

Some of the Things He Thought That Year

*for Maxine Chernoff*

On January the First of that year, he thought how much his vomit tasted like an alkaline battery. His younger brother once dared him to touch a AA battery to his tongue. That taught him to avoid dares.

Standing at the curb bent at the waist, he emptied his stomach juices into the storm drain. First came a heaving spasm, then the rest spilling out in hard coughs. Ratcheting noisemakers and boozy cheers radiated from the nightclub, but he thought nothing of it.

His frowning, shivering date folded her arms across her bust line. She seemed incapable of laughter, but she had a fun figure. A buddy told him she was twenty-six and getting off a bad divorce. Apparently that guaranteed a good time, or so the thinking went.

He thought little of this as he vomited, or of her sour mood, or even how her bittersweet lilac perfume reacted against the alkaline taste in his mouth. No, his only thought was that he'd never see her again, and he was right.

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In a shopping mall, he thought he spotted a woman giving him the eye. He asked his long-time friend about it. She scrunched her shoulders and said she couldn't be sure. He left her alone in front of a Banana Republic to chase the woman down.

He reached the woman in a bath shop. She was older and fit and possessed a subtle, confident smile. He bet she'd lived more of the world than he had, and this aroused him.

He circled a rack of pungent soaps and screwed up some courage. All he could manage to ask was what she recommended as a gift for a blind date. She said lavender bath beads because "most women will think you're bold."

He returned to his friend with nothing to show for running off. She was cool about it, or so he

thought.

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At home, drinking off a day at the office, he thought of a high school infatuation. He found her on the Internet. Her company sold deep-sea diving gear. Beneath her photo was a phone number and email address. It said her passions were legal novels, yoga, and long hikes with her husband.

He kicked away from the desk and stared into the night beyond his bedroom window. He wished he'd not thought of her after all.

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The days grew shorter and hotter, more so than he remembered in his childhood. He guessed hotter due to global warming, but why shorter?

The barbecue smoke made his father cough. "It's Memorial Day," he told him. "Of course it's getting hotter."

"But why are the days feeling shorter? Don't they get longer in the summer?"

His father needed a moment. "It's God's way."

God's a con man, he thought. The more we realize how precious time is, the less of it we get.

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He thought he might be homosexual. He spent a lot of time with a woman who showed no romantic interest in him. He considered the men he showered with at the gym, and all the pirated hardcore pornography on his computer. Did the sight of a naked man work him up? No, but it didn't disturb him either.

He asked his friend what she thought. Quit being a goof and put down a card, she told him. She needed his deuce to make gin rummy.

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On his thirtieth birthday he decided it was time to be a man.

No more using the word "dude". No more no-name beer. Cut back on the weed. Only wear jeans to the office twice a week. Quit phoning women on Thursday to see if they want to go out on

Friday.

Only the last one stuck. He just quit calling.

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Being a man meant no more Halloween. Usually he spent it with his good friend. They wolfed tequilas and limes on Grant Avenue and then rode MUNI out to the Castro.

The week before Halloween she called to throw out ideas. They could dress as jesters and be a pair of jokers. Or he could wear a dark suit and she'd find a grey wig and go as Mickey and Maude. Or The Avengers, although she doubted she could do Diana Rigg justice.

"Halloween's just an excuse for people to go ape shit," he said into his cell phone. "I'm gonna stay in this year."

She said okay and then said goodbye. She said it in such a way he didn't know what to think.

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He thought about skipping work and driving all the way to Las Vegas. He dared himself to do it and then drove like hell.

Crossing Bakersfield, he thought how pathetic it would be to wander the casinos alone. He saw himself going from blackjack table to blackjack table, hitting on every divorcee and lush he found, drinking all the free gin and tonics he could manage and smoking cigarettes indoors just because he could. He would come home broke, hung-over, and sour.

He turned around and drove back. He drove straight to his friend's apartment. He bet she never missed him. The way she hugged him at her front door, he couldn't be sure.

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Christmas is consumerism, he thought. Fuck that.

He showed up at his parents' house empty-handed. He drank a good deal of his father's lager and ate the last of his mother's pecan pie. He told his younger brother's wife her pregnancy didn't make her look too fat.

When they gathered around the tree he couldn't bear to refuse their gifts. They'd picked good

ones for him, stuff that took some thought. Even the presents his mother labeled "From: Santa" were keepers. He thought he was a piece of shit.

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New Year's Eve is something like consumerism, he thought. He would stay inside this year, alone.

His friend came over anyway. She brought a grocery sack of sparkling wine, deli sandwiches, chocolate bars, and a bottle of mid-grade Scotch. They watched Doris Day in Pillow Talk and Cary Grant in Charade. She fell asleep on the couch before midnight. Most of the Scotch was gone.

He thought how much he'd like to fool around with her. He thought of all the times he'd dicked her around. He thought of alkaline vomit and lavender beads and sea-diving gear.

He thought being a man would be a hell of a lot easier. Maybe she was the only person worth being a man for.

He pulled a blanket over her, turned off the lights, and fell into bed. Next year will be different, he thought.