

New Year

January 2, 2004

I thought that if I ignored it, the new year might sneak in quietly. I thought that if I climbed into bed, crawled deep beneath my down comforter, it might slip in virtually unnoticed, with deference and respectful silence. And in turn, the past year would slip out without ceremony, without reflection.

I was sure that if turned out the light before midnight, it would all cease to matter. I could have ignored the fireworks, I think, so far in the distance one could easily mistake the dull booms for claps of thunder. I could ignore the hoots and calls as teenagers and troublemakers. What I could not ignore, however, was the kids next door, taking to their front porch at the stroke of midnight to bang together pots and pans like some kind of suburban hillbillies.

In the dark, I turned into my husband's warm body and we whispered to each other the greeting we had wordlessly settled upon earlier: "New Year," he said to me. "New Year," I said back and right up until the very last syllable, I thought I might say it without crying.

Whereas some are prone to revelry and giddy antics on the last night of the year, New Year's Eve has always felt heavy and poignant to me. It is a day ideal for serial sighing, staring out of windows at an unfailingly grey sky.

Even as a child, the chimes at midnight haunted me. When I was eight years old, I sat on the carpeted steps in our darkened hallway in Boston and listened to adults in the living room sing *Auld Lang Syne*.

Me? I missed my grandparents. I missed Scotland. I felt empty and absent. I went to my room and listened to Abba's *The Winner Takes It All* over and over again. I knew that there was a special significance to this time of year and that I understood somehow that I was mourning the days that had passed rather than greeting those to come.

As an adult, I have always been a little prone to maudlin review of the year's event. It's no surprise that I can be a tad negative in my approach. The glass that holds what the world has wrought all year is not just half empty but drained completely. On truly bad years, it's sometimes missing entirely. (Everyone else, naturally, has one – and theirs is beautiful.) It's all rather self-indulgent and orchestrated and inexplicably meaningful to me as a rite of passage.

When I drank, my tears were the result of liquor-fueled maudlin introspection. As midnight drew near and I, inevitably, was struck with the realization that there was no one to kiss. An entire year's – no, a lifetime's – worth of loneliness would float to the top of my beer mug and I would drag the nearest person down with me in a sad-sack tale of what my life wasn't.

The past six New Year's have been sober ones – in all meanings. Even the gratitude I felt, the happiness I reflected upon was noted with gravity. My blessings are serious business. And just

because I put down the bottle doesn't mean I put down the bat. I still tend to focus on what I haven't accomplished, rather than what I have. This may not be avoidable. I'm a Scorpio.

I knew, though, that this year would be different from any before. I knew because I was bracing for New Year's Eve all through the holidays. I knew that no matter how hard a look I took at the year 2003, from how many different angles, no matter where I went, what I did or what I accomplished, it would always be the year that my mother died.

In 2003, I celebrated seven years of sobriety, two years of marriage. I made new friends, expanded my businesses, received an award and gained an agent. I traveled, a lot – to San Francisco, DC, Glasgow, London. I ate out a zillion and a half times, worked out a total of about 100 hours, bent myself into a pretzel in twenty or so yoga classes. Around me, the space shuttle exploded, we went to war in Iraq, celebrities won awards, books were written, movies filmed, babies born, wishes fulfilled. But it was still the year in which the most significant, most formative event of my life to date had transpired: my mother had died.

Those who have walked through a similar loss confess that it will always be this way. I will use it as a reference point. I will say, "It was the year my mother died, so I know it was 2003." People will ask when my mother died and the year "2003" will roll off my tongue without so much as a second thought.

This year, on the morning of New Year's Eve, I was awoken by a phone call at 6:30. It was a cheery and well-meaning reporter from Scotland who had, apparently, forgotten the time difference and was calling to do some fact-checking for an article she was writing on me. "I just wanted to make sure," she said. "Your mum died in June, is that right?" It rolled off my tongue, "She died October 5."

Even before the phone rang, even before this was the reminder to which I woke up, I knew that my mother's death would be the fact that drove my day. I knew it would be the water I waded through as I waited for midnight, waited desperately to put this year behind me.

I spent the day alone, as I do most days, wandering like a stranger throughout my house, incapable of passing 15 minutes without being enveloped in a gripping sadness unlike anything I'd felt in the months since my mother's death.

I cried. A lot. I understood that it was supposed to hurt that much and that I would have to weather it and it would likely happen again before too long. I let the yarn of my knitting grow damp with my tears. I watched Judge Judy through a watery haze. I sat in a bathtub filled with lavender and let my tears turn into steam.

That night, I called my father – spending his first New Year's Eve without my mother in nearly forty years – and said, weakly, that I hoped the new year would be better for us, that I hoped it would bring us some happiness. "When I say happy new year," he said, "it is with hope, not expectation." I waited until we hung up to cry some more.

I cried again when midnight struck, lying in bed with my husband, warm and familiar as the kids next door burst outside to start their noisemaking. “The good thing,” my husband said, “is this means they must have learned to tell time. So there’s hope.” I laughed then, the first time that year which meant he was probably right.