

I Will Never Celebrate New Year's Again

There's this producer named Tony who gives me a lot of work, so I have to remain on good terms with him. Part of the burden is going to the traditional New Year's party his wife, Gigi, throws. It's a drag; formal clothes, formal manners, champagne (which I hate) and talent being forced to entertain the guests.

So this New Year's I decided to miss it and stay home and have a quiet party. I invited my current girl, Martha, and another couple, bought a few magnums for them, and stocked up on whisky. I was preparing the ingredients for a light supper (Chicken á la King, salad, Petits Fours and coffee) when the phone rang. It was Gigi.

"What the hell is this I hear? You're running a rival brawl?"

"No, Gigi."

"That's the word going around."

"It's a lie. I'm staying home because I don't feel well, and I've asked a few people up."

"How many?"

"Three."

"Who?"

I told her.

"Damn you," she said, "I want them."

"All right, Gigi, you can have them. I'll cancel and go to bed."

So I did. But around ten o'clock, I began to get lonely and restless. I prowled around the house and finally noticed this invitation on the bulletin board. The Directors were giving a ball, and I'd been blackmailed into buying a ticket for twenty dollars which entitled me to a chance for a "door prize, supper, dancing until 3:00 A.M."

I arrived just as they were drawing for the door prizes. I've never won anything in my life, so I paid no attention. I sat down at the table with the guy who'd sold my ticket, and began drinking and chatting with him and the others.

The cases of wine, the cameras, the jewelry and the perfumes were distributed, and the M.C. finally called: "One Stutz Bearcat. Number 319." I ignored it, but my blackmailer exclaimed, "Hey! Isn't that the number of the ticket I sold you?" I looked at my stub. It was 319.

I stepped up on the dance floor where this lovely little Bearcat painted Fire Engine Red was displayed. It was big enough to hold a kid, and had a battery motor. I was in a daze; it looked as though '63 was promising to break my customary run of bad luck. I presented my stub, got a nice hand, and was about to claim my prize when a frantic character appeared, waving a stub. "I'm 319," he said.

We compared stubs. We both had 319; there'd been some kind of goof at the printer's. I was resigned.

"Have you got any kids?" I asked.

"Three."

"I haven't got any. Take the car."

My host tried to cheer me up and took me to a Park Avenue party in a giant duplex apartment featuring a sweeping staircase. I tried to hook up with a woman and was doing all

right with a Hungarian girl when the dance band broke into Black & Tan, the classic stripper's number. My Hungarian began to strip.

She did a professional parade, shedding gloves, jewelry and clothes while the guests howled. Then she started up the stairs, discarding lingerie. She reached the head of the stairs, dropped the ultimate essential, turned the corner and disappeared. There was a fanfare, and the band began a Conga. A Conga line of men formed and went up the stairs after the Hungarian. I left.

I went up to Small's in Harlem, couldn't enjoy myself there, but ran into a couple of young writers who dragged me over to Morningside Heights to a fraternity patty. There was a stench of beer, the floor was sticky, a four-piece band whammed and twanged, and about fifty couples were twisting. Now I not only felt lonely; I felt old.

Suddenly there was a hissing WHOOSH! and a cloud of snow appeared in the room. Some tweed had pulled a CO₂ fire extinguisher off the wall and was running around, shooting up the girls' skirts. They squealed and scattered, and one of them took refuge behind me. On closer inspection, she proved to be much older than the type you usually find at a fraternity dance.

She was about 30, with acid-red hair cut short, a sinewy, active body, and nervous hands. She wore a sort of Goldwyn Follies spangled dress, and gold pumps with bows. She was alive and attractive, but vulgar and common, and her name turned out to be . . . God save the mark . . . Torchy.

"You look like a gent," Torchy said. "Will you, for Christ's sake, get me out of here. This is kid stuff."

"Where's your date?"

"Passed out," she muttered.

We left, got a cab, and drove down to 50th and Madison Avenue, where I live. Torchy sat in her corner and said nothing. I was tired, unhappy, and not interested; but I had to go through the motions of the gent. I offered her a choice of going in the cab to wherever she was going, or coming up to my place for a drink.

"Boy, do I need a drink," she said. "Okay, but no funny business."

"At four in the morning?" I said wearily. "Who do you think I am, Paul Bunyan? So, come on; I'm freezing."

We went up to my place and I started a fire in the fireplace.

"What's that? Kennel coal?" Torchy asked. She wandered around the living room, staring at my books, pictures, and records. "Gee," she said. "I never been in a place like this before. You got class. What's it like to have class?"

"I wouldn't know, Torchy."

"Says you. This place is simply elegant. What's in there?"

"The kitchen."

She explored. "Je-zus! You cook, huh? What?"

"That was going to be Chicken à la King."

"You cook French. Wow! What's in there?"

"My workshop."

She investigated. "Christ! More books. You must have thousands. What are you, a publisher?"

"A writer."

"Yeah, it figures."

We went back to the living room and enjoyed the fire while we had drinks. We talked. Torchy was so naturally giving and receptive that she warmed me more than the fire. She wanted to know all about the books and the records and the pictures and what I wrote and had I traveled and did I have girls and what were they like and was I as nice to them as I was

to her. After an hour of this, she began to make me feel ashamed and ungrateful.

Suddenly she said, "I got to call Patchogue."

"Patchogue?"

"Yeah. Patchogue, Long Island. It's where I live. I got to tell them I ain't coming home tonight."

"The phone's out of order," I told her.

"Go on," she grinned. She came to me and ran her hand through my hair. "What kind of fink you think I am? I wouldn't hang a long distance call on you."

"The phone's in the bedroom," I said faintly.

"Yeah, I know. Alongside the bed." She went to the closet for her coat. "I'll call from that hotel across the street. They must have public phones."

"Don't be a fool, Torchy. Phone from here."

"And louse up the best time I ever had in my life? Nothing doing. I'm not grabby. I'll be right back."

"Wait a minute. I'll go with you."

"Stay here and make the chicken. I told you, I'm hungry."

"You can't go out in that light coat. Wear mine."

I threw my heavy coat over her shoulders. She turned and gave me a feathery kiss. "This is the best New Year's I ever had," she whispered.

"I'm beginning to think so, too, Torchy."

"You're an ace," she said, and scampered out.

I went into the kitchen and started the Sauce Bechamel for the chicken. I'd finished slicing the pimienta into strips and was getting the green peas out of the freezer when there was a heavy knock on the door.

"It's open," I yelled.

The knock repeated. I went to the door and opened it. A cop stood there.

"You Bester?" he asked.

"In the flesh. What's the matter, hi-fi too loud?"

"You better come downstairs," he said. "There's a dame in your coat . . ."

"That's all right, I loaned it to her."

"There's been an accident," he said. "Come on."

I followed him down to Madison Avenue, completely bewildered. It was getting light outside. On the bleak street there was a cab skewed against the curb before the hotel. A little crowd of spectators was clustered around a crumpled figure in the gutter. A livid pool of blood was spreading slowly from her body, staining its way into my New Year.

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