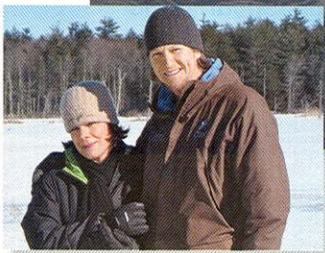
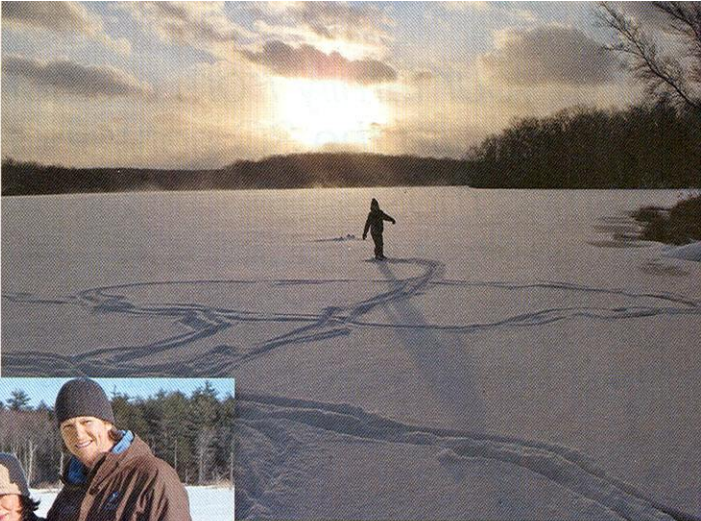


shaped 14- to 16-foot tree on our neighbor's property, and is officially sounded as "tímmmberrrr" rings through the snowy air.

The tree goes up, the lights are draped, and the first adornments are a pile of Mardi Gras beads that are thrown by all the children—adults too—over all the branches. (These beads were gathered while I was shooting *Miller's Crossing* in New Orleans and Albert Finney and I rode a float together during the Mardi Gras parade. The kids can't believe how much I must have shimmied to have acquired such a load of beads!) Then, while the fire is lit, and hot chocolate is served, we put up the rest of the ornaments: balls gathered over many years, from many locations, some dating back to my childhood. Eulala (now 11), Hudson and Julitta (both 5) each have their own boxes as well.

Truthfully, it takes us two days to put up all the decorations. We take breaks to get out Santa's cookie jar, prepare the snacks for his deer, watch *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, sing carols and hang the stockings. Mine was handmade by my grandmother, with "Marcia" stitched in sequins. Eulala *must* have her Nutcracker on the mantel, Hudson *must* ice-skate down to the marsh to see the eagle, and Julitta *must* dance a scene from *The Nutcracker* for us.

Thaddaeus drills the ice, and if it is thick enough, he gets out the ATV to clear two big circles, preparing for our annual New Year's Day Skate Party. There is a hockey



A true winter wonderland: Gossamer Lake in the Catskills at sunset, *above*. Marcia Gay Harden and her husband, Thaddaeus Scheel, *left*.

circle, and a party circle, for which we lug out a homemade woodstove. The children's lemonade stand gets turned into the "Skate Inn" by switching the signs, and guests warm up with brandy and hot chocolate. Once the music is set up, we are ready to go. I love to put on the Viennese Waltzes as a traditional "first," and as the crisp air dances with the sway of Strauss, Thaddaeus and I join hands and skate the circle, followed by the children and two dogs. Eventually we leave the circle and skate all over the lake, through the trees playing "follow the leader," and finally, when our cheeks are red and the snow glows orange reflecting the sunset, we skate back home. Ahhhh, tradition.

Academy Award- and Tony-winning actress Marcia Gay Harden, who ended her run in the Broadway hit *God of Carnage* in November, recently appeared in the film *Whip It*.



on the eighth day of Chanukah...I got socks

by Jennifer Weiner

I take it on faith that my parents never meant for Chanukah to be a disappointment.

In our town in Connecticut, Christmas was a very big deal.

People went all-out with decorations, twining colored lights through their trees, erecting plastic Santas on their lawns, lining their driveways with luminarias to light St. Nick's way ▶

into town. We were the only house on our street without them, the missing tooth in the neighborhood's candlelit smile. This worried me: Who wants to be responsible for causing Santa's sleigh to crash?

Chanukah is a relatively minor celebration on the Jewish calendar. But because it coincides, scheduling-wise, with Christmas, it's been elevated to big-deal status by Jews who didn't want their kids to feel left out come December.

But seriously: eight presents times four kids? That's a commitment.

My parents started Chanukah off right, lighting the menorah, frying latkes. By night two, they'd still be trying: The candles would be lit,

songs would be sung, gifts opened. Night three was usually a school night, and the swag was less impressive—barrettes, a book, some tights. By night eight there'd be a perfunctory blessing, reheated brisket, maybe a toothbrush or socks.

If Chanukah was supposed to make us forget our lack of Christmas, it failed. I spent years yearning for Christmas—the tree, twinkling with lights and heavy with handmade ornaments, a glorious heap of presents spread out underneath its boughs.

Now that I'm a parent, I wonder whether my daughters will suffer from Christmas envy. So far, I am trying to make their eight days

merry and bright (but still Jewish).

Still, as much as I lamented my parents' half-hearted Chanukahs, I can feel myself edging down the same slippery slope. I mean well. I want my girls to be happy. But eight presents times two kids is no holiday. I'll get to six nights' worth of decent gifts, then find myself desperate at the drugstore, trying to decide if a tube of strawberry-flavored toothpaste counts as a present. Answer: Yes, if it has sparkles.

Jennifer Weiner is a *New York Times* bestselling author whose latest book is *Best Friends Forever*. She lives, and celebrates the holidays, in Philadelphia with her family.

the best gift of all

by Debbie Macomber

Anyone who knows me will tell you I'm crazy about Christmas. My home is decorated with five Christmas trees—one for each of my children and their families and one huge tree for my husband, Wayne, and me. There are more than 50 Nativity sets throughout the house (I kid you not). You can't visit the guest bathroom without the Baby Jesus watching every move you make.

A number of years ago, while my boys Ted and Dale were in college and their finances were strained, they struggled with what to get their grandparents for Christmas. They wanted my mother and father to know how much they loved them, but finding a gift within their price range was a challenge.

Then one Thanksgiving, my father casually mentioned that I'd inherited my love of Christmas from him. He used to decorate the house with lights every year, something he could no longer manage now that his health had declined. He'd always taken pride in making our home the brightest one on the block and it saddened him that he couldn't do that any longer.

Shortly after that Thanksgiving, the boys came to me with an idea. They wanted to drive to their grandparents' home in Yakima (three hours from our place) and decorate it for Christmas. Then in January they'd drive back and take everything down. This would be their Christmas gift.

The boys did a spectacular job of it. I pitched in and purchased whatever supplies were needed, and the boys spent

two fun-filled days stringing lights and arranging boughs around the outside of the house. Every bush, plant and tree in sight was wrapped in lights. My parents were so proud that their home was, once again, the most brilliantly lit in the neighborhood. They had friends over and took delight in letting everyone know the decorations were a gift from their grandsons.

As it turned out, Ted and Dale traveled to Yakima to decorate the house and yard every Christmas for the next few years—until the end of my parents' lives. And like their mother, they got a bit carried away with the Christmas spirit, making each Christmas bigger and better than the one before. Spending time with their grandsons meant the world to my parents, who treasured this special gift more than anything the boys could have bought.

***New York Times* bestselling author Debbie Macomber celebrates this year with her annual holiday novel, *A Perfect Christmas*, and dishes from her *Cedar Cove Cookbook*. wd**

