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Anybody Can Celebrate

The first time our mom decided to sleep in the New Year, my sister Katie and I rang it in with our own celebration. I am not one to wish for childhood days or fondly reminisce. Those days were long, long ago. I am not that child any more. But every now and then, a tiny detail, something as simple as a pinkie raised away from a wine glass, makes me remember. That New Years, I was nine and Katie was eight. There was no party in our home, a two-bedroom apartment at the top of a six-floor walk-up, nor were we going to one.

Our mother slept often then, admonishing us to wake her up at a certain time of day for something she could not miss. When the appointed time came, we'd start out gently calling, "Ma," and lightly swooshing her arm back and forth. The covers were always a tight tangle around her, even over her head, like a mummy with its knees drawn up to its chest. Usually there was no response. A little louder and a little harder, and she might roll her head free and groan. Wrinkles from the gathered sheets would be pressed into her cheeks. Then, giving the arm a good swing, we'd raise our voices.

"But Ma, you said not to give you five more minutes." She'd yank her arm away then in groggy irritation. "Five more minutes." And she was lost under the covers again.

So Katie and I would continue getting ready for school, picking out our outfits for the day, or eating a bowl of Froot Loops. Or, if it was dinner time and we needed a bite to tide us over, we'd make some toast, or have a Devil Dog, if we hadn't devoured the entire box the night before.

Five minutes later we'd try again, and she'd ask for yet another five minutes. How many times we granted her the extra five minutes depended on how hungry we were or how strongly she'd urged us to ignore her pleas and just get her up.

"I'm depending on you two," she might say the night before. "Help Mommy out, ok?" It was only my violently shaking her arm, and my sister jumping up and down crying and whining, "Mommy! Get up already!" that finally brought her around.

I suppose we shouldn't have been surprised she preferred to sleep New Year's Eve, but we were. We were also baffled by the way she never woke up in a good mood, even when she woke up easily. She had asked us to wake her, hadn't she? The only times she woke up without a fuss was when we wanted her to sleep: when we'd be playing handball in the vestibule, sliding in stockinged feet down the slippery black and white tiled hallway, or playing, "The Giants Are Coming." The rules to this last game, our own invention, were simple. Put your tights on only half-way up your calves and run. The steps were little people steps, and the little people were invariably chased by unseen giants who took giant steps. We ran around like this screaming, "The giants are coming!" down the hall and into the bedroom. The climax was when Katie and I catapulted onto our beds to safety.

My mother put us to bed New Year's Eve after a late pizza dinner

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delivered from Dominic's, the best pizzeria in neighborhood. Even though our mother was the best cook we knew, dinner was often from Dominic's, and the rail thin, sandy-haired delivery boy with his bobbing Adam's apple was a familiar face at our door. I'm not sure exactly what time it was that we'd gone to bed, but it was early for us. Often, we got to stay up late watching as much TV as we wanted. I believe I fell asleep for a little while, but when I woke up to faintly throbbing music below us, I could not fall back. I turned over in my bed and lifted the corner of the venetian blind hanging near by. The window was dull and grimy, but outside, a clear black sky stretched and curved over the jagged outcrop of our building. The night's cold glittered in the clarity of the sky. A chill crept through the window frame and over my nose and cheeks. I looked across the way. Our building had a small courtyard circled by six stories of various bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen windows. Nearly every window was lit with warm light spilling out into the winter, or seeping around drapes and shades. The whole world was awake. I pictured our side of the building looking the same way, except our windows were the only dark ones, like untold secrets. The wind-up clock on my night table, its green numbers and fingers glowing, read twenty after eleven. There was a rustle from Katie's bed.

"Are you awake?" she whispered across the gloom.

"Yeah," I answered, pulling in my head from behind the blinds. "Am I doing this in my sleep?" I could just make out the bulk of darkness that was Katie curled up in bed. She giggled. "Yes," she teased. "You even fart in your sleep."

"No, I don't."

"Yes! I heard it."

"Sure." I lifted the venetian blind again, and ghostly light fell on my forearm. Directly across the way was our friend Cory's bedroom window. That window, like all the others, was also lit, the shade pulled three-quarters of the way up. Cory's parents were having a party. I closed my eyes, the cold settling over the tip of my nose again, and willed Cory to come to her window, to see me, to open her window and call out to us, "Come on over!" I opened my eyes. Except for the honey colored corner of a dresser, Cory's window was blank.

"I can't sleep," Katie said.

"Everybody's having a party," I answered.

"We should have had a party." She slid out from beneath her covers and pattered over to my bed in bare feet. She walked on the outside edges of her feet, as I often did, to avoid the chill. I lifted the corner of my blanket, and she crept in. "Or we should be at a party," she added.

We both stuck our heads under the blind and looked out at the white, pinpoint stars and the yellow glowing windows for a while. Our shoulders and upper arms touched, warming each other. With my nose close to the windowpane, I could smell the faint, gritty smell of dust turned to dirt.

Then Katie looked up at me, her pug nose crinkled and the corners of her thin mouth turned down. In the confidential voice she'd always use later when speaking of our mother, she said, "She doesn't like people around."

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I nodded, watching Cory's kitchen window. The shade was only pulled up a few inches there, but in the bar of light I could catch flitting shadows, hands reaching, I imagined, for drinks with ice cubes clinking, or holding cigarettes, smoke trailing up to the ceiling.

"Maybe we could go to Cory's," Katie suggested hopefully. But we both shrugged at that. We hadn't been invited. Besides, we were well aware how unsafe it was for little girls to go out alone at night. I sighed, picturing the silver ball as I'd seen it on TV dropping down over Times Square, floating over the rolling sea that was the crowd gathered below. I heard in my memory the countdown of voices piled upon voices, yelling over the blaze of noisemakers. The year before, we'd been at my uncles, and when everyone shouted "Happy New Year!" he hoisted both me and my cousin up in his arms, tossing us toward the ceiling. I reached up and brushed the ceiling with my fingertips.

"We could have our own party!" I burst out.

"Yeah!" Katie agreed, and then, "How?"

I sat up and propped my chin in my hand. "Well..., it wouldn't be a party exactly. But we can celebrate. Anybody can celebrate."

"Yeah," Katie said again, drawing out the word. Her eyes were opened so wide the tips of her dark lashes touched her eyebrows.

"We can watch the ball drop on tv," I said.

"And we can have ginger ale for champagne," Katie said. "And crackers."

"And cheese."

"Like at Uncle Lewis's party last year."

"Except he had yucky cheese." I wrinkled my nose, remembering the pungent smell of brie.

We got out of bed and tiptoed into the living room. The hallway was black, but ample streetlamp light spilled across the living room, spreading in a puddle at the end of the hallway to guide us. We clung to each other until we reached the living room, then we sprinted for the TV. The trick to clandestine TV watching was to first turn the volume all the way down and then turn the TV on. Static rolled over the screen. Blue light spilled onto the wooden floor. Only then did we ease the volume up to just audible level. Next, we pushed the coffee table in front of the TV, removed the couch cushions and pulled out the convertible bed. It groaned a little, but the legs barely made a sound on the floor as we braced ourselves against its weight and lowered it. Then we hit the kitchen. This was the first time we had to turn on a light.

We squinted a moment against the brightness. The pizza box was still on the table, the hood cracked open. Salt sprayed a stardust trail across a dark Formica corner. I was proud of how I could hoist myself up onto the counter to reach the cabinets above. Katie shadowed me below as I stepped over to the cabinet nearest the window. From behind our motley collection of glasses, plastic cups and mugs, I pulled out our sole pair of wine glasses. I knelt down gingerly and handed them to Katie, who placed them safely on the table. Next, I sidled over to the middle cabinet.

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From there I retrieved a box of Premium Saltines. These were my favorites. I often ate them like pretzels or potato chips. Meantime, Katie had put two strawberry frosted Pop Tarts into the toaster and got the Cheez Whiz and ginger ale from the fridge.

"Pop Tarts. Good idea," I said, vaulting down onto the floor.

We brought our picnic onto the convertible bed. As we ate, legs crossed under nightgowns for warmth, we planned our countdown strategy in quiet tones.

"No," I told Katie when I saw how she held her wine glass. "You have to hold it like this." I raised my glass, showing her how I kept my pinky daintily raised.

She held her glass up, which reflected and distorted the picture of people waving hands and hats in Times Square. So involved were we with our plans and Pop Tarts appetizers that we scarcely realized what time it actually was. Then Katie gasped, pointing to the time flashing on the screen.

"What?" I asked, alarmed.

She pointed to our near empty glasses. We jumped out of the bed and scampered into the kitchen for more ginger ale, getting back in plenty of time for the countdown. We put the paper plates, the box of crackers, the Cheez Whiz and the knife to spread it on the coffee table and faced each other on the bed.

The countdown started. Squatting, we counted out loud with the swimming crowd of party goers in their crocheted pompom hats, coats with wide lapels, patchwork leather berets. Our softly spoken numbers barely filled the air. "Four, three, two, one. Happy New Year!" Our backward somersaults were synchronized perfectly. We flung ourselves across the mattress to hug each other, jumped up and down on the sofa bed a few times and lifted our legs to fall into the thin mattress. The springs squealed in time with our bounces. Sweeping up our glasses from the coffee table, we toasted each other, swiping pinkies. The last few wisps of confetti were still floating down the screen and "Auld Lang Syne" was in full, incoherent swing when we decided that countdown was so exciting, we'd do it again; countdown, cheers, somersaults, hugs, jumping, falling, toasts. And then we did it again, laughing with delight. It was on the somersaults of the fourth countdown that I heard a shuffling noise at the living room doorway.

"What the hell are you two doing?" My mother was silhouetted against the light from the kitchen. Katie and I looked up from just completed somersaults, our feet still tucked under us. She was slouched a little, and she leaned a hand high on the doorway post, her other hand resting on her hip.

We gaped. Maybe if we said nothing, she wouldn't think it was as bad as we were afraid it might really be. Did she notice the food? The crackers spilling out of the box? The knife that had fallen from the jar of Cheez Whiz onto the floor?

"Come on," she said, motioning with her arm. As the kitchen light momentarily lit her face, I caught sight of a sheet crease in her cheek. "It's late. It's time for bed."

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Katie and I looked at one another. I read it in her face. It was too early for bed. It was New Year's Eve.

"Come on!" she snapped, "Don't play games with me when you've already woke me up. Move it."

"Ok, Mom," I said, slowly unfolding my legs.

Katie nodded, following suit.

"We're putting the bed away," I said, hoping this would satisfy her that we were going back to sleep, before she noticed the rest of the mess.

"You got that right," she said.

I moved in slow motion over to the corner of the bed, waiting for Katie, who moved even more slowly as she turned off the TV, to take her place on the other side. We looked at each other. "One, two, three," we counted in unison, and we lifted the end up. My mother sighed, letting her head fall back a moment and her hands drop to her sides. She shuffled off down the hallway. Katie and I smiled in collusion as we folded the bed over and in.

Yet the room was empty without the TV on, and the air draftier without the bulk of the convertible bed. The party below us drifted hollowly through the floor as we put everything away and turned off the light. But we did not put away our wine glasses or the bottle of ginger ale and a packet of crackers. Whispering vows to stay up all night and play cards--rummy, war, and twenty-one--we brought our booty with us.

In our darkened room, I lifted the blind and saw all those windows still lit up, but there was someone in Cory's window now, leaning on the sill, cupping her chin in her hand. I pulled the shade up all the way and eased open the window. Katie squeezed in beside me as freezing air rushed into the room. We waved our arms at Cory. She started, then opened her window. Her face in the dark was hardly more than a smudge.

"What are you doing?" My stage whisper echoed across the courtyard chasm.

She shrugged. "Id like to go to sleep." Then she whined, "but I can't." She shook her head, her short, straight black hair tossing to and fro. Katie and I exchanged looks.

"You want to sleep on New Year's Eve?" Katie was incredulous.

"I'm tired."

"We're staying up all night," I declared proudly.

Again she shrugged.

"Playing cards," Katie added. "Strip poker," even though none of us knew how to play poker.

We caught Cory's impressed gasp over the icy air. All three of us were shivering, hugging ourselves. Katie and I were bouncing on the balls of our feet in unison. I reached over for our glasses and handed Katie hers. We held them up in a toast, pinkies poised. Cory leaned over backwards for her glass.

"Happy New Year!" we called softly, and we sipped that same delicate way at our drinks.

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Today, so many years later, I sat at a little glass table across from a haggard, worn Katie. I remembered that celebration, because of the simple act of lifting the glass that held my cola. The glancing sun lit the dark liquid with a hint of cherry, and I saw how my little finger was raised, as if I were some genteel woman sipping at champagne. I held the glass aloft and smiled at my sister.

“Happy New Year,” I said, even though July was pummeling us with its heat.

At first her smile was returned out of politeness, but then I saw glancing memory in her eyes, and her smile broadened, the lines of her face radiating with it.