

ALL THAT, AND A BAG OF CHIPS

*Feeling a lot more naughty
than nice, CHRISTINA KO muses
on the meaning of the holidays*



PHOTOS _ SHUTTERSTOCK

THANKS TO THE fact that we've damned ourselves with political correctness, that time of year we once called Christmas for convenience is now deemed "the holidays". It's a linguistic distinction that I find not just vague but entirely misleading, because that week that takes us from the end of December to the beginning of January is typically anything but relaxing, anything but leisurely, fraught as it is with the minefield of gift-giving, indulgence, airport mishaps, family drama, overindulgence and for some, the white noise of loneliness and loss.

If Sartre got it right and hell is others, then the holiday season is in fact an exquisite form of torture, obscured behind a barrage of endless air kisses and beneath piles of presents. I'm pretty sure this isn't what Dickens' ghosts of Christmases past, present and future had in mind when they were doing their best to elucidate the deeper meaning of this time of year. It's certainly not what Dr Seuss was thinking when he invented the cranky and villainous old Grinch, then reformed him into a chipper and chummy chap within the span of one children's book.

The holidays are supposed to be about the spirit of togetherness, about the celebration of another year ended, about joy and generosity, about love and laughter and of course, about gifts. Indeed, there are tales as old as memory itself that remind us that as the end of the year approaches, so too do commercial obligations abound. Who can forget intrepid Rudolph and his much-mocked yet indispensable nose, that bulb of crimson illumination that allowed children the world over to receive their much-desired gifts on a Christmas Eve in low-visibility conditions? Or the trio of sagacious silver-haired gents who came to bestow Jesus with frankincense, gold and myrrh on the occasion of his birth?

While many of us tend to ignore the lessons espoused by the Holy Book, if there's one we should abide by, it's the one that allows us to indulge our materialistic desires without guilt, isn't it? And businesses make it easy for us. When you work in media, you have no excuse for failing to know about the appropriate contributions to family and friends, thanks to press releases from every brand you can imagine, each touting proper present possibilities at every price point and for every demographic. There are gifts for her, for him, for your child, for your pet, for your boss, for your annoying auntie, for your best friend's other best friend, for your postman's great-grandmother's second-uncle's ex-girlfriend...

Certain occasions seem like fair game. Singles' Day in China and Black Friday in the US, for example, aren't real holidays; they're invented shopping holidays. Valentine's Day is a candy holiday, as is Halloween. Chinese New Year might be a family occasion, but given that the rulebook demands new threads and even provides colour-specific guidelines, it's not too surprising that brands with their eyes on the China market – basically, all of them; you know you saw that *South Park* parody – churn out special-edition releases in eye-catching red and featuring whatever animal the Chinese zodiac switches to. And it makes sense, particularly given that it falls during what is traditionally a post-holiday lull in the retail sector. But Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa – shouldn't these be pure?

You could argue that the act of gift-giving is somehow connected to altruistic notions of care and consideration – affection, translated into matter. There's nothing like the feeling of stumbling upon the perfect idea, nothing like that high of anticipating the recipient's enjoyment upon ripping open that wrapping paper and discovering: "I am loved by someone who knows me thus!" While all this is true, perhaps I just don't have very good friends and family – more often than not, I find myself feigning ecstasy at being able to add to my scented candle collection. And let's not even get into today's politics of imbalanced gifting, such as the faux pas that occurs when you realise you've given your boyfriend a present that implies great intimacy and he's gotten you a metaphorical lump of coal.

Gifts aren't the only sorcery that the retail giants foist upon us. Themed parties demand the purchase of ugly Christmas sweaters (and since haute fashion houses don't often indulge in such gimmickry, these are usually made at the hands of the sweatshop workers oft employed by fast-fashion brands). Trees need trimming, doorways need mistletoeing, dads need Santafication and it's come to my attention in recent years that there has been a disturbing proliferation of felt reindeer-antler headbands in polite society, which emerge just as the first bars of Wham's "Last Christmas" infiltrate the ears of shoppers in an endless, trance-inducing loop.

Shall we speak on celebrations? When did our happiness at the holidays become predicated on platters of turkey, flutes of champagne, puddings and yule logs, and hampers that overflow with ingestible treats you might not care for any other time of year? These mascots of traditional holidays may bring with them nostalgia, but they also romanticise the overconsumption that is so blatantly rampant in society today.

I am, of course, as complicit in this as anyone. I love turkey, I make a mean cornbread stuffing and I measure the success of my annual Thanksgiving dinner by the amount of food consumed, not the joy of those attending. I mean, it's not like I like people. People are tiring. I like *some* people, *sometimes*, in small doses and controlled environments, and with an exit strategy that can be easily implemented. In other words, I don't like people at all.

And I don't think I'm alone in this. Sure, if the mood is right, I enjoy a good white elephant gift exchange. When I still worked in an office, yeah, of course I'd rather attend the annual holiday shindig than sit at my desk trying to close the January issue before the printers went on break. But then there are more nights than not when I've lied about my availability to the host of an event, feigning sickness and feeling that my time is better spent under the covers with a couple of corgis and David Sedaris, whose *Holidays on Ice* is a better bible than the Bible if you aren't religious.

In some ways, the weirdest thing about the holidays is that they're supposed to mean the same thing to everyone, as if a global holiday committee had a big marketing meeting and decided that the week of December 25th should be about family, friends, food and frivolity – and nothing else. My dream this holiday season isn't exactly to be so rebellious and contrarian that I wish to spend it antisocially (or even, god forbid, ordinarily). I'm reminded of an interview I once read with the enviably weird art-world darling Haegue Yang, who makes sculptures with offbeat things like Venetian blinds and whose last exhibition contained a performance by football drones. Her dream holiday, she told the *South China Morning Post* a few years back, was to be locked in a room with a couple of friends, subsisting on water and nothing else. "People always think about which restaurants to go to, ordering food and drinks, or where to go. These are overwhelming topics, and people do not realise they are more overwhelming than going to work," she suggested. "All these rituals are disturbances and do not take 'getting together' seriously."

As far as I've learned, Yang has not found friends serious enough to take her up on this offer, but there have definitely been moments when I've thought that perhaps this set-up – eerily reminiscent of the aforementioned from Sartre's *No Exit* – is a lot more compelling than the Christmas I dressed up as a dinosaur, did a bunch of tequila shots, and went home with a box of Legos and a hangover.

Of course, I don't want to take Yang's concept and rip it off completely, so my holiday scenario would probably also include a few bags of chips and Maltesers – because hunger doesn't make for good company – and a couple of stacks of old magazines for entertainment. Besides that, is it odd that her fantasy sounds kind of fantastic to me?

Because if you strip away the formulaic and the commercial, the glitter and the gatherings, what you've got when you break down the meaning of the holidays is... absolutely nothing. And oh, how freeing is that? The holidays should be about whatever you want them to be – and if that's a by-the-book Christmas party, that's okay, too. But if it's a bag of Doritos and a conversation that never ends, then I certainly can't think of anything more beautiful. #