



# New Year's Night

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In the end, only a jar of change was taken. Of course, it's a bit misleading to say "only" when jars of change are involved. They're like genie's bottles that way, able to hold far more than would seem possible (particularly when quarters are involved). There could have been \$50 in that jar of change. Considering the circumstances, though, I felt I got off lightly.

Let's start at the beginning: back when the world was young and older friend's IDs carried with them the first realization of bulk purchases, I threw a New Year's party. Many a brave keg was hurried up my stairs; many a young man fell prey to red plastic cups and slightly scummed funnels. (As for young ladies, many of them displayed the good judgment of finding a party that wasn't a complete sausage fest.)

Still, even without women, the party was a good one. Going to college in the same town you grew up is good for ensuring your popularity during the holidays. While all of your friends are sleeping beneath Michael Jordan height charts and Alice in Chains posters in their childhood bedrooms, you're the master of your own house. Sure, you're subsisting on crackers and raw tuna fish every night, but they're *your* crackers and raw tuna fish. Even better, your landlord fully expects you to ruin the carpet. He's already factored it into the security deposit.

The guest list for the party was open-ended; anyone who wanted to come was welcome. Of course, the only people who wanted to come were my friends from high school. Their numbers were buoyed slightly by friends-of-friends, true, but the end result was a mini-reunion, with everyone drinking cheap beer and flavored vodka from a bottle that was actually three bottles in one: orange, lemon and lime.

The house featured a brick porch where the smokers in the party would occasionally retire for a breath of fire. It was in the aftermath of one of these trips that I realized that some new guests—three men who looked to be in their early twenties—had joined our party. They'd been wandering the streets when my smoker friends, caught up in the bonhomie of a few drinks, had invited them inside.

Now this was a neighborhood where strange women would use urgent requests to visit our bathroom as an excuse to raid the medicine cabinet. Homeless men would approach to inquire about the possibility of a ride to Elkhart or gauge our interest in buying used pornography. I wasn't thrilled at the invitation offered to my new partygoers.

Their appearance didn't alleviate my concerns. Each wore a puffy coat three sizes too big to give the impression of being willing to throw down anytime. Their eyes constantly scanned the room for valuables; one had a truly offensive teenage mustache. Still, not

wanting to stereotype, I offered them drinks and added three extra glasses for the \$3 champagne at midnight.

Not being anyone's sucker, I kept an eye on them as well, and thus, I soon followed one of them down into my basement, the door to which was pointedly closed.

"What are you doing down here?"

"Where's the bathroom?" he answered.

Hmmm. Unlikely, but plausible. I told him where the bathroom was, he went upstairs, and I resolved to watch the door a little closer.

After midnight, the champagne corks had been launched into the ceiling (also covered by the security deposit), and I was doing my best to strike out with one of the few ladies present when I became aware of a hullabullo in the kitchen.

The flavored vodka bottle had disappeared.

My immediate reaction was to walk back down into the basement. I discovered that one of the bedrooms had an open window. A jam box was sitting in the snow outside, waiting to be retrieved, and a television, too big to fit through the window, lay discarded on the bed.

Those sons of bitches.

Heading back upstairs, I decided that involving the police at a party where more than half the participants were underage wasn't the best idea. Instead, I'd go easy on them. Tapping one of the guys on the shoulder, I told him that someone had tried to steal my roommate's television, and, while I wasn't accusing anyone of anything, it was time for him and his friends to go.

He refused.

At this point, it becomes necessary to inject a bit of racial tension into the proceedings. You see, with the exception of the one person I was trying to kick out, everyone in the house was white. This prompted him to ask, indignantly, how I knew it was him who tried to steal the television.

"I'm not saying you stole anything," I reiterated. To be fair, he might not have even known about it; it was another guy, the one with the teenage mustache, who I'd found in the basement earlier. "All I'm saying is that it's time for you and your friends to leave."

"How do you know someone else here didn't take it?"

"I've known everyone else here for most of my life. I just met you a couple hours ago."

"So you trust them more than you trust me?" he demanded.

I thought that was what I'd just said, but I answered anyway. "Yes."

"That's stupid!" he shouted.

At this point bad-teenage mustache joined the conversation. "Dog, if anything goes down, I'm going to have to be with my boy here." Evidently two MGDs hadn't prompted a shift in his loyalties.

"I'm the only black person here, and you're saying I stole your television!"

"I'm gonna have to be with my dog," his friend barked.

As we went back and forth, my friends began to grumble about more proactive means of removing unwelcome guests. I was still holding out hopes of acting as a peacemaker. Watching the house for my absentee roommates, I could only envision the rubble that seemed sure to result from any brawl. On the scale of torn-shirt to crashing-through-the-balcony-and-smashing-the-table-beneath-in-a-brothel, this one had definite potential of reaching television-used-as-a-weapon-only-to-miss-its-mark-and-destroy-the-stereo levels.

"Look," I said, "I don't care if you think I'm racist. You guys have to go."

"Let me finish my beer," the first guy told me.

"No," I laughed. "You have to go."

"I'm not ready to go."

With that one, my friends decided they'd been patient long enough. "This isn't your house! Get the fuck out of here!" one of them shouted.

"You get the fuck out of here," he answered.

"Seriously, you need to..." I was going to say "leave," but I was interrupted by the shatter of the champagne glass he'd hurled at the wall behind me.

Several things happened very quickly after that. First, one of my friends laid out the glass-thrower, a fact I still embarrassingly take some vicarious pleasure in. Next came a retaliatory bout of grappling between all parties. This was followed by one of the ladies present attempting to defend her boyfriend by spraying a canister of pepper spray, which had the foreseeable affect of blinding everyone in the room.

Taking advantage of the tears, I swept everyone up in my arms and

shoved them outdoors. I then called the police, who arrived to find one of the party crashers defending himself by brandishing a snow shovel and, unbelievably, two of my friends, both brothers, fighting one another in the driveway.

"All right," the police announced. "Time for everyone to leave."

"No," I said angrily (arguing with cops when you're drunk and underage is always a good idea). "Everyone doesn't have to leave—only these three do." I tried to point them out, but the trio who'd been so eager to share my company had already fled through the alley.

Or so I thought. Relaxing inside after the squad car left, we were interrupted in our re-telling of war stories by none other than Mr. Mustache. Bursting through the door, he grabbed the aforementioned jar of change. Then, with a shout—"At least I got this!"—he ran away again as quickly as he came in.

I didn't even bother trying to chase him.

The story should have ended there, a cautionary tale about not watching the door at your party. But the true resolution came two weeks later, when we got the pictures from the party developed. Among the normal shots of drunkenness, desperation and stupidity was a nice group photo of everyone celebrating the clock striking midnight. There, among my high school friends, and their friends of friends, and even, yes, a few assorted ladies, were our criminal masterminds. Their faces beamed for the camera, and their glasses were raised in a toast to their seemingly surefire plan.