

BY MICHELE MILES GARDINER
DIDN'T I just sweep up the last remaining pine needles from last year's Christmas tree? It seems like I did. So either I'm a horrible housekeeper or time has flown by incredibly fast, because it's that time of year again: Christmas.

It's not the dancing Santas displayed in stores since Halloween that made me realize Christmas is here. No. It's the stuff I get in my mail, like the holiday card I got from my ex-accountant reminding me about the upcoming tax season, and, "Oh, by the way, 'Merry Christmas.'" But the biggest reminders of all are those dreaded newsletters my family sends every year.

I know my relatives mean well sending me and everyone else on their mass-mailing list these holiday newsletters. But after reading them, I wonder how I went so wrong in life. Their letters boast of exotic trips to Fiji and millions gained in the stock market. Meanwhile, I spent my year ankle-deep in overflowing toilet water or on the phone with mechanics about

one of my broken-down cars.

Couldn't a family member toss in something I can relate to? Didn't any of them have a heel stuck with toilet paper as they walked through a five-star restaurant? I think it would be the charitable thing to do in the spirit of the holidays to mention this. At least then I could almost enjoy reading those newsletters as much as they enjoy

writing them.

Each year, after I've crumpled up my last newsletter in frustration, is when I start thinking about Christmas gifts. And this is what I think: I'm not so crazy about them, especially after the garage sale my husband and I had last summer. Neighbors and passers-by poked at and walked away from our parade of discarded gifts from our Christmases past: Battery-run robots with missing parts, dusty Barbie Doll paraphernalia and never used educational toys.

As degrading as the experience was, it taught me that that this year I will only buy gifts that disappear after using them — gift cards, perfume or clothes for

myself. While my daughter rarely wears the sweaters I give her, my clothes she likes so much that I never see them again.

I haven't actually bought any of these gifts yet, but I have detangled the icicle lights and hung them outside. And for the first time in all my years of hanging lights, every one of the strands lit up. I didn't have to run to the store to buy more, not even once. That's the closest I've ever come to witnessing a Christmas miracle.

So it's sadly ironic that this — my year of icicle light perfection — is the first year my teenage daughter is too old to care.

But that's OK. I think I need the lights hung up for myself anyway. They give me that Christmas boost I need to tackle the adult version of musical chairs, otherwise known as trying to find a parking space at the mall. And once that's out of the way I will then begin gift wrapping, rum drinking, cheese-ball eating (this is the only time of year I ever consider eating my cheese in ball form. Why is that?), and then, finally, the

gift-opening.

All of this will be followed by television programs reviewing the horrific and embarrassing ways in which we humans behaved over the year as it nears an end. But editing and rehashing what has already happened isn't really all that difficult. That's why I'd like to dare to make a prediction for 2007:

I predict the uvula (that dangly thing at the back of the mouth) will become the new hot body part. It's the only thing Paris, Lindsay and Britney haven't yet exposed, so it's one of the few mysterious parts left. Yes, I predict Hollywood will lead the way in tattooing, piercing and sculpting the uvula.

So when you hear Paris Hilton say, "Your uvula is hot," just remember who predicted it first.

Merry Christmas! Pass the cheese ball, please.

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