar after he bankrupts you. This year, add some laughs to your game table with The Game of Life: Quarter Life Crisis Edition. Players start the game with crippling debt (just like real 25-year-olds!) then play the game through typical adult twists and turns (you could lose your job, your spouse, even your wife) to be the first person to pay it off. Totally relatable, and tons of fun with higher stakes than the regular version.

Finally, don't sleep on older video games. Mario Kart never goes out of style, nor do any-K version of NBA basketball, NCAA basketball, FIFA soccer, MLB, and so on. Show granddad how to use the controller, and watch out. Then, when things get too heated, suggest a game of Yahtzee. That one never fails.

19. close your eyes & imagine



Fresh-cut pine. Cinnamon glaze on warm baked ham. Peppermint candy canes. Gingerbread just out of the oven. Hot chocolate and toasted marshmallows. New snowfall. Holiday evergreens. A crackling fire. Wet woolen mittens drying on the radiator. Sugar cookies. Lit candles glowing on a table, lavender and pine scenting the air. Crisp, cold, sub-zero air. Oranges studded with cloves. The top of a child's head as you read *The Night Before Christmas*, together. Homemade caramel sauce. Fresh baked rolls, dripping with melted butter and garlic. French toast casserole on Christmas morning. Warm maple syrup. Molasses cookies. Slightly sweet champagne just after the cork pops. The familiar scent when hugging a loved one.

20. chill

Years ago, as I raced to prepare for my first big-girl-in-the-city holiday party, the Christmas tree fell over, shattering ornaments as it landed with a thud. Its resting place? The coffee table, carefully arranged with the festive holiday appetizers and drinks I spent weeks planning, shopping, cooking and fussing over to make my party pre-Instagram picture-perfect. So I did what any reasonable person would do. I burst into tears as the first guests arrived. Ho. Ho. Ho.

At mutterhood, we know the holidays can be stressful. But here's a few ways to help you de-stress:

There's an app for that. Calm features "100+ guided meditations covering sleep, anxiety, focus, stress, gratitude and much more." (Apple app store and Google Play) Or, when your Apple watch tells you to "breathe" take a moment and do it.

Read a book. Studies show that reading can reduce stress by up to 68%. You already know that mutterhood loves a library, so take a stroll through your local branch and find something new.

Smell an orange. According to Health Magazine, researchers have found that citrus fragrances "boost feelings of well-being and alleviate stress by upping levels of norepinephrine, a hormone that affects mood."

Throw an axe. (See mutterhood's [Let the Games Begin](#))

Have a Christmas cookie. Or ten. Seriously, they aren't going to eat themselves.

And to my twenty-something self: don't stress. A downed Christmas tree makes for a memorable party.



21. the gift of the week after

The last week of December is for many of us getaway week, when families pack up the car or hop a flight for the slopes, the beach or a visit with family. In the spirit of the journey, we offer an inflight entertainment guide of sorts to our favorite travel movies to watch about travel.

Home Alone. Eight-year-old Kevin, who is accidentally left behind when his large, boisterous family takes off for Christmas vacation, ends up defending his house from inept burglars. Reprising his role as Kevin, 38-year-old Macauley Culkin recently released this advertisement for Google's personal assistant and it's actually pretty funny.

The Family Stone. Yes, we talked about this one last year but it bears repeating as an all-time favorite about adult siblings who gather back home for Christmas at a time when many of them face personal changes both good and bad. Sarah Jessica Parker is hilarious as one of the son's uptight girlfriend, and the rest of the cast shines too. It's funny, heartbreaking and reminds you why family is the most important bond of all.

Bridesmaids. Technically not a holiday or travel movie, stream this one for the airplane scene, when Kristen Wiig is all of us on an awkward bachelorette party she can't afford and Melissa McCarthy chats up a federal air marshall. Hilarious.

Up in the Air. George Clooney and Anna Kendrick take corporate downsizing to cruel heights then crash personally in this 2009 classic that shows no matter how many millions of airplane miles you earn, exclusive premium status will never bring you happiness.

National Lampoon's Vacation / National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation. I mean, how can we not include these classics, especially with lines like this: "This is no longer a vacation. It's a quest. It's a quest for fun. You're gonna have fun, and I'm gonna have fun. We're all gonna have so much f***ing fun we're gonna need plastic surgery to remove our goddamn smiles!"

Safe travels, everyone!



22. a winter poem



We wanted to write about snow, and winter, and then I remembered a poem I'd read recently that stayed with me and it seems like this would be a perfect time to share it with all of you.

"Ice" from Zeppo's First Wife: New and Selected Poems by Gail Mazur. Copyright © 2005 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved.

Source: The Common (The University of Chicago Press, 1995)

(found via Poetry Magazine, December 1987)

Ice by Gail Mazur

In the warming house, children lace their skates,
bending, choked, over their thick jackets.

A Franklin stove keeps the place so cozy
it's hard to imagine why anyone would leave,

clumping across the frozen beach to the river.
December's always the same at Ware's Cove,

the first sheer ice, black, then white
and deep until the city sends trucks of men

with wooden barriers to put up the boys'
hockey rink. An hour of skating after school,

of trying wobbly figure-8's, an hour
of distances moved backwards without falling,

then—twilight, the warming house steamy
with girls pulling on boots, their chafed legs

aching. Outside, the hockey players keep
playing, slamming the round black puck

until it's dark, until supper. At night,
a shy girl comes to the cove with her father.

Although there isn't music, they glide
arm in arm onto the blurred surface together,

braced like dancers. She thinks she'll never
be so happy, for who else will find her graceful,

find her perfect, skate with her
in circles outside the emptied rink forever?

23. down to the wire

If after making your list and checking it twice you suddenly realize Santa's still a few gifts short, don't fret. Here's a list of last-minute gift ideas for when you need a little something extra, or you can't remember where you hid the kids' stocking stuffers, or you just found out your cousin's adult kids are coming to the family party and what if they bring you something and you have nothing for them, because of course this would happen one hour before you leave.

When you have absolutely zero time to go to the mall, shop your house. Lots of people keep a just-in-case bag of gifts (wishing right now I was one of them) but other options include books (one you haven't read that someone else might like), sweet treats (a mason jar filled with cookie dough or hot chocolate ingredients, tied with a ribbon with the recipe attached), a scented candle you never opened, things like that. Obviously, these items should be new and unused, but sometimes inspiration hits when you're on a deadline.



Regifting can be controversial, but we find nothing wrong with passing along a gift that's not quite right for you but someone else would enjoy. Again, organized people probably have a few of these in their just-in-case gift bag, but we all have something we haven't yet (or couldn't) return so keep this in mind and regift away, guilt-free.

IOU coupons for a date, free babysitting, a visit, or any kind of mitzvah are always good options, particularly because you're offering the gift of your time. Plus, you can use all your craft supplies to make the coupon — even glitter!

Then there are gift cards, like Dunkin Donuts, Dick's Sporting Goods, Target, department stores, restaurants, nail salons, a spa — the possibilities are endless. In fact, the bag-of-just-in-case-gifts people probably also have those five-packs of \$10 Starbucks gift cards that you can buy at places like Costco for this very reason. (Whatever.)

Bonus tip: This year we discovered the gift-card game changer for teens and college students: Uber. Yes, you can buy Uber gift cards in any denomination, and I'm telling you this from personal experience, when you gift this card you will be more popular than Santa Claus.

When there's nothing else: socks. We discussed this on Day 14, but socks make a great last-minute gift. In fact, when I set up my just-in-case bag of gifts for next year, they're the first thing I'm going to buy.

24. the gift of zen



view the live video [here](#)

25.

the gift of home



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.

mutterhood.com 

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