

Christmas on a Slider

E eater.com/2016/12/12/13900508/life-in-chains-christmas-at-white-castle

December 12, 2016



Finding — and losing — holiday magic in the annual family dinner at White Castle

by [Arianna Rebolini](#) Dec 12, 2016, 1:00pm EST

I believed in Santa until I was ten years old. I wasn't an idiot — I knew that the Easter bunny was a fraud — but I believed fervently, even after discovering the truth about the tooth fairy in a *Baby-Sitters Club* book. I wrote two letters to Santa every year: one, a wish list in alternating red and green ink, dropped in the mailbox next to our mall's (obviously fake) Santa; the other, a note of thanks left with a plate of cookies for him and, for his reindeer, carrot sticks.

I was working on my annual Santa letters one afternoon when my mother called me from the second floor of our Long Island colonial. I ran upstairs to find her sitting on my bed, and immediately assumed I was in some kind of trouble. "Wanna sit down?" she asked, and I plopped down next to her. "I need to tell you something," she said. "I don't want you to find out from your friends, and I don't want you to be teased."

No part of my mind anticipated what she said next: that Santa wasn't so much a magical old man as he was just... my parents. They didn't just deliver the presents, they nibbled the cookies and drank the milk. I was devastated, furious, and disillusioned. *How could I trust my*

parents ever again? I wrote in my journal. *Was magic NOT real? And if not, what was even exciting about Christmas?* How could I possibly care about the carols, the lore, the annual outing to White Castle?

I don't remember Christmas before White Castle, and I have no memory of White Castle before Christmas.

We went to White Castle one night a year, and it was the same every time: My parents, my older sister, my younger brother, and I piled into the station wagon, Christmas carols blasting. My dad would turn off the highway and pull into the floodlight-illuminated parking lot that, for one month only, was stocked with rows of trees. I'd stuff my face into the thick and slightly jagged needles to get a good whiff of pine, while my brother and sister would inevitably get bored and fall into a game of hide and seek. My mom would finally point to a tree we could all agree on — tall, but not too skinny; verdant, but not too pricey — then my dad would carry it over to the netting machine.

But that was all just the opening act. The sooner we picked out the tree, and the sooner we got it strapped to the roof, the sooner we could ride across the street to White Castle, gleaming in the night. It was the highlight of the season, a full-sensory celebration so unlike our usual diet of home-cooked Italian comfort food.

My parents would shout the order from the rolled down windows — 15 burgers, some cheese, some plain; five milkshakes; a couple sides of fries and onion rings; mozzarella sticks if we were feeling extra ravenous — then my siblings and I would set up an ad-hoc picnic in the boot of the station wagon. The burgers, so mushy and compact, with their barely there patties, were my favorite, and a treat my otherwise strictly white-meat family wasn't usually allowed. I wasn't an adventurous eater, and if you'd asked me outright I would have sworn that I hated pickles, but those aromatic, nearly translucent little discs? They were essential.

Each burger was packaged in a snug cardboard container and I stacked them in little towers, cheese to my left and plain to my right. The structures came down almost immediately as I devoured the burgers one after another, in two bites each. The milkshakes — vanilla, always — came next, somehow much better than the local diner's, as if the recipe contained some secret ingredient. (I don't want to know what it was.) We were a family that rarely splurged — no vacations other than the occasional road trip to Vermont, back-to-school clothes bought slowly through layaway at Marshall's — but, here: milkshakes, burgers, crinkle fries, and onion rings, no question.



I don't remember the first time we ran through this routine, but my mom told me recently we drove through spontaneously; my siblings and I were starving after picking out a tree and White Castle happened to be across the street. As for the rest of the year, we didn't live very close to the neighborhood. The White Castle Christmas dinner was never magic, I realized — just an arbitrary decision made by my parents which became meaningful through repetition.

Tell someone who's been to White Castle that the chain was an integral part of your family's Christmas and they'll usually try, and fail, to mask a grimace. Tell someone who *hasn't* been, and they'll ask: "Like, from Harold and Kumar?" The chain gets a bad rap for its paper-thin patties, its soggy buns, the crass excess of its 30-burger Crave Case — or, by god, the 100-burger Crave Crate. Despite White Castle's notable history (it's generally credited as the first U.S. burger chain), the regional chain is somehow still ranked a notch below the bigger names as a matter of taste. White Castle is somehow an other, and perhaps worse than that, dated. Maybe not the brand — Harold and Kumar fixed that — but the food itself: The crinkle fries that most closely resemble carnival fare, the sliders that look like they were just defrosted.

Don't get me wrong, I don't think White Castle is, like, top-notch cuisine. I love it in the same way I now love the off-brand bags of cereal my mom used to buy instead of Trix, or the Bud Light Lime at a party full of beer nerds. Which is to say, I love it because I know I'm not supposed to, and I love loving it without any shame or under protection of irony. The

tradition, for me and my siblings, was unsullied by class implications. I didn't know enough about food, hadn't developed nearly enough neuroses around it, to know that some things we eat might be designated tacky or bad. Everything about the experience was novel, thrilling. A burger you could eat in one bite? A chicken nugget shaped like an onion ring? It was about milkshakes *before* fries, riding in the back of the car, being told by my parents to order whatever we wanted. It was about leaving rules behind, for one glorious night.

Of course, Christmas and its attendant traditions eventually lost all sense of novelty, especially after my family's abrupt move from New York to Arizona when I was eleven years old. We moved in June; I spent the summer stomping my feet around our freshly built townhouse, mumbling curses under my breath. When Christmas rolled around, I staged a boycott with my sister. It was 70 degrees outside, and our neighbors were wrapping Christmas lights around a fucking *cactus*. There was no snow, no Santa, and, my god, no White Castle. My mom promised we would create new traditions in our new home, but we spent most of the time in Arizona trying to find our bearings, only to move back to New York three years later.

Though we returned to New York, we didn't to White Castle. By that point in our lives, we were lucky if we could gather everyone up just to get the tree. My parents did their best to make it feel special — they pumped our favorite Christmas songs through the car stereo, pulled out boxes of old handmade ornaments for decorating — but tradition was about reliability and consistency, and I was an angst-filled teenager who'd given up on both after the move. None of the other Christmas routines restored that same sense of wonder, and I somehow doubted White Castle was the missing piece.

I was at least sort of right. I did eventually have White Castle again — so, so drunk during my first semester at Fordham — and it wasn't an emotional time machine. I didn't feel nostalgic when I bit into the slider. I just felt an urge to eat ten more. And then I felt like throwing up.

A few years ago, my family finally revisited the White Castle tradition, the seal broken on an early Saturday afternoon. By lunchtime, we'd picked out and wrapped up a modest five-foot beauty from a new lot, my mom suggested White Castle for lunch, and that was that.

We don't go every year, and it's not the same, of course. My youngest brother is a vegetarian, my sister is a pescatarian, and my 30-year-old stomach has given up almost completely on dairy. We don't have a station wagon; in fact, we no longer even fit in one car, but one of us, usually the kids, will drive through the drive-thru, and come home to spread the bags out on the kitchen table. It isn't inherently meaningful, but then, it never was.

The joy of it was its specificity to our family — doing something that breaks our own rules and establishes our rituals. For us, that tradition continues in myriad little ways: imposing a pajamas-only Christmas, convincing mom to get a little tipsy, and, when we can, eating some mushy sliders. Not magical, but still special.

Life in Chains is Eater's essay series exploring essential roles played in our lives by chain restaurants — great and grim, wonderful and terrible.

Arianna Rebolini is a writer and editor based in Brooklyn

Edited by Matt Buchanan

Photos by Adam Kuban and Thomas Hawk, respectively, via Flickr / Creative Commons