Chris Blackwell, Antoine E. Davis, Jonathan Kirkpatrick, Aaron Edward Olson & Raymond Williams

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Hot Beverage Holidays, *by Aaron Edward Olson*

The small marshmallows sit atop a thick froth, packed together like pillows on a blanket. A steam carrying the unmistakable aroma of cocoa betrays the rich chocolate hiding below the surface. I clutch the insulated plastic mug in both hands, holding it inches from my face, not allowing any of the smell to escape. It's more than just a cup of hot chocolate. For me, it's the holidays.

This season is tough for many. The traditions of home life are absent in prison, replaced by new, less memorable ones. With family gatherings gone, a pick-up game of cards usually has to suffice. A few of the fellas will take seats around the table, filling places that once belonged to the ones I love and cherish. Each card played helps to pacify the longing to be free from these prison bars, so I can once again spend moments like these with meaning.

It's evening, and I'm alone on my steel rack with my mug of hot cocoa. Earlier in the day, it was filled with hot spiced apple cider. That may sound fancy for prison, but the seasonal drinks are all instant—overpriced pouches of powder that I have to buy with funds from my commissary account. But I'm willing to pay because these drinks are that important to me this time of year.

It's not about the quality of anything here. It's the act, the motions, the tradition, all of which began after my arrest 17 years ago. My first holidays in prison were marked with tears, absent the stockings, presents, freshly cut Christmas tree and family dinner that define the season for so many. Now I've made my own tradition of joy and consistency that I look forward to each year of my confinement. Although the drinks are available year-round, I try to save them for this time of year, and I never splurge for marshmallows outside of the holidays.

Eager to taste what I've been smelling, I bring the hot chocolate to my lips, sipping a bit too strongly and scalding my tongue. I may have lost some taste, but I laugh at myself because I feel freedom in this clumsy mistake. As the cup cools, the melted marshmallows merge with the froth. With the last drink, satisfaction comes, and the holidays feel complete.

A Christmas Competition, *by Antoine E. Davis (AD)*

The supervisor promised a worthy prize for the work group that made the best Christmas tree display from scratch. All 28 prisoners in my program gathered around our boss and listened to him lay out the rules: