

# Marni Jameson

## **The Spirit Within**

By Marni Jameson

“We kept driving by not sure if this was the house,” the woman said as she came through my door to our holiday party last year.

“Well, it is,” I said brightly, taking her coat, noting the Marc Jacobs label. Hmmp.

“We were looking for lights or something,” her husband added.

“All your neighbors have lights,” she said – as if I didn’t know that.

“Well, you would think,” I laugh, feeling guilty – again -- for not having more outdoor spirit. “We just didn’t get around to lights this year.”

“Or last year,” whined my daughter, who’s working as coat check girl. I give her a glare to stop her from sharing family skeletons, which is what I get paid to do. But we both know the guests have kicked Mrs. Claus in her Achilles.

Although inside our house, the holiday sparkle was blinding, outside it might as well have been Labor Day. Naturally, I blame my husband. Our agreement is simple if sexist: I decorate the inside; he decorates the outside. Just because he’s unaware of this agreement doesn’t mean he shouldn’t abide by it.

I do my part the day after Thanksgiving, while he watches football and eats turkey sandwiches. Then I start nagging, which brings out an excuse list longer than my Christmas stocking: It’s too soon. Wait till the game’s over, or the weather’s nicer, or the lights miraculously untangle themselves and all actually turn on. It’s too late; Christmas is almost over.

Aargh! Before I strangle him with garland, I do something rare as a Santa sighting on Ground Hog’s Day. I consider his side. Dan’s not lazy. Those who’ve been reading the column recall the 1500-square-foot deck he built out back, and his hands-on role in the basement remodel. So what gives? Then I light (sorry) on the root of his reluctance. It’s his infuriatingly practical nature. He thinks it makes perfect sense to wash dishes only once every three days. He doesn’t understand why, when the elastic in his underwear makes the sound of radio static, it’s time to replace them. “They’re just getting broken in.” He doesn’t see the point of making the bed or using a hamper, and only washes his car on high holy days. Christmas lights, therefore, don’t symbolize to him the bright spirit of the season, but the height of futility – or fatality: You put them up. You take them down. Both times you risk your life.

Now I know you’re thinking: If Christmas lights mean so much to me, why don’t I hang them, or hire someone. I’m all for women’s equality, but I delegate to those with more testosterone any outdoor job that requires a tall ladder and power tools. I have a friend who one year, just five days before Christmas, fell off a ladder while trying to fix her outdoor lights, and broke both her arms. Her husband still feels like a chump.

As for hiring a pro, frankly, come that time of year – well, all year -- I'm cash-strapped. My family would prefer I spend that \$300 on gifts.

“What?! No gifts?”

“It's the gift of light!”

Thud. That would be the sound of falling hope. Still, I'm tempted. I've put promotional cards from house lighting services near Dan's cereal bowl. He ignores them. He resents spending money on jobs he can do himself – even if he doesn't do them. Which is another subject I need to bring up with the therapist we're surely heading for.

This year my girls and I anticipated the light wars, and acted early. We chose my youngest daughter to do the bidding, because she's the hardest to refuse. My older daughter and I stood off stage and coached:

“Daddy, can we have Christmas lights this year?”

“Why your pretty smile is all the light I need.”

We shake our heads violently and make motions like a referee signaling foul. Don't fall for that charm trick.

“Daddy, everybody has lights but us.”

“What's the point if you only see them when you drive into the driveway at night?”

“It shows the world we have spirit.”

We nod and point our thumbs up.

“We'll see,” he said. And we all know what that means. Bah Humbug.

To help you put light in your lives, and to spare you life, limb, electric shock and broken marriages, I call lighting specialist Richard Beard, of Logan, Utah, who offers these outdoor holiday lighting tips:

- Buy lights with UL or ETL labels. They've passed minimum safety standards. Use only lights marked for outdoor use.
- Plug into three-pronged grounded outlets. Don't use indoor extension cords, but a sturdy, three-pronged outdoor cord. Fuses blow when people string too many strands together (usually more than three) before grounding to an outlet.
- When reusing strings, discard any that have frayed wires, damaged sockets or missing bulbs. When replacing bulbs, unplug the string.
- Use screw-in hooks or fasteners that don't damage your house or light strings. Nails and staple guns can damage both.
- When the season's over, take down the lights. They're not designed to withstand prolonged weather exposure.
- Or avoid all the above and go with a pro. Most charge between \$200 and \$400 to light a house. That usually covers putting the lights up, taking them down, and maintaining them. Pretty tempting. However, I haven't given up hope that Dan will haul out the ladder and do something impractical. But lights or no lights, the party's still inside. The spirit is still within.

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