

mutterhood

every woman is a story



2019

holiday countdown

2019 holiday countdown

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our countdown begins



Welcome to mutterhood's third annual holiday countdown.

In the past we've waxed nostalgic and focused on gifts as our themes. This year we've settled on MAKE.

For this holly, jolly time of year we're counting down all the ways to make the season bright.

Inside you'll find our selections for each of the 25 days, a collection that kicks off with a story about how shopping local can unlock some early holiday magic and ends with a wish for all of our readers.

From our families to yours, we hope you make the most of this special season with love, light, laughter.

Enjoy!

Cathi & Ellen

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1.

make a choice

With Cyber Monday less than 24 hours away, this year's holiday season is fast upon us. Three days ago turkey dominated our thoughts; today it's to-do lists and tree-trimming and omg we've got how many weeks to pull this all together? (Spoiler alert: The answer is three.)

It's tempting to bookmark that one website and Prime everything, but this year we're making a different choice — to step inside our favorite local shops for our holiday gifts.

Part of the reason is to support small businesses, like the gift shops, tree farms, clothing boutiques, bakeries, restaurants and jewelry shops that make up our towns and neighborhoods. If you're on the hunt for some holiday cheer, there's nothing better than a cozy shop with a bell that rings as you open the door, a table with warm cider and cookies, candles flickering and scenting the air, and items unique to that shop laid out and arranged for all to see.

There's also that personal touch, one that you won't find online. One favorite store gift-wraps, for free, every purchase with skill that rivals professional designer packaging. Another favorite, a restaurant this time, sends guests home with a small bag of shaved chocolate and spices, along with its recipe for Mexican hot chocolate. Holiday gallery shows are another hidden treasure, with original works and prints typically available for purchase, plus the opportunity to meet the artist.

Bookstores will always be among our favorite holiday destinations. Remember The Great Believers, the book we chose for the mutterhood book club back in February? This weekend, Unabridged Bookstore, an independent bookstore in Chicago, is offering personally inscribed copies of the book along with a seven-page, never-before-published scene that author Rebecca Makkai provided to commemorate World AIDS Day.

It's that one-of-a-kind offering that only a neighborhood shop can offer, that homey touch that makes the holidays special.



One local tree farm.

2.

make time



Eight holiday lights.

Snowstorms to the east, windstorms to the west, there's still so much turkey left and someone brought all their leftover pies to the office. If you've fled Holiday Day 2 reality for the online storm that is Cyber Monday, here's a lovely photograph of a meadow in summer. Make it your moment of zen.

3.

make a difference

It's Giving Tuesday on day 3 of our holiday countdown. Here's a look at just one of the women's arts organizations making a difference in our world.

The morning light slanted through tall windows that lined the second floor of the 1903 Renaissance Revival building, spilling down the marble staircase and onto the main first floor. A few dozen folding tables were set up for a craft show that was about to start, but we were there for the art — three floors of it, all created by women dating back to the 16th century.

The National Museum of Women in the Arts, in Washington, DC, is the only museum in the world dedicated solely to women in the visual, performing and literary arts — which is strange when you think about it, because aren't we half the population so by rights shouldn't we get half the museum space? (That's a rhetorical question.)

Here you'll find more than 4,500 paintings, sculptures, photography and other works of art by women you may

have heard of — Mary Cassatt, Frida Kahlo, Elaine de Kooning and Sarah Bernhardt, to name a few — plus contemporary artists, including Amy Sherald, who painted former First Lady Michelle Obama's official portrait, which hangs in the National Portrait Gallery just down the street.

The building itself is a beautiful backdrop to the collection, with large gallery spaces, deep hallways and a stunning facade. The artwork is plentiful and varied, and even more striking when you realize there's not a male Dutch master among it. The impression is light, airy and refreshing — a view of the world from a familiar perspective.

The museum opened in 1987, the brainchild of founder Wilhelmina Cole Holladay, an art collector who, realizing women artists were historically excluded from art history textbooks and galleries, dedicated her work to celebrating the accomplishments of women artists of all nationalities and time periods. In addition to the art collection, the museum board sponsors educational programs for children, including the Girl Scouts, and funds research to increase representation of women in the arts.

For more information: [National Museum of Women in the Arts](#)



Sixteen seasonal pinecones.

4.

make a memory

I think it's time we talk about Santa. Because honestly, I love the guy.

I love him as St. Nicholas, aka Nicholas the Wonderworker, a fourth-century Christian saint and protector of sailors, orphans, prisoners, and everyone in between, whose prayers brought about miracles and whose secret gift-giving is the origin of our Christmas tradition.



I love the evolution of St. Nicholas during the Middle Ages to the white-bearded patron saint of children, whose generosity and magical powers are still celebrated in Europe on his feast day, December 6.

I love the jolly, grandfatherly Old St. Nick that Clement Clarke Moore created in his 1822 poem, "The Night Before Christmas," which he wrote for his six children and which became a tradition in and of itself. And I love France's Père Noël and England's Father Christmas, who over time replaced the Grimm's Fairy Tales versions of St. Nicholas that haunted Europe since medieval times.

Whether your version of Santa is scary or sweet, I think we can all agree it wouldn't be Christmas without him. There are mall Santas, store Santas, chocolate Santas, and inflatable Santas; Santa pajamas, Santa sweaters, Santa hats, even Santa socks; movie Santas, TV Santas, Elf Yourself Santas,

and books full of Santas. We even have a wine-stopper that when used places Santa black-boots-up into a bottle of holiday Cabernet.

My favorite Santa of all, though, is the one we told our children about when they started to question whether Santa is real. I remember the conversation clearly, our elementary-school-aged daughter sitting with me on the stairs, trying to reason out how one man can deliver presents to every single person in the world in just one night. She tried hard to make it work, but ultimately had to ask: "Do you believe in Santa?"

My response was an unequivocal yes. A couple of years later I told my questioning son the same thing, and even today, I don't regret the lie.

We have to believe in something, after all. I just happen to put my faith in a jolly old elf and his eight tiny reindeer whose only job it is to spread joy one night a year.



Ten winter snowflakes

make ready



Five rolls of ribbon.

I scurry around the house looking for the usual suspects. Bottle of wine? Candles? Coffee mug? Picture frame? Does this ornament look used? Does this book look read? I don't have time to bake cookies. Those earrings I never wear? This fancy box of tea that I never opened? Does tea expire?

Oh for crying out loud, who wiped their hands on those new Christmas dish towels?

I'm tearing through the house, scrambling through drawers, searching for hidden treasures with tags. The unused, unworn, unwanted. My ride to book club is idling in the driveway and I've just been reminded that tonight is the holiday gift exchange. The what now?

I've been down this road so many times. The bottle of wine from my trunk as a baby gift to new parents. The brand new bracelet I bought for myself, wrapped up for a friend who brought me a holiday surprise. The warm, fuzzy candy cane socks I had to regift. Darn. They looked really cozy.

It's at this moment my oldest chooses to school me with a story about his girlfriend's gift closet. How have I become this many years old and never heard of a gift closet?

I've done some research. Seems many people cleverer than me have space set aside stocked with little gifts. They range from a box under a bed to an entire closet, complete with accompanying gift wrap and ribbons. Gifts for all occasions just waiting to be shopped at home. Things perfect as hostess gifts, housewarming presents, birthdays and holidays. Scented candles, pretty scarves, luxurious lotions, funny mugs, silver frames, fancy pens and beautiful journals, waiting at the ready for their time to shine. "I'm thinking of you" tokens of affection.

The idea becomes an early resolution. I'm going to Marie Kondo myself an organized gift closet because that will certainly bring me joy. Right after I grab the Mr. and Mrs. Claus salt and pepper shakers from the table and stuff them in this gift bag.

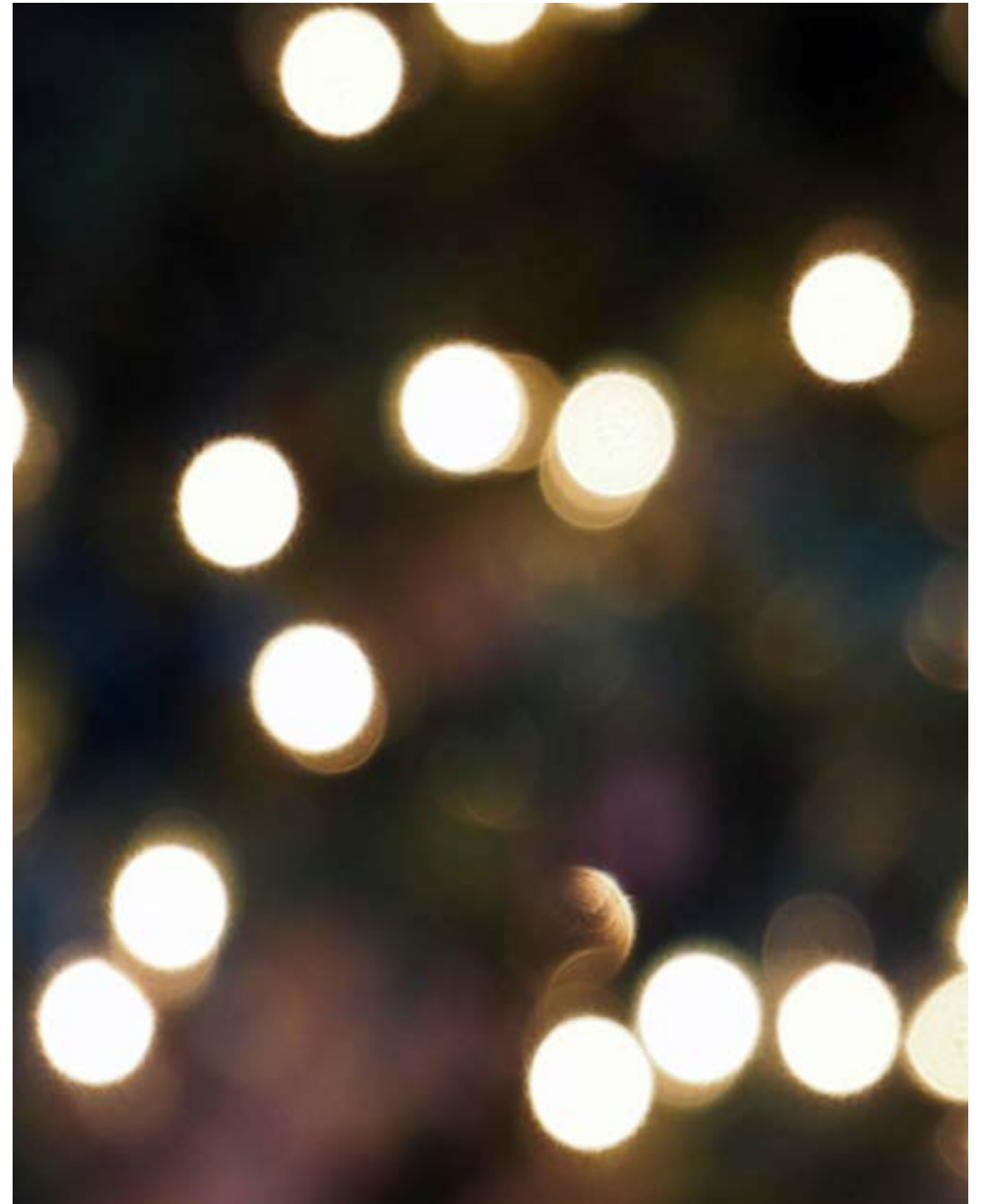


6.

make it weird



Spotted: this confusing mashup of holiday icons in the window of a thrift shop.



Holiday lights.

7.

make it bright

This time of year, when night falls in the late still-afternoon, we welcome bright, twinkling holiday lights. There's an art to a holiday light display though, and in that spirit we offer mutterhood's five unwritten rules to achieve a warm holiday glow.

That extra bulb. You know the one, it's taped to the string of lights underneath the Underwriters Laboratory safety certification? You're supposed to use it to replace the always-just-one unlit bulb on the strand that's dragging all the others dark along with it. Who does that? Unwritten rule: Just buy a new strand, they're like \$2.99 at Walgreens.

White cord vs green cord. Go with the green. It's nature's color; it looks good on green trees inside and bare branches outside. White just begs for snow, which is fine on Christmas Eve but until then, why tempt fate when you've still got shopping to do? Unwritten rule: It's easy being green.

LED vs traditional. Maybe it's just us, but LED lights feel like you're texting in bold letters — fine for some, but for others it comes across a tad bit aggressive. We prefer a warmer holiday glow. Unwritten rule: LED is fine, but use sparingly.

Outdoor lighting. For the love of god people, use more than one strand of lights! Send a message to Santa and make it glow. You're competing with the Clark family Christmas down the street; how else will the big guy find your house when it's lost in the shadow of someone else's showmanship? Unwritten rule: Be tasteful, not timid. Your kids will thank you.

Blinking lights, or nah. Those new projector lights that project green snow and giant white snowflakes on the front of the house? Lights that blink? Candles in every window? A single spotlight highlighting a giant holiday wreath? Hey, you guys do you. Unwritten rule: When it comes to holiday cheer, who are we to argue?



make it work - part 1



Bim Willow sounds like the name of a charming character in a delightful children's fairy tale. Instead, he's a taskmaster of tree-limbed furniture whose not-so-whimsical workshop we attended one early Saturday morning in November.

The Chicago Botanic Garden, which hosted the session, offers classes in everything from drawing to yoga to nature-walking. On a sweltering day last July, we at mutterhood decided that Bim's holiday workshop was one we wanted in on. So we signed up, and before you know it, the day arrived.

It was a beautiful morning, perfect for a nature craft. We arrived at the garden well before Bim's 9:00 start time, bought coffee at the cafe, and strolled over to the workroom, where at least a dozen people were already busy. We were early, but Bim was earlier — and we were already behind.

The workshop description detailed the day's task: Build your own holiday tree or reindeer from natural materials, no experience necessary. The tree was definitely the easiest, or so we thought. Crafted from willow limbs and branches, the trees were constructed from green branches we selected from several piles around the room and nailed together in a tee-pee shape. Other piles held smaller branches that in theory you wound around the tree frame, adding texture and movement and, at least in the four-foot model Bim made, professionalism to the design.



The raw materials.

The tree topper was a Star of David, already assembled from cut branches. Bim's holiday mash-up, if you will.

Needless to say, approximately none of the trees looked remotely like Bim's. Ours were much taller (blame the supplies, not the makers) and the branches twining through the tree skeletons looked, well, like someone found a bunch of twigs in the back yard and stuck them on.

“Oh, yours is beautiful!” we gushed to our workshop neighbors, and they to us, each of us determined that as a group we would leave proud of our morning’s work.

Cathi’s tree came the closest to Bim’s, though like everyone else’s it stood five-plus feet tall and three-plus feet in diameter. She festooned it with branches and vines, adding contour and depth and charming natural detail. Mine lacked that level of artistry, achieving a sort of minimalist quality due to the fact that I was having trouble hammering the branches together in the first place. Bim’s tattooed helper reminded me several times that the nails had to go ALL the way through the branches or the tree would fall apart. I whined and swore until Cathi (and anyone else within earshot) heard enough; she stopped embellishing her tree to come over and secure the nails in mine.



A workshop participant compares her creation to Bim's example.

It takes a village, as they say.

The two hours flew by until we declared we were done. (I was done a lot earlier.) As we collected finishing nails from the floor and unused branches to be composted, we surveyed the workshop forest. Trudy, the woman working next to us, worried that her tree wouldn’t fit in her Honda hatchback, while a couple from Wisconsin pondered how they were going to get both the tree and reindeer they’d made home. Bim’s tattooed helper shrugged and said it probably wasn’t going to happen.

Turns out, scale was the legacy problem for our willow workshop, and we were no exception. Cathi and I had driven together, and with a large SUV and the back seat folded down, I was sure fitting two trees in the back would be no problem at all.

HA.



Ellen gets to work.

We walked our trees back to the parking lot, smiling at the people who commented on our designs, and stopping every minute or so because folks, willow limbs are heavy. We finally made it to the car, where we pushed, pulled, opened windows and crammed the trees into the back until Cathi called her son to come and pick her up. There was no way both of our trees were going to fit into one car, which turns out wasn’t the worst thing happening in Parking Lot B. Ten or so cars down, the folks from Wisconsin were realizing that Bim’s helper was right — the tree and reindeer didn’t fit, and what were they going to do?

Bim should have warned us, but those are minor details compared to the holiday heirloom we all created.

Was the tree workshop a success? Yes, but not so much that we’re going to do it again. If this is your kind of thing though, Bim offers workshops year-round, including several in which you build your own furniture — coffee tables, side tables, even a willow settee.

We’ll leave those to more accomplished artisans, though. Like the ones who bring a U-Haul.

Check make it work part 2 for pictures of the decorated holiday trees.

9.

make it work - part 2



When I first brought my tree home (above) my husband said it looked like it belonged at Burning Man. I blinged it up for inside and Ellen decorated hers (right) for the outdoors. Not sure they'll ask us to decorate holiday windows on State Street, but it was fun.

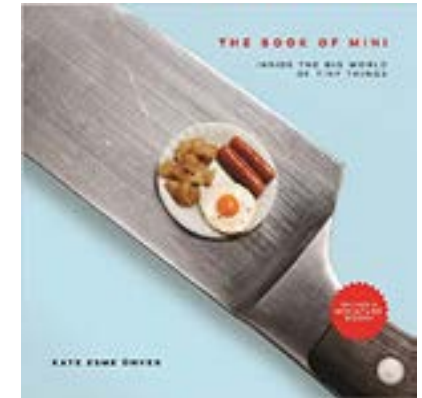
10.

make a list



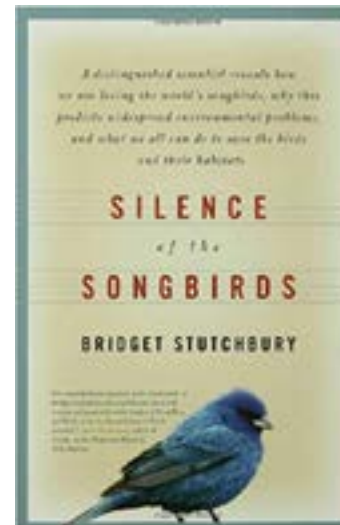
Is there anything better than a new book for Christmas? (Trick question – there’s nothing better!) We could always list a bunch of recommendations from the Best Of 2019 lists, but we thought, why not ask the women we featured in mutterhood this year to tell us what’s topping their lists?

We first met JoEllen Kerwin in Home, our first issue of the year. A talented artist and skilled miniaturist who creates detailed, historically accurate rooms and displays, JoEllen studies the world of miniatures closely, learning practical techniques and applying them to her own designs. Her recommendation: ***The Book of Mini: Inside the Big World of Tiny Things*** by Kate Esme Ünver.



“I was familiar with Ünver’s Daily Mini posts on Facebook and @dailymini on Instagram when I met her promoting her book at the big mini show in April. It’s mostly pictures with captions chaptered by themes and comes with its own miniature book nesting in the cover.

I think the book has really taken off, as I see it available many places online and, even better, at real bookstores, too. It offers a yummy introduction to miniatures of the highest quality, and I find it very inspiring.”



Saima Abassi’s story in our Bloom issue introduced us to a passionate naturalist and environmentalist whose work here and in her native Pakistan is dedicated to helping people create sustainable natural habitats. Saima’s book recommendation: ***Silence of the Songbirds*** by Bridget Stutchbury.

“I recently read this book and cannot stop talking about it! The author took me on a magical and daunting journey of the migration of the North American song birds. This truly is an eye-opening book that eloquently shares the value of the songbirds to our trees, flowers, gardens and ecosystems.

Stutchbury gives advice on how people can do simple things to make a difference, like buying shade coffee versus sun coffee and buying paper products that are made from sustainable forests vs unsustainable forests. Unfortunately, these birds are faced with many human-induced threats. I could not put this book down!”

11.

make it work - part 3



You may remember our friend Trudy from Monday's story about Bim Willow's tree-making workshop. Trudy was our neighbor and sister in arms that morning; we shared laughs and suggestions while struggling to coerce our willow branches into anything resembling a tree. (Reminder: It takes a village to make a holiday craft.)

The three of us hit it off, and we promised at the end of the morning to keep in touch. A few days later, Trudy sent us this photo of a holiday project she undertook at her home. We thought it was such a great idea that we asked if we could share it, and Trudy readily agreed.

It's quite beautiful: Trudy fastened a large tree branch from her living room ceiling, and hung her collection of glass ornaments and other trinkets from the branches. The effect, especially in the sunlight, is charming.

As projects go, it seems relatively straightforward. But that's what Bim Willow said ours would be, so what do we know. We love the effect, and thank Trudy for the idea!



Twenty-one knitted mittens.

12.

make some noise*Twenty jingle bells.*

Today is Day 12, the halfway point of our holiday countdown. To celebrate, we created our own *Halfway There* holiday playlist featuring twelve of our favorite songs by women artists that will have you humming along while you drive, wrap and bake all those holiday memories. It's available on Spotify to listen to or download, along with last year's Happy Holi(daze) playlist.

You'll be singing in no time.

make it happen

Sister Catherine, a distant relative by marriage, spent her golden years retired from the nunnery but still in its service. For most of the year she worked tirelessly on whimsical felt ornaments, embellished with embroidery, beads and sequins. As the holidays approached, she would sell her crafts, often at parties hosted by family and friends, to raise money for her order and her fellow retirees.

The tradition of holiday craft fairs, ubiquitous this time of year, usually features a range of crafts and other wares produced by women. We were intrigued to learn that the origin of the craft fair in this country can be traced to a group of Boston abolitionists. In 1833, the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society was formed. To amplify their message, these women held in-home craft fairs, selling homemade Christmas goods to fund their efforts, while also gathering like-minded people to support the cause. Their first fair raised \$300.

The following year, a pro-slavery mob gathered outside the home where the fair was being held, threatening to burn the house to the ground. Undaunted, the Society moved the fair to different homes, each time one-step ahead of the protesters. They refused to relent, declaring that the fair would become an annual event.

Over the next 20 years, the fair, now known as The Bazaar, became a popular Boston holiday tradition. Uncle Tom's Cabin author Harriet Beecher Stowe proclaimed that the fair was "the most fashionable event of the holidays." Women throughout New England formed sewing circles to produce the crafts, which also provided them a safe place to spread the anti-slavery message.

In 1840, The Bazaar debuted a novelty item: the Christmas tree, one of New England's first. Recently made popular by England's Queen Victoria, the tree was all the rage in Europe. Bazaar organizers used the tree to display items for sale that were crafted by local children.

The success of the venture, both in raising money and in spreading the anti-slavery message, represented another important milestone: the growing political and organizing power of women, which holds true to this day. As for the late Sister Catherine, we are reminded of her power every year when we hang her ornaments on our tree.



Twelve felt ornaments.

14.

make it cozy

*Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens
Bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens ...*

Oh, mittens.

Knitting mittens for a holiday gift is one of those ideas that sounds fantastic in July but ends up being a last-minute, curse-filled sprint in December. Trust me, as a seasons-long veteran of Christmas crafts I know of what I speak.

My name is Ellen, and I'm a holiday knitter.

I come by it naturally. I grew up surrounded by yarn – my mother was a knitter, and both of my grandmothers knit, crocheted and quilted – but I didn't pick up my own needles until the early 2000s, when a friend's knit night drew me in.

Since then I've made a billion (approximately) cowls, hats, fingerless mitts, scarves and ponchos. I've also purchased dozens of patterns, bought more than a few knitting books, and we're not going to talk about how much yarn I own. (No, we're not.)

It's been an uneven crafting relationship. Typically when I start a project it's all consuming — until I tire of it, unravel what I've knit (called frogging, in knitting vernacular), roll it back into a ball and stash it in a plastic bin with all the other balled-up yarn I own. (But we're not talking about that, remember?)

I love the process; I'm just not into completion.

What I appreciate about knitting is the zen of it. The repetitive nature of the stitches calms your mind, but there's also a tactile quality to it with soft yarn that begs to be touched. You can knit on your own or with others; I've helped fourth-graders learn to knit at my children's elementary school, and am now part of a second knitting group whose creative members seek out fresh, modern projects that we all ooh-and-aah over.

This past spring, a close friend invited me to join her weekly knitting class at a local yarn store. Every Tuesday we sit around the store's long table with five or six other women and knit together. I've learned how to brioche, cable, and this Tuesday will learn how to attach a thumb properly (not in my usual winging-it way) to three pairs of Lightning Fast Mittens, a one-skein pattern that Christine, our instructor, gifted to us a couple of weeks ago. (Christine is a professional who knows crafting desperation when she sees it.)

I look forward to these Tuesday evening sessions for the relaxed companionship and opportunity to learn new skills. My mittens may not yet have thumbs, but I'm enjoying knitting again. Isn't that what a craft is for?



15.

make a lasting impression

Oh Christmas Tree.

Of the many traditions in our family, most passed down through the generations of women, our Christmas trees owe a mighty holiday cheer to my grandmother. Packed with lights shining like the North Star, she took days to unwrap, place, adjust, and stuff her trees with ornaments, each one with a family story to tell.

We didn't appreciate her tree when we were younger, of course. We were too focused on the packages underneath. Those were also her job. All the energy she focused on the trees didn't extend to those packages. Wrapping was not part of her skill set. Neither was removing price tags.

Eventually we began to look up. Our family's history hung from those branches. She told us tales about each one, how it came to her, what it meant. We begged to take home our favorites and she always relented, happy to pass them on to those who appreciated their magic.

I think about her each year when I stuff my own trees to the breaking with memories. Among the branches lit like the sun as she taught me, we place our own treasure trove of sentiment collected over the years. We share stories about their origins, reminiscing about trips we've taken, experiences we've shared, crafts we've made together, little school pictures glued to felt.

But everyone knows that the first ornament on the tree is a tiny pair of Christmas stockings, stuffed with old tissue paper and faded over the years. It is the ornament my grandmother bought for her first son, my father. It's importance continues, my boys clamoring for the honor to hang it front and center. Now it's the only one of our ornaments to have traveled to a kindergarten show-and-tell, where our family story was shared with the class.

Thanks grandma.



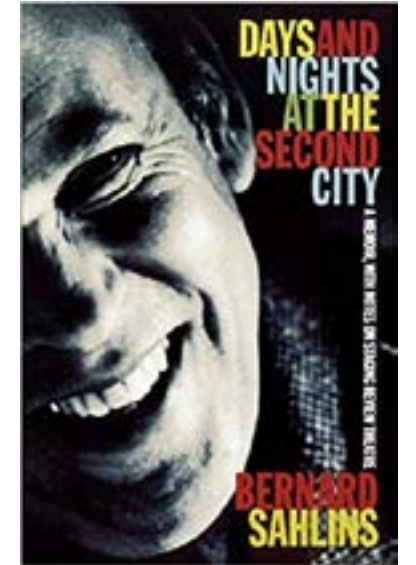
16.

make another list



Think we were done with holiday book recommendations? Not a chance. Here are a couple more ideas from women we featured in mutterhood this year.

Margaret Hicks, who we profiled in wander, isn't just an award-winning tour guide and owner of Chicago Elevated, which gives tours of Chicago's pedway and other out-of-the-way attractions. She's also an alum of The Second City comedy club and school of improvisation, and she jumped at the chance to recommend a book to mutterhood readers.



"I have a great book! It's *The Days and Nights at the Second City* by Bernard Sahlins. Bernie Sahlins was the one businessman in a room full of funny people. His history of The Second City is smart, funny and goes deeply into what makes The Second City different from all of the other comedy clubs. Bernie writes about the famous people who came through there and also how Second City does its creative work. It's a fun read and you will definitely recognize names and hear stories you've never heard before."



Laura Luce, whose stunning David Adler house we featured in home, has a passion for history, grand estates and art. She recommends *The Dutch House* by Ann Patchett, a novel about the bond between siblings that spans five decades and involves a lavish, historic estate outside Philadelphia.

"I love how the house is incorporated in the storyline of this fantastic book. I listen to audiobooks quite often, and I recommend it for this one because Tom Hanks is the narrator and he's so good at bringing the story to life."

Editor's note: Ann Patchett, the author of *The Dutch House*, is also co-owner of Parnassus Books, a wonderful independent bookstore in Nashville, Tenn. The store sells autographed copies of all of Patchett's books; you still have

time to order one as a gift for Christmas — or start a new tradition with a new book for New Year's and support independent bookstores.

17.

make it yours

My name is Cathi, and I'm a non-recovering Christmas tree-aholic.

This time of year I spend most of my days placing Christmas trees of all sizes around the house, each of them decorated according to a well-chosen theme.

The tree on the left is my actual family tree, created from the boxes and boxes of family photos languishing in the corners of closets. As a rescue mission, I photocopied my favorites, turned them into ornaments and wrote the who, what, when and where on the back.

It's a simple, sentimental craft that brings all my family, both past and present, together for the holidays.



18.

make a moment



There is calm in a winter morning walk, the streaks of light and shaded gray skies painting a quiet beauty in the bitter cold. A reminder to breathe, a moment to reflect, a time to appreciate the beauty of the season.

19.

make it sweet

Ah, the confections of Christmas.

Arriving shortly after we're done arguing the merits of Halloween candy corn (the correct answer: yuck) these sugary, chocolatey and marshmallowy treats scream HOLIDAY. They tempt us from every store shelf, their tree and star and Santa shapes beckoning to us under their festive foil wrapping. After much debate, here are our top five:



5. Candy Canes – Pretty to look at, pretty to tuck onto presents, pretty to use in holiday drinks, and pretty to scatter on holiday tables, we're sorry candy canes but you're pretty far down the list when it comes to delicious holiday treats.

4. Fudge. Not so pretty to look at, a small taste goes a long way with your packed-to-the-brim sugar-to-chocolate ratio. With or without nuts? We'll take either.

3. Reese's Peanut Butter Trees. We're firmly in the "yes, please" camp when it comes to this peanut butter and chocolate mashup.

2. Russell Stover Marshmallow anything. If a crumbly chocolate outside and a creamy marshmallow inside is wrong, we don't want to be right.

1. Hershey's Kisses. One candy to rule them all, they are the gift that keeps on giving. Just right when you need a chocolate fix (or 20), these little morsels in their tiny packages will be rolling around in your purse and hiding in coat pockets well into spring. Are they still good months later? Yes they are.



Nine holiday trees.

20.

make me laugh

In honor of Ugly Christmas Sweater Day, we are reposting our most popular post from last year. This adorable photo of my nieces and nephews from years ago was gifted to family and friends. It took days before I spotted an unfortunate folding on one of the Mountain Country sweaters. (Go ahead and look for it – we'll wait.)

It has become one of those family legends that we laugh about every year.



Fifteen knit stockings.

21.

make tracks

And I heard him exclaim as he rode out of sight “Merry Christmas to all. Next stop Davis Street.”

For years I’ve watched news reports of Chicago’s CTA Holiday Train, the cars zipping through Chicago lit with thousands of festive holiday lights. Sightings of the train in person eluded me, seemingly as rare as happening upon leprechauns or unicorns. Until today, when I discovered there was a schedule.

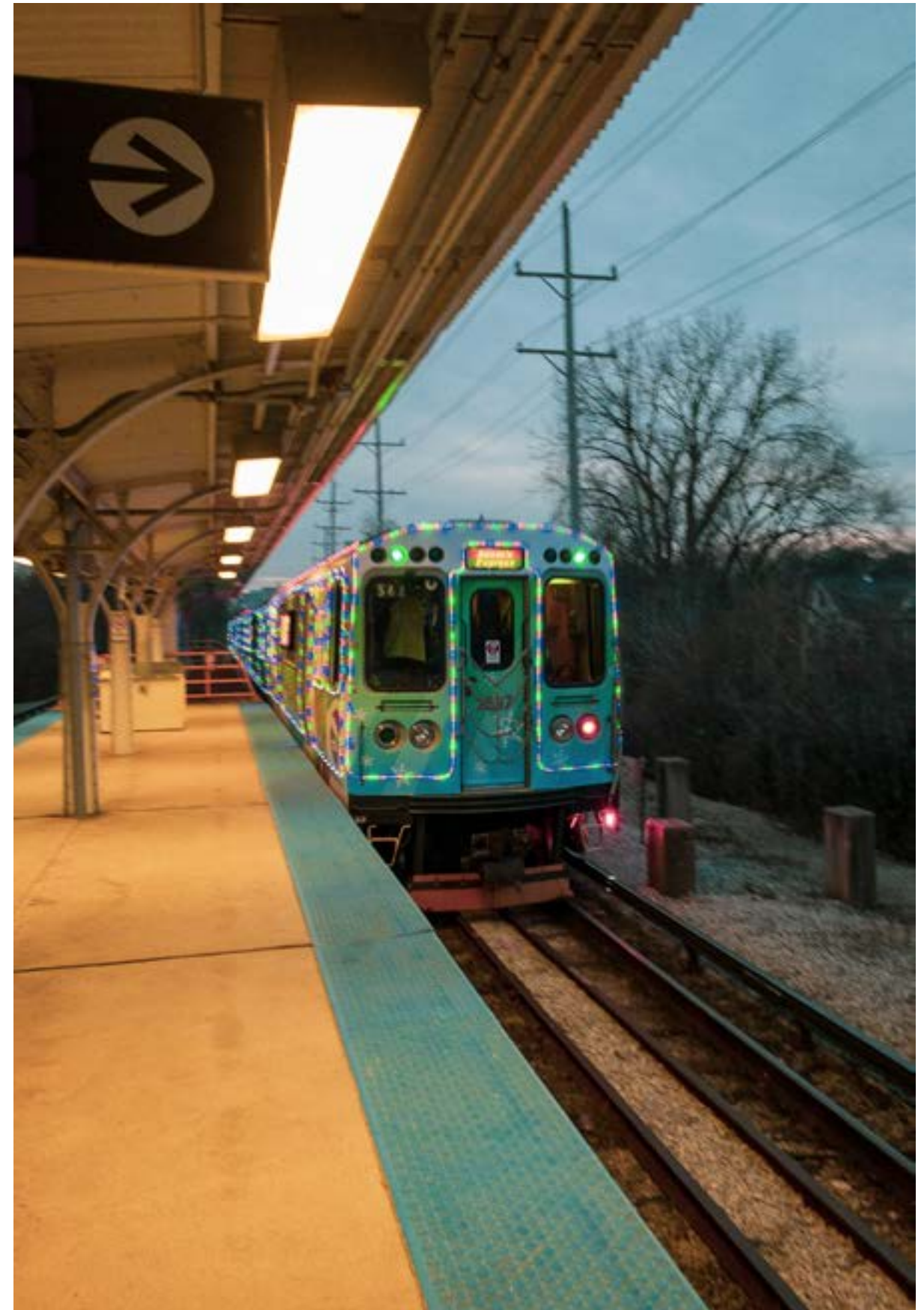
The magic of the train is even better in person. As it pulled into the station I was irrationally excited to see those thousands of lights coming my way. The doors open and CTA elves welcome you aboard with complimentary candy canes. Inside, every surface of the car is decorated in holiday cheer. Instead of their customary industrial blue, seats are clad in colorful holiday fabric. Ads that normally urge you to buy a better phone plan are replaced with signs urging you to visit the North Pole Barbershop — and jokes! What do you call the fear of getting stuck in a chimney? Santa Claustrophobia.

Yes Virginia, there is a Santa. He’s waving from a flat, open-to-all-elements middle car, sitting in his sleigh and led by five not-so-tiny reindeer. One young admirer asked if Santa got cold riding around the city like that but his mother assured him that Santa was a cold-weather fan and begged him to stand closer for a photo. Photo opportunities abound on the train, where cutouts of elves and reindeer await your personal touch.

The Holiday Train debuted in 1992 when a CTA train car was used to deliver food to local charities. That tradition is still part of the charm, with CTA employees donating their time and money to deliver food baskets throughout Chicago.

You can ride the holiday rails yourself, but you better hurry. The train stops running the evening of December 23; obviously Santa has other places to be on Christmas Eve.

You can find the [CTA Holiday Train schedule HERE](#).





A CTA elf greets passengers.



CTA Santa and his reindeer.

22.

make it shine

Today is the first day of Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights.

We're very bad at menorah-lighting in my house, where we celebrate both Jewish and Christian holidays. But we try. Every year we google the proper order for lighting the candles, the menorah shining brightly against the explosion of Christmas holiday decorations on every surface of our house.

To us, the menorah is more a remembrance of ancestors, especially those lost most recently. We think of them as we light the candles, preserving their memory as we reminisce about the times we shared. Another beautiful Jewish custom calls for candles to be lit every year on the anniversary of a loved one's passing, both traditions so similar to the candle-lighting I grew up with, kneeling in churches, your lit candle flickering among many as you take a quiet moment to reflect.

During this busy holiday season, with its focus on family and traditions, the simple act of lighting a candle brings so many memories to light.

23.

make it quick



It's crunch time, so we'll just cut to the chase with a list of last-minute gifts we've turned to in the past when all of a sudden Christmas is just hours away.

Cookies. We know, who has time to bake? But everyone has that one recipe they turn to, maybe from grandma, mom, Martha Stewart, or the back of the chocolate chip bag. Tonight, just put on those big girl pants and make a batch. Bake them first thing in the morning (your house will smell all Christmassy), throw them in a gift bag and pass them out as hostess gifts, neighbor gifts, even stocking stuffers. No one will be disappointed.

Cash. This year most of our gift-giving is for late-teens and early twenty-somethings, and nothing — and we mean nothing — is more appreciated than cash. I'm not naming names, but one of us may have spent an embarrassing amount of time on Pinterest looking for clever ways to wrap

dollars — shape them into a wreath; fold them into a chain, like those gum-wrapper ones we were obsessed with in middle school; fill up a box with single dollar bills — you get the idea. But why prolong the surprise? Just put cash in a card, sit back and bask in the praise.

Gift cards. Impersonal, yes. Practical and appreciated? You betcha. Make it more meaningful and choose cards from the recipient's favorite store. Or Target, because isn't Target everyone's favorite store?

IOUs. You've tracked the package, stalked the front porch, maybe even followed the delivery truck down the street. (Oh right, no one else does that.) Still, sometimes Santa just can't do it all. When a gift doesn't arrive in time, or you forgot to order it in the first place, or you're waiting to order it after Christmas when it's half the price it is now, don't settle for just any IOU. Get creative! You could cut out letters to spell the gift that isn't there and make a Scrabble game out of it. You could play charades to guess the gift, or just turn an empty box into an elaborately gift-wrapped package. For this gift, the only limit is your imagination.

Simplicity. When our daughter was three, she loved to color. So Santa filled a basket with crayons, markers, a stack of free coloring sheets he printed off from somewhere online, stickers and — her favorite gift of all — Scotch tape. The sight of all those little presents was almost more than she could stand. This remains one of our all-time successful gifts, and offers the best last-minute gifting lesson: Don't overthink it, and wrap absolutely everything.



Eleven Santas from around the world.

24.

make it merry



As Santa makes his way through the night sky, we hope your celebrations are as magical as they are merry.

25. *make a wish*



Families have gathered, Christmas presents exchanged, and now comes the calm before the returns/shopping/vacation storm.

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

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