

Reindeer Food

By Stephen Rusiniak

From the book:

Chicken Soup for the Soul The Blessings of Christmas



I don't remember where it came from, but one Christmas Eve reindeer food appeared in our kitchen. I knew it was reindeer food because a label on the small brown bag said so. Glued to the other side of the bag were two construction paper antlers, a fuzzy red nose and a pair of moving button eyes—a reindeer face? The bag, though sealed, proved no match for my inquisitive prying. Once opened, the alleged food appeared to be nothing more than a couple handfuls of oatmeal flakes and colored glitter. I soon learned, however, this mix was magical.

Michael-four and Tracy-two knew what to do with reindeer food.

"Don't be silly Daddy, we have to give it to reindeer," my son informed me.

"Of course," I said, but added, "You know, reindeer don't live around here, right?"

Ignoring my question they happily reminded me that later this same evening, a team of eight led by Rudolf himself would be transporting Santa Claus to our very rooftop. Giggling with anticipation Michael shouted, "Come on, Tracy, let's go," and off they went to prepare treats for the man in red.



Santa, Michael and Tracy during Advent Sunday at our church

Once upon a time I'd left treats for the holiday gift-giving team too, but as my belief in their existence began to diminish, a far more cynical view of the real world replaced my imaginary one. Eventually I'd come to believe that leaving snacks for Santa amounted to nothing more than an act of bribery—a moral corruption committed with purpose to ensure the anticipated delivery of a plethora of requested gifts.

Of course, kids see it differently. Pure of heart and still untarnished by age or circumstance, my guys saw Santa as a kind man who happened to give away presents. Besides, if he was planning to travel around the world in one night, surely he'd need a snack. Milk and cookies for him and carrots for his reindeer, but the idea of leaving something extra greatly appealed to them.

And so, shortly before bedtime, preparations commenced. Tracy arranged some cookies on a holiday plate while Michael poured the milk. Next to Santa's treats he placed some carrots and a note—written in his best four-year-old cryptic-looking letters thanking Santa for stopping by, and telling him that besides carrots, there'd be something special on the front lawn for his traveling companions.



When it was time to disperse the food, Tracy was ready. Wearing a misbuttoned winter coat over her yellow Dr. Denton sleeper, stood waiting at the front door—the bag of food in her tiny hands. Michael remained inside—electing to spend his final moments before bedtime standing in front of the warmth of our real fireplace while mesmerized by the televised version depicting the ever-burning holiday Yule log.

Outside the weather was nasty. A snowy-sleet mixture was falling. Cautiously, I stepped across the treacherous ground—one hand holding the umbrella protecting us from the icy precipitation while the other held close my little elf. With her arms securely around my neck and her hands clutching the bag of food, she held on tightly. Once we reached the middle of our frozen front yard, Tracy reopened the bag and began scattering small fistfuls of reindeer food into the chilly air. Suddenly, unexpectedly, there was magic.



The bag containing the magical Reindeer Food



The directions!

Once released, the food began to sparkle. The multicolored lights from our outside holiday decorations began reflecting off the glitter as a frosty breeze captured tiny pieces of the mix—transporting them in gentle swirls above our heads, and dispersing them throughout the yard.

After the bag was empty we marveled as thousands of tiny, glistening specks twinkled from the frozen ground. And as they did, the cynicism during my years as an adult suddenly disappeared. Eventually, the uncomfortable rawness of this wintry night began to permeate our heavy coats and reminded us it was time go back inside.

On Christmas morning and after all of the presents had been opened, Michael and Tracy remembered the reindeer food. Outside in the snow and all over the front yard were hundreds of footprints. Convinced the reindeer had thoroughly enjoyed their treat, my kids

returned to their toys. For a moment I considered the variety of local wildlife that could have enjoyed the reindeer's treat. I quickly concluded that, given the magic of the previous night, the tracks most certainly belonged to a particular team of reindeer—just as my kids had known all along.

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the backstory:

As another Christmas was approaching and I was sorting through boxes of our holiday decorations, I stumbled upon an old-crinkled brown lunch bag which turned out to contain "reindeer food." It had been so long since my kids had made such bags, in Sunday School, every year, and at the beginning of the Advent season.

Seeing this bag, as so often happens, sparked memories—eventually becoming the catalyst causing the creation of this piece.

Reindeer Food has appeared in a local parenting magazine, a newspaper, shared nationally on OUR AMERICAN STORIES radio as one of my "radio stories," and now is included in the book *Chicken Soup for the Soul The Blessings of Christmas*.



Ho, ho!