

Keep the Christmas Magic

Plan it in September, enjoy it in December

HEIDI LUND

Posterpaloma

For my children,
who remember the dog and the falling Christmas tree
and none of the rest of it.

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A NOTE BEFORE YOU START

This book is for the grown-ups.

Somewhere in these pages there are lists of presents, notes about who is getting what, and a short and frankly undignified account of the year my daughter found every letter she had ever written to Santa in a drawer in my own house.

So if you are small, and you have picked this up because it looked like it might be about Christmas: it is not. It is about spreadsheets. There is nothing in here for you at all, and you would be far better off doing almost anything else.

Everybody else, welcome.

A few of the practical details in this book are British: Boxing Day, the postbox, the shops closing when they close. Adjust them to wherever you are. The third salad, I am reliably informed, is international.

One more thing worth knowing before you begin. This is not only a book to read. There are twenty pages at the back that are yours to write on: four worksheets you will meet as you go, and three sets of record pages, for what you ate and who was there.

One for each Christmas. They start as a list. By the third year, a keepsake.



PART 1.
THE INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER ZERO:
THE CHRISTMAS MAGIC



One December I baked twenty gingerbread houses. Not twenty gingerbread men. Houses. Walls, roofs, gables, little panes of melted sugar in the windows, each one assembled while the icing was still wet enough to hold and dry enough not to slide. They were for the school Christmas market. The sign-up sheet had asked for a contribution. It had not, in any language, asked for twenty.

Somewhere between reading that sheet and standing in my kitchen at midnight with flour in my hair and piping bags stiffening on the counter, a number rose up in my head and installed itself as fact. Twenty. I never once stopped to ask where it came from. I only knew that a smaller number would have felt like arriving with my hands half empty.

They sold beautifully. People were delighted. And I remember almost nothing about that evening except the ache between my shoulder blades.

The same winter, I hauled a large old toy bear out of a second floor window.

He was dressed as Santa. I arranged him so that from the street it looked as though he were climbing in, caught mid burglary, one paw over the sill, sack presumably somewhere below. It took me an afternoon and a great deal of undignified leaning.

Nobody ever mentioned it. To this day I have no idea whether a single person walking past ever looked up and noticed him hanging there. But every time I came home and saw that ridiculous bear halfway through my own window, I laughed out loud.

Two projects, one December, roughly the same amount of trouble. Only one of them was for me.

That is the book you are holding.

This book is for the woman who is up at midnight wrapping presents, managing three different family schedules, remembering everyone's preferences, and quietly holding Christmas together.

If you are the person who makes the magic happen in your household, this book is for you.

You may be the mother, the wife, the hostess, the keeper of family traditions—or simply the person who somehow knows which child needs which gift, what time the school concert starts, and which relative will notice if a tradition is forgotten.

That role can be beautiful. It is often an expression of love. But somewhere along the way, the person creating Christmas can disappear inside the work of creating it. You can become so busy making the holiday wonderful for everyone else that you barely get to experience it yourself.

This book is not about doing less because Christmas does not matter. It is about doing less of what was never really yours to carry and making room for what is.

Because you are not the Christmas staff.

You belong at the table, too.

THE AUDIENCE THAT NEVER ASKED

I love Christmas. I want to say that plainly and early, because a great deal of what follows is going to sound like restraint, and I would hate for you to mistake restraint for indifference.

I love the smell of the season and the dark afternoons and the particular quality of light on a table set properly. I wanted my children to have magic, real magic, the kind they would carry with them, and for a good many years I built it with both hands. I went overboard. Not always, and not on purpose, but often enough that I can spot the symptoms in another woman from across a room.

Here is the thing I eventually noticed. Almost everything I overdid was aimed at somebody who had never requested it.

Not my children. Not my spouse. Not my mother. Not any actual person who might reasonably have hopes about my Christmas. The audience I was performing for was a composite, assembled out of a neighbour, a sister in law, a woman at the school gate, and several strangers on the internet whose names I do not know and never will. That committee met in my head every autumn and set the standards, and I obeyed them the way you obey a traffic light.

The bear was different. The bear had no committee. The bear was simply my own peculiar joy, hanging out of a window, entertaining an audience of one.

So before we go a single page further, one question, and I would ask you to answer it honestly rather than kindly:

WHO ARE YOU DOING THIS FOR, AND DID SHE EVER ACTUALLY ASK?

Some of your answers will be lovely. Your daughter really does want the cinnamon buns. Your father really does light up at the same carols every year. Your own heart genuinely lifts at hanging the wreath on the door. Those stay. Every one of them stays.

But somewhere in your list there will be an item you cannot trace to a real, named human being who wants it. And once you have said that out loud, it tends to lose most of its power over you.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS ACTUALLY ASKING

This is not a book about caring less. It is about spending the same love in fewer places.

At Christmas, you are not just an event planner. You are also shaping your family's traditions. You decide what gets repeated, what gets made room for, what belongs on the table, and what becomes part of the story your family tells about Christmas.

That is a beautiful role. It is also easy to take too far. When you are exhausted and running on empty, trying to satisfy an imaginary committee that nobody elected, something important gets crowded out. You.

And Christmas was never meant to be something you produce for everyone else and then miss yourself. So cutting back is not selfish. It is how you stop missing it.

What matters will not be the same for everyone. For some it is the spiritual heart of the season, the service on Christmas Eve, the quiet of it. For others it is music, or food, or the walk on Christmas morning, or simply being in a room with the people they love. Nobody else gets to say which.

Advent gives us an old and useful idea here: stopping points. Small spaces in the season where we pause long enough to notice where we are, what matters, and what we want to make room for.

The principle is simple enough to fit on a fridge door:

Know where the edge is, and stop just before it.

Not because ambition is vulgar, and not because hospitality is silly. Both can be ways of saying I love you, and I would not take either away from you.

Only because past a certain point, you stop being the person who makes Christmas and start being the woman who survives it. And you can feel the difference yourself, even when nobody else could name it.

That is why every chapter in this book offers you two forks, and only two.

Fork one: same as last year. Keep what worked.

Same menu, same table, same jumper, same route through December. Repetition is not laziness. Repetition is how a thing becomes a tradition in the first place, and nobody is keeping score, least of all the children.

Fork two: better by one degree. One new dish. One new decoration. One improvement, chosen deliberately and then followed by a full stop.

There is no third fork. There is no fork where you do both and hand letter the place cards as well.

The bargain

The rest of these pages will ask you to do a surprising amount of work in September and October. Lists, addresses, orders, a menu written down while the weather is still mild. If you came here hoping to be told to do less, that part may look like a betrayal.

It is the opposite. Every hour spent in October is an hour bought back in December, and December is the only part of this that was ever the point. The admin is not Christmas. The admin is what we get out of the way so that Christmas can happen to us too.

Because you are allowed to be a guest at your own holiday. You are allowed to sit down while the candles are still lit. You are allowed to make something purely because it makes you smile softly, even chuckle, whether or not a single person walking past ever looks up.

Somewhere out there, that bear is still climbing in the window.

One last thing, before we start. While I was writing this, I asked my own children what they remember best about our Christmases. I was braced for something expensive. This is what I got.

“Actually, what my kids remember best about our Christmas is how we used a rope to tie the tree to the bookshelf, because our dog always managed to knock it over. We even have an accidental photo of the event almost happening: the tree, well decorated by little hands, already moving downward, the villain’s tail visible in the photo.”

Not one thing on my list. Not one thing I stayed up for. A rope, a bookshelf, and a dog with ambitions.

Let us begin in September.