

Rushing Home with our Treasures

by BROCK WEIR

Santa Claus Parade season is kicking into high gear across Ontario, and so is the holiday season.

Well, if we're honest with ourselves, it has been in mid-gear a few months now with many stores not even waiting for the candles in our pumpkins to burn out before dusting off their garlands, advent calendars, and other impulse buy tchotchkes, usually wreathed in some combination of red, green and snowy white, to suit just about every taste.

It's not just retailers that got into the act this year ? and who can blame them? On some TV channels and streaming services, the steady drip-drip-drip of holiday cheer comes earlier and earlier every year.

Why, of course we all need to watch movies in June that involve a high-powered big city executive heading back to their small-town home for one reason or another at some point in the dead of winter, against their better judgement, not wanting to leave their very, very, very important job behind for the merest of weekends ? only to have their entire world upended by a toothsome organic mulch farmer who reminds them of life's simple pleasures.

Or watch a tale about a crusty developer or lawyer, still a city slicker, only following a buck, who descends upon Small Town, USA (almost invariably, as it happens, shot in Canada) to build a bucolic lifestyle-ruining mega mall or casino ? only to have second thoughts when the local artisan kombucha maker, whose kitchen falls in the direct path of the plans, captures their heart while making snow angels outside a landmark in the proposed path of destruction.

These pictures rarely capture a realistic view of the holidays, but I guess that's the point. We don't necessarily want to watch people go through the actual realities of holiday seasons; rather, perhaps we simply want to be spoon-fed the ideal because we've moved a bit away from it in our actual lives.

That's not to say these ?ideals? don't bubble back to the surface every once in a while.

Our communities are, of course, kicking into the highest gear of the holiday season with Santa Claus parades either just in the rear-view mirror as of this writing on Monday morning, or just on the horizon.

Personally, I love these parades. Not only can they be a great showcase for local talent, but they are one of the few areas these days where it seems the community can come together with a more or less unified mission.

While Christmas obviously has its roots in Christian tradition, it's a huge draw for families of all ages, regardless of faith, or lack thereof, whether you were raised with Christmas in your households, or came to the community from a country where this is a completely new, sparkly experience.

Nat King Cole often sang and, thanks to technology, still sings about ?tiny tots with their eyes all aglow? ? and this is rarely more evident than when the Jolly Man in Red passes by ? but as I observe these parades, sometimes another traditional holiday number comes to mind:

City sidewalks, busy sidewalks

Dressed in holiday style

In the air there's a feeling of Christmas

Children laughing, people passing

Meeting smile after smile?

(Let's skip over the refrain. You know it's Christmas time in the city.)

Strings of street lights even stop lights

Blink a bright red and green

As the shoppers rush home with their treasures

Hear the snow crunch, see the kids bunch

This is Santa's big scene

And above all this bustle you hear?

To me, this song, far more than the latest flick from the Hallmark or Lifetime assembly line, exemplifies the kind of Christmas I've always had in mind.

Maybe it was my steady childhood diet of ?Miracle on 34th Street? (the Maureen O'Hara, Natalie Wood, William Frawley version, please) and ?The Shop Around the Corner? but it often feels they set me up for retail ideas that were then the norm, but just about to go down the proverbial drain.

Our sidewalks might still be busy and dressed to the nines in their holiday style; kids are still laughing and people are still passing, potentially these days with a little more grumble and bluster; and today's society is such that when smiles are met with smiles, unless you know the person it could be considered weird or unusual. Our lights still blink, the snow still crunches, and there's still a sense of bustle ? but how many shoppers rush home with their treasures rather than keeping an eye from their front window for the Prime truck to show up?

I was always a proponent of the staycation even before the pandemic. Don't get me wrong, I love getting away to climes that are further away, places I have never been before, and experience cultures that are different from my own. Yet, that being said, I've always loved road trips that take one through traditional ?main streets? which were once the centres of commerce.

In these settings, not that long ago, you would meet your neighbours amid the shopping rush. It would afford you the chance to explore each emporium's signature wares, kick the tires on services rather than products, perhaps get inspired on the gift front by seeing an item that might not be on the wish list, but was actually the perfect gift for your mother, cousin, or neighbour. And, to boot, you'd get the chance to actually handle the merchandise and inspect the quality before purchase.

But, as I appreciate elements of both small town and big city life, I also miss the days of honest and true department stores that boasted just about everything under the sun, not just high-end fashion, furniture, jewellery and cosmetics. When I was a kid growing up in a part of Newmarket adjacent to rural, a trip into Downtown Toronto was still a very exciting trip. During the holidays, one of the most exciting destinations was the flagship Eaton's store.

At that time, under one roof, you could spend the entire day going from floor to floor; starting at the top, you could get something for just about everyone on your list, something for every taste, and by the time you reached the bottom floor below grade, you could get everything you needed for your traditional turkey dinner as well.

Somehow, online shipping doesn't quite have the same allure.

It might be convenient, but it doesn't offer the thrill of the hunt or, in short, the experience. And, of course, on the manufactured urgency that is that oh-so-American import of Black Friday, the less said the better.

This holiday season, I'm going to make an effort to once again go down the Silver Bells route and shop local ? you not only get the chance and opportunity to support your neighbours and keep your money local, but you get an experience that only comes once a year as a free added bonus!