



# CHRISTMAS MAGIC

Sometimes you find it where you least expect it.

BY HOLLY PEVZNER ILLUSTRATION BY NAOMI WILKINSON

Two Christmases ago, I was firmly in the jolly, tinsel-strewn Santa zone: I snagged the most-coveted and hard-to-find gifts early. My stocking stuffers were fun and cool (not boring and lame). I dressed the tree with generations of ornaments and decked the walls with rows of holiday cards. My speakers rang out carol after carol as our family

counted down with our tastefully glittered Advent calendar. By the time the 25th rolled around, I was pulsing with holiday cheer, primed to have a Christmas for the record books. And it all went down just as I had hoped. My boys squealed and shook with delight as colorful paper flew through the air. They hugged and high-fived as they compared loot. And, be still my heart, the morning was

peppered with big thank-yous and declarations of Santa's awesomeness. They played for hours by the tree, belly to floor, while my husband and I—and Nana and Grampy—watched with coffees in hand. My kids' smiles were big, and my heart was full. This, I thought, was Christmas.

And, by most accounts, it was a fantastic Christmas. Thanks to an unusually mild winter, the kids got to wear their new soccer jerseys and try out their footballs in the yard. When they weren't running out back, they were in their around-the-tree playing positions, Lego and Star Wars guys in hand. They had a blast, but when the day drew to a close and I tucked my oldest son into bed and asked, "Did you have a nice holiday, sweet pea?" I got a surprise answer. He took an extra-long pause and hesitantly answered: "It didn't really feel like Christmas. I love everything I got, but it was more fun leading up to Christmas. And this year, we didn't have the family party. Today sort of felt like a regular day with cool gifts." My heart sank.

Every Christmas my kids have ever known has been punctuated by a giant party filled with dozens and dozens of relatives of all ages. It's loud. It's boisterous. I barely see my own children. They're always caught up in a swirl of cousins, aunts, and uncles of the first and second variety. Homemade treats are everywhere, including the highly anticipated only-at-Christmas Needhams, which are a drool-worthy blend of sugar, chocolate, and potato. There's the potluck lunch that always features two distinct takes on Boston baked beans. There's the annual attempt at a giant group picture. There's the grown-ups-only white-elephant gift exchange that gets rowdy and hilarious when scratch tickets and booze get unwrapped and quickly stolen. And we didn't have any of it this year, canceled for a number of

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health, schedule, and hassle reasons.

I knew that not having the party would dampen Christmas a bit, but I convinced myself that Santa's magic—and all those spot-on gifts—could carry the day. Plus, at the family party, the boys never even ate the beans, and the adults got all the gifts, not the children. Anyway, we had a cousin-playdate on the books for the next day. It would be fine. Clearly, I was wrong. I felt terrible, worse than terrible: I felt like a colossal Christmas failure. I wallowed and welled for a while, but then it hit me: My sweet 8-year-old boy, who labored over his Christmas list for weeks, making edits and rearranging items in order of priority—the kid who took inventory of every toy flyer and cross-referenced his list with his brother's—that kid understood that Christmas was about way more than presents under the tree. He loves the lead-up and the same-every-year party! Me too, kiddo! Me too! And just like that, my despair turned to pride. All those family activities and crafts and trips that I shoehorn into one glorious month every December really do mean something.

The ornaments the kids make to give grandparents; the homemade candies and treats they give to so many; the special Toys-for-Tots trip to the store; the holiday train show; the *Polar Express*; the local production of *A Charlie Brown Christmas*; the bumper-to-bumper drive to see the over-the-top holiday

lights across town; decorating cookies; the gingerbread house; "Twas the Night Before Christmas"; writing notes to Santa; that dang Elf. And, of course, the family party. All of it adds up to our perfect holiday. The gifts, which I so often put at the center, are really just a sweet bonus.

I was so very proud of my boy's take on our holiday, but I also worried. What if our family never quite achieved that beloved Christmas nirvana again? The party was probably a no-go for good, and now a new tradition needed to take its place, one that would make Christmas once again uniquely ours. I thought back, trying to recall how my own childhood holiday traditions shifted as my sister and I grew. I smiled, remembering how my mom changed the way her gifts were labeled. Her ornate signature and personalized messages were replaced by autographs and love notes of teen heartthrobs. "Oh! This one is from The New Kids on the Block," my sister and I would giggle. She managed to make our new tradition just as amazing as the old. If she could do it, I could do it too. And I didn't even have to wait till the following Christmas.

Later in the week, I unearthed my mom's stuffed-mushroom recipe and told the kids how she'd make them on New Year's Eve. We'd all eat while the ball dropped. I told the boys how I always felt so fancy dining on late-night appetizers; how my mom served them on a poinsettia-etched glass dish that was kept in the china cabinet. They loved hearing about it and were very excited to help me get them ready. And when they were finally served—on the very same glass serving dish my mom used—the kids gobbled them all up with delight, and I couldn't stop smiling. Change can be good. Really good. "Can we do this every New Year's?" asked my 8-year-old. I wouldn't have it any other way. ♦