

To All The Holiday Magic Makers

Christmas 2023

The first sip of hot cocoa in a styrofoam cup will always and without fail zap what's left of my taste buds into oblivion with how scalding hot it hits against my tongue. It's inevitable really. And yet, why is it that every year, when the holiday season approaches once more, the first thing I think of, the very first thing I look forward to each year, is that same scorching hot death drink with its notes of peppermint? Oh, how I can smell its smell and feel its warmth against my cold fingertips. Year after year. Without fail, it brings me joy.

We pile back into the truck. The remnants of this year's cocoa is now cold in my hand. We just finished walking around the neighborhood looking at Christmas lights. Every year for as far back as I can remember, we head to Candy Cane Lane, the infamous neighborhood that collectively treats decorating their homes with Christmas lights as if it were an Olympic sport. Each year we bundle up with holiday-themed sweaters, scarves, and mittens. Mom always orders me a peppermint hot cocoa from the corner stand and we walk the two blocks each way.

Then, when we get back in the car, we debrief. We each pick out our favorite houses and vote on which one we thought was the best. A unique theme is always awarded with extra style points. This year, The Grinch house was the clear winner, no doubt.

“I just don't understand how you can buy a home on Candy Cane Lane and not decorate. That's ridiculous,” Dad says to Mom. “Now, now, we shouldn't judge when we don't know their story. Maybe something came up this year and decorating just wasn't in the cards. You never

know what a family might be going through. Maybe we should send them a gift, spread our own holiday cheer,” Mom replies. She always has such a way of seeing light in every situation, even this one, where the problem literally is lack of light.

We pull into the driveway of our own not-yet-decorated home. We always wait till the Sunday after visiting Candy Cane Lane to decorate as a family so who are we to judge anyway. The Christmas tree we hand-selected from the farm earlier in the day, lays wrapped in the bed of the truck.

“Sophie, make sure you take off your boots before walking inside, and hang your coat up please.” Eye roll, eye roll, eye roll. “Listen to your mother,” Dad retorts. I live in a prison, this is a dictatorship. I stomp to the door purposefully, remove my shoes, making an apparent scene, and leave my coat on the floor, next to the hanger, a deliberate and diabolical move on my part. I catch Mother picking it up and shaking her head but she doesn't utter a word about my poor behavior. She simply picks it up and hangs it gracefully next to hers.

In the morning we wake early to decorate. I'm in a cheerful mood because it's one of my favorite days. Dad's outside on a ladder, stringing the lights across the roof. Mom and I work diligently to get the tree up inside the house. I love pulling each unique ornament out of the box like they're keepsakes worth cherishing. We make our own snowflakes by cutting up paper, then we tape them up on the windows. Our nativity scene that's been around since before I was born sits proudly on the mantle, and our stockings are hung in a line on the fireplace.

Then we go to Target, just me and Mom. We pick out this year's set of matching jammies that we'll wear together on Christmas Eve. Dad always forcibly wears his, but honestly, I think he secretly loves them.

As we get home from the store, Dad is finishing wrapping the trees tightly with more lights. "Lookin' good hunny," Mom says, noticing how festive the yard turned out as if it's any different than any year prior. "And you're always lookin' good, hunny," Dad remarks with a wink. She smiles and I cringe, "Gross."

Christmas Eve comes fast. Moms in the kitchen pulling out the cookie cutters. Christmas music fills the house with its warm familiar melody. I join her. She lets me crack the eggs and help stir the bowl. As soon as they're done we'll decorate them together, and we'll create a few special ones to leave out for Santa. Dad sits on the couch watching the football game without sound so that he doesn't disrupt the music, a key component in this cookie-making tradition.

"What do you think makes Christmas so special?," Mom turns and asks me shortly after setting a timer for 12 minutes on the stove. It catches me by surprise, I wonder the same thing. "Santa?," I reply selfishly knowing that can't be the answer she's looking for. "Could be," Mom says. "Well Jesus of course," I try again, trying to appease her this time. "That's certainly true. He sure is the reason for the season."

What does make Christmas so magical? I sit and ponder. Maybe the answer is not just one thing, but a string of things. Like Santa, peppermint hot cocoa, and Christmas cookies. By

themselves, they might feel quite ordinary, but together maybe they collectively make the season whole and magical. I don't know. But what I do know is that my home does feel like magic and everything about the holiday season makes me smile. Except that apparently, chores don't go away just because it's a holiday. No, actually they double and I think that's pretty rotten.

Santa arrived late last night. He ate all our cookies and the reindeer enjoyed the food we left outside for them. It's morning and our stockings are filled. A present from Santa sits on the fireplace, wrapped in the same shiny, red, wrapping paper it's always in every year.

The home radiates with the smell of warm pancakes and bacon. Freshly squeezed orange juice sits proudly in the center of the table. I'm allowed to open my stocking and my gift from Santa. But we must eat first before we can even begin to touch the presents from Mom and Dad. And even then, it's a slow, meticulous process. The agony.

My stocking always has a new toothbrush, a book, candy, and a few things so uniquely me. Santa's good that way. He isn't too fancy, he sticks to his same ritual, and I can always count on that.

Our bellies are now full. I'm seated anxiously on the carpet next to the Christmas tree. Mom sits with her mug of coffee, legs crossed on the couch, telling me what presents I'm allowed to open and in which order. Dad works through his same one-liners like clockwork. "What'd we get ya?," He asks genuinely curious because he has no idea.

I get five presents each year. Mom says this is so I'm not too spoiled. Sometimes I wish I got as many presents as my friends do. They get to run downstairs and unwrap them all in a frenzy, tearing through them like a tornado ripping through a field.

We stay in our matching Christmas jammies all day. We have honey baked ham for early dinner. We watch the same lineup of Christmas movies we always do: 'Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer' first, then 'Frosty the Snowman, and then, of course, we finish with 'How the Grinch Stole Christmas'. I fall asleep on the couch with my head on Mama's lap.

Another Christmas has come and gone. Everything was so perfectly the same, everything was magic.

Christmas 2024

Dad lets me sit in the front seat this year. Which is illegal surely, but it's got a better view of the lights. We decided not to get out and walk this year. My styrofoam cup sits in the cup holder. He remembered how much I love having a hot cocoa to commemorate the season, but it's from the gas station, and there are no traces of peppermint. It is still, however, scorching hot. The house that was bare last year, shines brightly this year. A change in circumstances, roles have been reversed. They're the clear winner of our fictional competition.

We pull into the driveway of our home. The lights are already hung. It's a job dad has always done anyway. It was the one thing he felt confident in checking off of the long list of

holiday to-do's. The Christmas tree we hand-selected from the farm, lays wrapped in the bed of the truck.

I place my shoes nicely by the door, clanking them free of mud first. I hang my coat nicely on the rack by the door. It hangs there alone.

Dad and I head to bed and sleep in. What's the rush? By afternoon, we have successfully located the box we need to decorate our tree. It was labeled nicely and stored away in the attic, thankfully. Each ornament dad pulls out of the box he holds on to for a little too long before hanging proudly on the tree. Each unique ornament is a keepsake, a memory we both cherish with every fiber of our beings. We don't make snowflakes this year, but our nativity scene sits on the mantle, and our stockings are hung on the fireplace.

Christmas Eve arrives. Dad bought us jammies, but mine fit a bit snugly. I scour the drawers for Mom's cookie recipe, realizing she must have always made them from memory. I click through channels on the radio, trying desperately to get Christmas music to play. Shouldn't it be easy to find one dang radio channel with holiday spirit for Christ's sake?

I give up and sit slouched on the tile floor. Dad doesn't watch the game. Instead, he comes over to me and helps me up. He googles a generic sugar cookie recipe, and he plays Christmas music softly through his phone. They come out burnt on the bottom, but mushy on top. "I'm sorry sweetheart, I really tried," Dad says. "I know you did," I reply.

We leave the cookies out, but they go uneaten. Mistake number one. My stocking has no toothbrush, the gift is wrapped in different paper. Mistakes two and three. I know now that Santa was never real. It was just mom, it was always just mom.

Dad cooks a good breakfast. He's always makes good food. Six presents are wrapped for me under the tree. There's an extra one because Dad hopes it'll make me feel a little more loved, and a little less sad. And I make one for Dad, to make sure he knows I feel his love, and love him too.

Dad can't find the movies we always watch. We settle on a new Christmas special neither of us have seen before. We watch in silence for a little while before he turns to me and says, "I know things aren't the same this year, but I love you with everything I got hun, and I'm here for you even if I didn't quite get all the things right." "I miss her," I say. "I know you do. I do too, more than anything," He replies. "What do you say we start a new tradition?" He gets up and grabs a tub of peppermint ice cream that I didn't even realize he bought. He hands me a spoon and we do some serious damage.

And now, I realize that the real magic of Christmas came from a mom, a mom who simply and unconditionally loved me so dang much. A mom who wanted me to feel the spirit of Christmas, and made sure to the best of her ability, that I always did. And to be loved like that, even for a little while, well, that is the greatest gift of all. Thank you, God, for creating Moms.

What makes Christmas so magical? I ponder. It's not one thing, but a string of things that a person, a loved one creates and brings to life. The real magic comes from togetherness, from the act of someone wanting you to feel so special that they create magic by anticipating your needs and wants, often before you even realize them yourself. And this year Dad did just that. He created new magic in the small, resilient ways he tried to keep her spirit alive.

“Thank you for everything, Dad.”

“It's me and you always, kid.”

Another Christmas has come and gone. Everything this year was so uniquely different. And yet, everything was still magic.