

Sidedoor: S11E08 – Midnight Magic

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

Lizzie: *All right, let's get these towels ready.*

Lizzie: Every year on January 1, I do something I look forward to—but also kinda dread. With my family, I jump in the ocean. In Maine. So it is cold!

Tom: *That's ice.*

Dad: *I just gotta get a picture.*

Lizzie: Sometimes the tide is so low we have to sprint for yards just to get deep enough to plunge. Running over the frozen sand, I can't even feel my feet, just this vague burning. And when I duck under, the shock of it knocks the air out of me.

Lizzie: *[gasps]*

Lizzie: And there is nothing like feeling like you might be dying to give you a new lease on life for the new year!

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Jim Deutsch: *That is a great way to mark the transition, because that is what New Year's traditions are about, are marking a transition from old to new.*

Lizzie: This is Jim Deutsch. He's spent more than two decades as a curator with the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. And he says my New Year's tradition makes sense.

Jim Deutsch: *Jumping into the cold water is a shock to the system.*

Lizzie: *Yeah.*

Jim Deutsch: *And I think something that allows us both physically and mentally to make the transition from old to new, it is a marker.*

Lizzie: I'm not the only one to mark the start of the year with a polar plunge. This is something many people do, from Coney Island to Antarctica.

Jim Deutsch: *With New Year's traditions, there are many similarities around the world.*

Lizzie: But many differences, too. From running around the block with your suitcase, to throwing water out the door, to shaking a peach tree at midnight, New Year's customs are as varied as they are wacky. But Jim says they all have something in common.

Lizzie: We'll find out what that is in this special episode of Sidedoor, where we're running around the Smithsonian to explore an array of New Year's rituals. What is it about turning the calendar page to a new year that has otherwise practical people practicing magic at midnight?

Lizzie: That's coming up in ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Times Square: Four, three, two, one! Happy New Year!]

Lizzie: With the new year approaching, we're taking a romp through some new year's traditions from around the world, starting close to home. Quite close.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Joanne Hippolyte: So today, we're here behind the scenes of the Sweet Home Cafe in the kitchen area. Most people don't get to see what goes on behind the scenes here, so consider yourselves lucky.]

Lizzie: I *do* consider myself lucky. And might get even luckier, because in this is a video shot in the cafe of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, Joanne Hippolyte, curator of the African diaspora, joins the executive chef to tuck into some new year's culinary traditions.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Joanne Hippolyte: Today, we're gonna be talking about three traditional dishes that are served on New Year's Eve, typically on Southern tables. And these dishes are associated with prosperity and good luck: collard greens, Hoppin' John and cornbread.]

Lizzie: Hoppin' John is a dish made with black-eyed peas, which are native to West Africa. Joanne says they were brought to the Americas as part of the transatlantic slave trade.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Joanne Hippolyte: There are even stories of enslaved people being fed black-eyed peas as part of the food they ate as part of the middle passage. And they became a staple soul food recipe here for enslaved people as well as for white Southerners as well.]

Lizzie: So this makes sense that black-eyed peas took root across the South, but what do they have to do with marking the new year?

Jim Deutsch: *This raises the question, why? Why are black-eyed peas and collard greens considered good luck? Which leads me to talk about magic.*

Lizzie: Folklorist Jim Deutsch says the new year is a time of renewal—letting go of the past, looking to the future. But the thing about the future is nobody really knows what will happen. We all face uncertainty. And uncertainty, for humans, is just plain hard.

Jim Deutsch: *People do not want to be victims of forces beyond their control. They want to have some control over their destiny and fate, and so anything we can do to make the next year better than the previous year, we will try. And that's where magic comes in. This idea that perhaps there is some way that we can influence what will happen to us.*

Lizzie: And Jim says there's a name for this particular kind of magic.

Jim Deutsch: *Sympathetic magic.*

Lizzie: Sympathetic magic is the idea that different things can influence each other based on a perceived mystical connection. For example ...

Jim Deutsch: *Colors are very important in this type of sympathetic magic. So if you've got a blood ailment, you'll want to drink something red, like the juice of red beets. Or if you've got jaundice, you'll want to eat some type of yellow squash. So yellow-yellow, red-red. Or if you've got a brain disorder, you might eat walnuts because walnuts look like ...*

Lizzie: *Brainy!*

Jim Deutsch: *Brainy.*

Lizzie: These magical beliefs go back tens of thousands of years—think ancient hunters painting animals on cave walls to capture their spirits for successful hunts. We've been at this magic thing for a while. So getting back to our Southern table, cornbread is yellow like gold. Collard greens are green like cash money. And black-eyed peas are round like coins. And even if you don't exactly believe that vegetables will bring you riches ...

Jim Deutsch: *What's the harm in eating black-eyed peas, collard greens and also pork if you're a meat eater.*

Lizzie: *Why pork?*

Jim Deutsch: *According to folk belief, pigs or hogs root, they forward, as opposed to chickens, which scratch backwards. Now I'm not a farm boy, but I'll have to take their word for this. And so we want to move forward rather than regress into the past.*

Lizzie: But these are far from the only symbolic new year's foods. You can look around the world—or just in other parts of America—to find more magical examples.

Tey Nunn: *All of a sudden, you know, a little bit before midnight, we're like, "Where are the grapes? Where are the grapes?" Because you have to have the grapes at midnight.*

Lizzie: Tey Marianna Nunn is the associate director of content and interpretation for the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Latino. She says in her Peruvian and Mexican family, you cannot have New Year's without grapes. Twelve of them. Why?

Tey Nunn: *Because 12 months and 12 moments on the clock at midnight. And also 12 is a very symbolic number in Catholic religion, which many, you know, Latino countries obviously are influenced by.*

Lizzie: Yeah.

Lizzie: Like Catholicism, this grape-eating tradition arrived from Europe.

Tey Nunn: *It's a tradition that supposedly originated in Spain.*

Lizzie: The story goes that a particularly entrepreneurial winemaker had a great growing season, and planted the idea as a way to sell off extra grapes—12 grapes per person. Other sources claim it started in the 1800s as a way for the upper class of Madrid to poke fun at the French tradition of daintily eating grapes and sipping champagne on New Year's Eve.

Tey Nunn: *So you shove the grapes in your mouth.*

Lizzie: *All at once?*

Tey Nunn: Yes.

Lizzie: *Twelve grapes at the same time?*

Tey Nunn: *That's the way my family has done it.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Lizzie: Some people eat the grapes one at a time, but no matter how you do it, you better do it quickly.

Tey Nunn: *Because the thing is is you need to finish the 12 grapes by the end of the strokes of midnight.*

Lizzie: *Wait, so what happens if you don't swallow all the grapes by the 12th stroke?*

Tey Nunn: *Then you're gonna have some bad luck in the next year.*

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Lizzie: *This is a lot of pressure! How many people choke?*

Tey Nunn: *It is a lot of pressure! And I will tell you that it took me a long time in my life to realize I should go with the smallest grapes.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Tey Nunn: *I just would grab 12 grapes and that could be very challenging at times.*

Lizzie: *And just like black-eyed peas, the magic of the grape is in the shape.*

Theo Gonzalves: *It has to do with the shape of it mirroring coins.*

Lizzie: *Theo Gonzalves is a curator at the National Museum of American History. His family is from the Philippines, but grape-eating is found there too. Though Theo says pretty much any round fruit will do.*

Theo Gonzalves: *Filipinos eat a lot of round things for New Year's. It's meant to invite the idea that prosperity can be yours in the next year.*

Lizzie: *Hmm.*

Lizzie: *Bonus points if while eating something round, you wear something round like polka dots. Though Theo personally has not gone in on this trend in a while.*

Theo Gonzalves: *Uh, I had a polka dot shirt when I was in graduate school.*

Lizzie: *And?*

Theo Gonzalves: *Not since then.*

Lizzie: *[laughs] It's nowhere to be found?*

Theo Gonzalves: *The '90s was a different decade, and I'm happy to say I was on trend back then, but I don't think I have anything of a polka dot nature in my closet right now.*

Lizzie: *Mm-hmm.*

Grace Jan: *I think one tradition that we've incorporated is making dumplings with our children.*

Lizzie: Grace Jan is a conservator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art.

Grace Jan: *And I conserve Chinese paintings.*

Lizzie: Grace celebrates Lunar New Year, which typically falls in late January or early February. Her parents are from Taiwan and her husband is Korean American, so together they've created their own blend of traditions that includes making dumplings.

Grace Jan: *Jiaozi.*

Lizzie: Because—can you guess?

Grace Jan: *It symbolizes traditional old money from China.*

Lizzie: Round like coins.

Grace Jan: *Yes, like coins. Yep.*

Lizzie: Well, in theory, anyway.

Grace Jan: *I mean, of course they don't really turn out perfectly because my kids are making them, and we don't really care as long as the inside doesn't come out. But that's something that we've done the last several years as a way of bringing our kids into the tradition. And it's something that they look forward to because I don't typically do that. So we save that really just for this season.*

Lizzie: *Yeah, it's something special.*

Grace Jan: *Mm-hmm.*

Lizzie: And this gets at what so many of the traditions I've been hearing about share. Yes, there's the magical symbolism, but there's magic in the ritual itself—the fact that you do the same thing every year. That thing, whatever it is, becomes meaningful. Like jumping in the ocean. I mean, it is a little bit scary every single time, but I like to start the year by reminding myself that making myself do uncomfortable things is a way of feeling strong.

Lizzie: But even more than that, it's the ritual of doing it alongside my brothers, feeling brave together and then huddling up together by the wood stove, giddy with those post-plunge endorphins. And I think this is what we treasure most about traditions: it's the people we do them with and the memories we create together. Theo Gonzalves says when he thinks back on New Year's from his childhood, what stands out isn't the food.

Theo Gonzalves: *Always at the stroke of midnight, my dad would get up, no matter where he was in the house, he would get up, and he would shake our hands, and he would give me and my brother hugs and kisses. And so I—I miss that. Especially as a little kid because I mean, we came to expect it. It was kind of like an acknowledgement. It's like, "Hey. You know, we made it. We made it through this year, and we have no idea what the next year holds. So I'm gonna—I'm gonna send you into this new year with some love."*

Lizzie: *Wow. And I love the handshake. It is sort of like, "Congratulations, sir. We did it again. We made it another revolution." [laughs]*

Theo Gonzalves: *Shaking the hands of these little kids, these five- and six-year-old little kids. It was—it was fun. Very distinctive memories of that.*

Lizzie: All right, I gotta go buy some grapes, but when we come back, we'll take a tour of even more ways to ring in the new year—including some specific strategies for those of us who might be wanting to invite some love into our lives in the new year. That's coming up after the break.

Lizzie: If you're thinking, "I don't have a New Year's tradition, but this is all sounding kind of fun." Well, it's never too late to start your own tradition—and you can always look to history for guidance.

Jim Deutsch: *This is from an article that appeared in the Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin, December, 1944.*

Lizzie: *Huh!*

Lizzie: Folklorist Jim Deutsch.

Jim Deutsch: *It says, "If you wash your clothes on New Year's Day, you will wash someone out of your family." So you don't want to do that. [laughs]*

Lizzie: *Well, I guess in theory that could be a good thing, depending on the person.*

Jim Deutsch: *Depending on the person, but I think for the most part, Lizzie, we don't want to wash people out of our families!*

Lizzie: *You're right, okay.*

Jim Deutsch: *So it's another example of this sympathetic magic.*

Lizzie: So no washing on New Years Day—unless you've, like, really had it with Cousin Eddie. Or unless you're in Latin America, where washing is good.

Tey Nunn: *A really important tradition is, like, cleaning the house, or cleaning the front step, or throwing water out. It's about cleaning, you know, just a clean start.*

Lizzie: Tey Nunn again.

Lizzie: *Tell me more about the water thing, because I read about this one.*

Tey Nunn: *Well, I had always known about it, but I didn't know a lot about it until I was talking to our founding director at the museum. We were having a meeting, and he's Cuban American. And he would say that in Miami, all the doors would open at midnight, and you'd hear buckets of water, you know, flying out the front door!*

Lizzie: *[laughs] Wow!*

Lizzie: Out with the old, in with the new. And if you want the new thing to be love, well we can find some help in the same article from 1944.

Jim Deutsch: *It says, "On New Year's Night, place a gold band in a glass of water, go into a dark cellar and you will see your husband's picture in the bottom of the glass."*

Lizzie: Your husband's?

Jim Deutsch: Your future husband, yes.

Lizzie: Oh, okay.

Jim Deutsch: Your future husband, yes. They left out the word "future," but that is what's implied.

Lizzie: If you're not into the idea of finding a dark cellar to go skulk around in, here's a backup plan from the Journal of American Folklore from 1894.

Jim Deutsch: *And this one comes from the Alleghenies. "If a girl wishes to know whether her future husband will be a stranger or from the vicinity, she can find out by going alone, and after night on New Year's Eve, standing silently by a peach tree and shaking its stem. Should a dog bark, her suitor comes from a distance. If a cock crows, his home is near."*

Lizzie: Whoa! *[laughs] What if neither happens?*

Jim Deutsch: *That's not in the text. [laughs]*

Lizzie: *Why is it always women wanting to know their future husbands? Why is it not men wanting to see their*

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future wives?

Jim Deutsch: *That's just what the folklorists have recorded. I think perhaps men don't want to speak of it being some ...*

Lizzie: *Up to fate.*

Jim Deutsch: *Up to fate, or up to chance.*

Lizzie: *Well, I mean it's true that men at that time did have more control over their fate.*

Jim Deutsch: *That is true.*

Lizzie: *So ...*

Lizzie: *Now whether it's about finding love or wanting wealth, health or good luck, Tey Nunn told me about another way to invite your hopes and dreams into the new year.*

Lizzie: *Um, tell me about this 'underwear' thing?*

Tey Nunn: *[laughs] Weirdly, this goes through many of the Latin American countries, you will see right after Christmas, stalls and stalls in the markets, selling different colored symbolic underwear. I always knew about yellow underwear in Peru, that's—it's for good luck. And especially in the big cities like Lima, there's stalls with bright yellow underwear, light yellow underwear. But it's all yellow.*

Lizzie: *But choose your underwear wisely.*

Tey Nunn: *The color is symbolic. So, you know, yellow means 'wealth' and red means 'love' and white means 'peace,' and ...*

Lizzie: *So you have to pick one thing for all year? It has to be love or peace?*

Tey Nunn: *Oh, no. You can do a combo platter.*

Lizzie: *[laughs] You can wear multiple layers of underwear?*

Tey Nunn: *I would think so! I think you could be creative. And it's also about putting on new clothes. And that's a tradition, too, is you put on new clothes for New Year's.*

Lizzie: Yep, the Journal of American Folklore from 1927 corroborates this.

Jim Deutsch: *For the new year, you want to wear something new, not some old—you know, if you wear an old rag ...*

Lizzie: *Right. What can you expect? Same old, same old?*

Jim Deutsch: *Same old, same old. Literally, same old, same old.*

Lizzie: Wearing something new on New Year's Day isn't just about starting fresh, it's about setting the tone for the year ahead. What you wear, like what you eat, becomes a symbolic marker of the future you hope to create. But it's not just what you do that matters, sometimes it's about who you welcome into your life.

Jim Deutsch: *So there's other customs that it's very important who is your first visitor.*

Lizzie: In Scotland this is called "first footing." The first person to set foot in your house—ideally a tall, dark-haired man to symbolize safety from Viking invaders—brings symbolic gifts that set the tone for the new year. And here in the US ...

Jim Deutsch: *Folklorists have collected several variants. That's one of the things about folklore. You know it's folklore if it exists in variants.*

Lizzie: One variant from Tennessee says if a man comes in your house first, all your chickens will be roosters. Another ...

Jim Deutsch: *Bad luck comes—this is from Hawaii—bad luck comes if a woman is your first visitor.*

Lizzie: That is rude! Let's move on.

Jim Deutsch: *What you do the first hour of the new year will be what you do most of the year.*

Lizzie: That's from the Journal of American Folklore in 1950, collected in Illinois.

Jim Deutsch: *So what you do that first hour, Lizzie, after the stroke of midnight, that's gonna be important.*

Tey Nunn: *The Peruvian side of my family has always packed suitcases and ran around the block because that means you're gonna travel.*

Lizzie: Tey Nunn says you start the year the way you want to spend the year.

Tey Nunn: *And if you want to go to someplace tropical, you throw your bathing suit in. And if you want to go, you know, someplace cold, you throw your parka in. And you still run around the block with your suitcase.*

Lizzie: *Wow! This is like a mobile vision board or something.*

Tey Nunn: *[laughs]*

Lizzie: *You know, people, like, make a collage for their hopes and dreams? This is just like a turbo exercise of, like, pantomiming.*

Tey Nunn: *It is.*

Lizzie: *Whether you're shaking hands, jumping in the ocean or eating your weight in round fruits and legumes, Theo Gonzalves says the new year is an opportunity to mark time.*

Theo Gonzalves: *If we accept that there are lots of ways to tell time—and certainly one way to do that is how your boss tells time for you.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Theo Gonzalves: *Keeps you on the clock, off the clock. But then there's the other way that we tell time which is through rituals. Rituals are ways for us to tell time with each other, and they're reminders to each other for all of us about what should come next.*

Lizzie: *And we don't always know what comes next, which is a reason why these rituals are so important. Because we all share this painful position of facing the unknown.*

Jim Deutsch: *There's a lot of consistency in tradition, which reinforces the idea that basically human beings around the world are more similar than not.*

Lizzie: *Right, like the traditions echo each other, but that's because the core desires are ...*

Jim Deutsch: *Similar.*

Lizzie: *Somewhat universal.*

Jim Deutsch: *Universal, yes. Health, happiness, love, prosperity, all the good things we value in life. Well, shall we say Happy New Year or ...?*

Lizzie: *Happy New Year, Jim! [laughs]*

Jim Deutsch: *Happy New Year, Lizzie Peabody.*

Lizzie: *I hope it's a good one.*

Jim Deutsch: *Likewise.*

Lizzie: And Happy New Year to all of you. See you in the brave new world of 2025.

Lizzie: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. To see the full "Freedom's Eve" food traditions video from the Smithsonian's National Museum of African-American History and Culture, we'll link it in our newsletter. You can subscribe at [Si.edu/sidedoor](https://si.edu/sidedoor).

Lizzie: For more Sidedoor holiday magic, check out "[A Very Merry Sidedoor](#)" and "[Auld Lang What?](#)" Especially if you want to hear the most danceable version of Auld Lang Syne I have ever heard.

Lizzie: And let us know how you celebrate! Send us a note or a photo about how you usher in the New Year—whenever you do. You can find us on social media @SidedoorPod, or write to us at Sidedoor(@)si.edu.

Lizzie: For help with this episode we want to thank Jim Deutsch, Tey Marianna Nunn, Grace Jan and Theo Gonzalves. Thanks also to Rick Lee, David Coronado, Juliette Pasquini, Melissa Wood and Joanne Hippolyte.

Lizzie: For more American folk traditions check out the book, *The Folklore of American Holidays*, by Hennig Cohen. This is a compilation of many different sources collected by folklorists over the years, and it really supported our research for this episode.

Lizzie: Our podcast is produced by James Morrison and me, Lizzie Peabody. Our associate producer is Janae Morris. Fact checking by Nathalie Boyd. Executive producer is Ann Conanan. Our editorial team is Jess Sadeq and Sharon Bryant. Mimi Plato writes our newsletter. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Transcripts are by Russell Gragg. Extra support comes from PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

Lizzie: If you have a pitch for us, send us an email at Sidedoor[at]si.edu. And if you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship[at]prx dot org.

Lizzie: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening, and Happy New Year!

Tey Nunn: Breakfast I had half of a frosted turkey cookie.

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Lizzie: Wait, what?

James Morrison: Oh, I was looking for turkey cookies, actually!

Lizzie: What is a—hold on, do you know what that is?

James: I'm just guessing it's a cookie like a ...

Tey Nunn: Shape of a turkey.

James: Yeah, kind of like that.

Lizzie: Oh! I definitely thought it was a cookie made of turkey.

Tey Nunn: No. [laughs]

Lizzie: Like a savory cookie where the frosting was, like, gravy or something? I don't know.

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