



Photo by David Cray

What I Want for Christmas

PUDDING REMAINS AT THE TOP of my “No-Eat” list. It, along with yogurt, is so unappetizing to me, that I ban it from passing my lips. Once a year I do make an exception, though, when the annual bowls of chocolate pudding come out of the kitchen on Christmas Eve.

Because our family’s last name is Danish, years ago, my mom decided to find a Danish tradition that our family could adopt. The one she chose involved making rice pudding and serving it to family members on Christmas Eve. Knowing the palates of her family, she modified the custom by settling on chocolate, rather than rice, pudding. What stayed the same was that an almond is hidden in one of the bowls of pudding, and whoever gets the almond is the “elf” the next morning. Elf duties basically boil down to handing out the gifts from under the tree on Christmas morning.

When I was little, I was devastated whenever, as I frantically swirled my spoon through the bowl searching for the almond, one of my sisters would cry out “I found it!” Somehow the role held such delight for me and I longed to be crowned the Christmas Elf. Part of what was so appealing was the bit of joy that came from handing a gift to someone.

Gift giving is one of the most focused on and celebrated aspects of Christmas. When I was younger it was easy to come up with ideas for gifts. I remember visiting Santa each year and being ready when he asked what I wanted for Christmas. Selecting presents for my sisters and parents was easy. As the years have gone on though, I notice it is more difficult to think of what to give or get. Maybe that is because, as I reflect on life, the greatest gifts I have been given are not things that fit into boxes under the tree or that can be encased in wrapping paper.

I feel so blessed to have been given the gift of traveling to Kyrgyzstan with Airmen from Fairchild AFB to see the incredible work being done by our military, much of which they do without recognition. You can read about the trip on page 104. I marvel in amazement at the events in which I was able to participate—a refueling flight over Afghanistan, a humanitarian mission to give coats to Kyrgyz children, tours of the base, sitting with the pilots for night landings and a takeoff. Every once in a while, in the midst of enjoying all these incredible opportunities, I’d be hit with a sobering sight putting it back into perspective that I was at a military installation which is an active part of the war in Afghanistan.

One morning as I was walking across the base, I passed a truck full of young strapping Army troops preparing to leave for Afghanistan, loading their green duffel bags into a pallet to be put on their plane. Soldiers tossed one bag after another to each other, in an assembly line format. Many of these men were young, and as I watched them I was hit with the reality of where they were going. While I was at there for a week and would get to fly home in a few days, these brave men were going into a war zone where they would be far from their loved ones, in a frightening and unknown environment. Even more disheartening was the thought that some of them may not come home. As I stopped to watch, one of the soldiers dropped a bag and several tightly rolled pairs of white socks tumbled out onto the road. My heart ached as I wondered if perhaps his mother had washed them and packed them for him, a final maternal act before her young boy went off to war. I felt helpless standing there, thinking of the sacrifice they were making and the people who loved them and would miss them while they were gone.

I thought I understood it before, but after this trip, I have such a huge amount of respect for all of the servicemen who are sacrificing so much; their safety and comfort, as well as enduring the strain of being away from their friends and family back home. I can’t imagine how hard that is. It makes me say thank you God for my life here, and be thankful for those who fight for our freedom.

This holiday season, as I think of those socks, and the unknown soldier to whom they belong, I offer a prayer, asking God to watch over him. I am also reminded of what a blessing it is to have people who I love and to be able to spend time with them. No amount of riches, no number of boxes under a tree, nor rewards or accomplishments could ever mean as much as the chance to spend time with those I love and hold dear in my heart. *That*, is what I am asking for this year. May you be lucky enough to receive such a gift from your Christmas Elf.

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