

Another New Year's Eve

By Julie Pepper

I strategically place big buckets of ice filled with Champagne and Chardonnay in different corners of the room. They'll just have to reach over when a refill becomes necessary. The table is set with deep Burgundies, big Zinfandels and hearty Cabernets all open and breathing, waiting for the New Year.

No dinner, just lots of appetizers, hors'd'oeuvres, and alcohol. I wanted it that way. Thinly sliced Chinese pork, cold sesame noodles, smoked oysters, salmon roe caviar spread on top of cream cheese and miniature crackers, a tremendous pot of yam and ginger soup warming on the stove, with a hunk of homemade French bread sitting next to it; the room is speckled with colors and flavor. The glassware is lined up along one side of the table. It's beautiful. Big bowl shaped red wine glasses, long elegant ones for white, and tall flutes for the Champagne.

It's cold and dark outside. I'm wearing what they call a lounging outfit. It's mostly a pale, pale, greenish, (sage, actually,) and satiny, but then there are these tiny little black roses around the collar and the slightly, flared pant cuffs. The saleslady tried to impress upon me how chic the relaxed sophistication of the "lounge act" was, but what impressed me more, was the soft, silky material, which made me feel I was getting away with hosting in my pajamas. The only problem now is, whenever I get up out of my chair, the pants seem to stay behind, sticking to it, but everything, with the exception of my mouth, (which is dry,) feels a little wet and sticky, particularly my underarms and the palms of my hands.

I take a rocks glass and pour a generous helping of Johnny Black over ice. When Jack walks by, I slide my moist palm, under one of the cheeks of his khakis. Then, I go to kiss him, but actually, I transfer a scotch laced ice cube into his mouth. He doesn't even cringe at the chill of it, but instead, pulls me close to him, grabbing my neck and depositing the same cube down my shirt. We've been together for ten years, but this is the first New Year's we host together.

When I take another hit off my scotch, it goes down hot, despite the ice, and the flavor, that slightly bitter, slightly sweet, really mellow, carmelly, fireball flavor—it reminds me...

We are picking each other up on the way to a party. We go from house to house, but my house is the last one on the route because I live around the corner from Michael, the boy who is having the party. I work it out so I'm a part of the pick up crew, because I hate waiting.

Up the stone walkway, I walk, and then knock on Maxi's door. Maxi is short for Maxine, which she hates. She's fourth on the route. Jaime and Karen are waiting outside. I knock on the door because her mother can't stand it when we honk.

"Hi, Mrs. Rizzelli. Is Max ready?"

"Not quite. Maybe you better go up and hurry her along," she says, and so I go to, but she kind of pushes me back from the stairwell. Not hard though.

"Well, don't you look nice, Nina?"

"I curled my hair."

"It's very becoming on you," she says.

"Thanks," I say, making my move to go up.

But then she cuts me off at the banister and she asks, "Where are you girls off to tonight?" I'm always afraid when she asks me something that she's trying to trick me.

"Uh, a party."

"Yes. Whose?"

She just looks at me. She's got a great poker face. But I happen to know Maxi has to lie to her just to do stuff. I'm not going to lie to her, though. Maxi didn't say to.

"Michael's. He's my neighbor." Neighbor sounds so safe.

"Oh that's right. Maxi mentioned it," she says, seeing she's not going to get any more out of me even if she tortures me.

“Well, you better go and get her before she changes her outfit for the third time. And Nina, you might want to try a little more hair spray, a couple of those lovely curls are starting to wilt.”

“Yeah. Okay,” I say, running up the stairs two at a time. “Hey, Max. What’re you doing?”

“Oh, hi! Sorry, I had the hair dryer on. I guess I didn’t hear you guys beep.”

“We didn’t. But next time listen for us. You’re mother just gave me the third degree. I had to tell her we were going to Michael’s.”

“Yeah, that’s okay. I had to tell her, too. She asked me a million and one times. As long as she doesn’t see him, I guess. I did give her his phone number, though. I hope she doesn’t call and ask to speak to his mother or something.”

“Yeah, embarrassing. I’ll be his mother for you if she does though, kay?”

“Yeah. Except don’t go overboard like with Jaime’s mom or anything. Just make her American.”

“Okay. What time do you have to be home?”

“She said, one, but I’ll call later and get it later.”

“That’s pretty good, but why don’t you just sleep over?”

“She won’t go for that. Not after last year.”

“Oh yeah, sorry. You look nice,” I say, touching her hair.

*“Thanks. I changed four times. **Your** hair came out good.”*

“Took forever. You should’ve seen Karen trying to get those dumb looking rollers to stay. I kept telling her to forget it, but once she got started she turned into Vidal Sassoon’s mother.”

“Yeah. And Paul Mitchell’s sister,” Maxi says, giggling, as we run down the stairs.

“Mom, I’m going,” she calls out.

“Do I have the number?” Mrs. Rizzelli calls back.

“It’s on the refrigerator. But, I’ll call you after the ball drops, okay?” she looks at me, crossing her fingers.

“All right. Have fun. And remember no drinking.”

Maxi’s mother’s too much. No drinking. Is she kidding? It’s New Year’s Eve. Maxi really does look nice. Her hair comes out so good when she blow-dries it. Straight, brown and silky, down to her shoulders, it looks as soft as the fuzz on her yellow sweater top. And her top has little white buttons that go all down the back.

I feel kind of sexy, too. This curled hair thing is different, even though I'll never have the patience to do it again. I like different, though. Like when I'm trying to make an old boyfriend worry that he made a huge mistake, I just wear my hair in a way he's never seen it before and I know it makes him think my whole life has changed.

"Let's hit it Kar. Numero cinco," I say.

Karen drives with one hand on the wheel, the other tapping her cigarette out the window. Most of us have dark hair, but Karen's is blonde. It blows out the window. Even though it's December we've got the ones in the front wide open. It helps clear the smoke and gives us a better look at the people on the streets. People hurry in and out of the liquor stores. We see a guy a little older than us, like seventeen, eighteen, in a leather jacket giving some change to a couple of kids. He also hands them a brown paper bag with the tips of a couple of bottles sticking out at the top.

Karen pulls into the parking lot and follows the kids around back of the Grand Union. She starts making a whirring sound like we're the police. Her car, her mother's car, is a navy blue Oldsmobile. I guess it could be mistaken for an unmarked car. She accelerates as we turn the bend, the wheels making that screeching sound like we're peeling out. We join in with Karen, whooo, whooing, like a siren, goofing, but the kids start running like they're really busted and one of them, the one with the bottles, trips and, splat, they crash to the concrete, smashing and spilling. We're all cracking up, but when the kids realize we're not cops they look like they're going to cry.

"Hey, you're not—why you want to do that?" the one kid says, shrugging his bony shoulders and looking down on the ground at the sticky shards of glass.

Looking at their sad faces, we all feel like bullies, so we chip in to buy them another bottle of Boonesfarm and I go in to get it for them. How could they think our demented impressions of a siren were real?

I pass ID inspection and buy the bottle. When I come out the boys are giggling with Karen. I hand over the bottle and Karen tells them to be careful and not drink too much.

"Well, now that we only have one bottle it shouldn't be too hard," the tall one says. We all say we're sorry for the millionth time and then go to pick up Leslie.

"They were so sweet. I feel really bad," Maxi says.

"I know," Jaime, says, "Those guys are my brother's age, the poor things."

Jaime speaks with a certain kind of maturity to her. She dresses like a woman, too. She wears suits and heels and glasses on a string. I still dress like a kid. Even when I'm a woman I think I'll dress like a kid.

When we get to Leslie's she's waiting outside, tapping her watch. Her hair is in a French braid and her jeans are tighter than any I've had to jump on my bed to get into.

Even though we have me, we go to my house. My parents aren't home and we can't go to Michael's, yet, because his are still there. We can see that they're still there, through the back window of my house, because our houses are that close.

"Hey, why don't we call some of the guys, and see what they're doing, while we wait?" Maxi says suddenly looking like the devil.

"Yeah," I say, grinning. Then I hand her the phone. "Go ahead," I say, probably looking a little like the devil, myself.

We each take turns inviting boys, we sort of like, to come over to my house before we go to Michael's.

While we wait for the boys and the call from Michael that the coast is clear, we check out my parents' liquor cabinet. It really is a cabinet. It's made of wood and the doors look like shutters. I don't feel right about everybody diving in all at once. So I take them, each, one at a time.

During our visits to the liquor cabinet the boys we called, Jon, Derrick, Russ, their friends, Bill and Gary, come over. I just slip them into the order. They're older than we are. We're sophomores in high school. Actually I am. My girlfriends are all a year ahead of me.

I have a sip of whatever, whoever, I'm with, likes to drink. Jaime likes Scotch. She actually likes it. I take a swig and practically barf. But she says it's a taste you have to "acquire" a liking to. So I take another sip with her, but it still tastes like cough medicine without the cherry flavoring. My parents really have a lot of stuff. Vodka and gin, scotch, even tequila. Anyway, I'm starting to feel it.

That's why when Michael calls and says the party's off, it doesn't really sink in. Something about his parents' finding out and staying home and can he and his brother come over, after he tells everybody?

We're laughing and drinking and relaxing in my home, my parents' home. We don't think much about where we're going to spend New Year's Eve. I know we can't spend it here, because that's the one thing my Mom and Step-dad strictly forbid.

Little by little people start to drop by. I run to the door excited at who it might be.

"The party's not here," I say, inviting them in. "But would you care for something to drink?" I ask, pretending I'm wearing a dress to the floor and I have one of those long Tiparillo cigarettes coming out of my fingernails.

I'm the hostess. There's nothing quite like being a hostess. I welcome people into my house, my home. I'm like an oyster. The door is my shell and the slippery skin and oyster's succulent meat, my heart. It pulses up and down in my chest. I hear the knocks, I open the door, and I become a delicious aphrodisiac for my guests.

I start to feel hot. That hot feeling in my face that happens sometimes when I drink.

I'm laughing a lot and I keep saying over and over again. "This is my house. But, I'm not having a party." Of course no one believes me.

Michael's sitting right on my living room couch, smoking a joint and drinking a beer. I know what Maxi means about her mother seeing him. He's got long hair and even though he's our age, he looks a lot older. He has a lot of hair growing on his face. And right now, he looks like a stoner. He always looks like a stoner.

Everyone's here. Smoking. Drinking. Beer in glass bottles break here and there. Little crashes. Eating. Our stereo can really go loud. It's my house and everyone's having the best time, laughing and smiling, kissing and flirting. Finally, a party where all the people you want to be there, are. If I'd invited all these people they never would've come.

Seniors and even boys out of high school are here. I see them looking at me. Some of them won't come in the house. They stay outside sitting on cars. They're thinking things about me. Wondering if I'm wild—if I'm a rebel, if I don't care about getting in trouble or if I'm too drunk to do anything about this crowd—it's all true.

But I like it. It's exciting having all these people in my house. They get lost in each other. I get lost in them. It feels so different that my parents aren't here. Lately I'm so angry when they're around. It's like some kind of delayed reaction to when they split up, so delayed, that nobody even makes the connection.

I like to be around my friends. They make me feel happy, free, reckless. I escape with them.

One of the boys Maxi called earlier is sitting in the big tweed armchair in my living room. Girls sit perched on the arms all around this boy, Derrick, like a harem. They laugh at every word that comes out of his mouth.

“So Mr. Milo says, ‘Hey there, toad—’ and you know how he says it, “tow-ed” with his nose flaring and getting red, and then he lifts me up by my collar and drags me back into the room.” Everyone laughs.

He is funny, because he’s really smart and curious. It makes him charming. But he’s never been so popular before because he’s not great looking. Brownish hair, fair skin, thin, he’s not built. But here, at this party, my party, it doesn’t matter. He’s Mr. Popularity. His friends cackle around him, teasing him when they can get a word in, calling him Derrick Love—a name that I think will stick.

I’ve always liked him, but not like that. I’m talking to other boys. But I’m not talking so well. I’m stumbling over words a little and mostly just laughing. I wish I could see more of what’s going on around me, but it’s blurry. Lots of people. Some of them kissing, Some of them smoking, dancing. I hear a loud bang and I know it’s the door slamming. It’s Cory. My sister. Older. She doesn’t look happy. What’s she doing home so early? What time is it?

Everybody’s starting to leave. Except for the boys who’ve been trying to put me to bed. They’re telling Cory how they’re looking out for me because I threw up a couple of times. One of them says the other one was trying to put the moves on me. Then the other one says the same thing about the other one.

“Just go home.” Cory says.

They kiss me goodnight even though I think I smell like vomit. I climb all the way under the covers, even my head. I can’t close my eyes because all the spinning the room’s doing is making me sick. At least under the covers all I can see is black. And sometimes tiny little stars. I wish I could just fall asleep and make it go away, but I hear loud voices. They’re not really voices though. More like cries. It’s my mother.

She’s saying, “Oh, no. No, no, no.”

She sounds like she’s in pain. I can picture her face as she looks around the room, sad and tired. Mick and she were probably laughing before they got to the door; Mom looking so pretty in her New Year’s Eve dress of blues and greens and purples, her eyes sparkling from the fun evening. Maybe they were holding hands, just thinking about how this year was going to be a great

one. And then they opened the door and there was their house looking like a going out of business sale that some drug dealer was having.

I squirm under the covers trying to set a position I can hold comfortably when they come up. Pretending I'm asleep is my only option. They're coming up the stairs. Their footsteps pound on my head. And soon they're in my room with the lavender walls and purple windowsills deciding whether they should wake me or not.

"Let's deal with it in the morning," Mick says. He sounds pretty disgusted with me.

When morning comes, I wish more than ever that I could suddenly be bewitched with magical powers, snap my fingers, make the mess disappear and then vanish. Instead, my mother opens the shades in my room with a loud snap, letting all that horrible sunshine drench my pillow.

"Get up," she says. She hates me.

It's my punishment to clean the entire downstairs of the house. (And I'm grounded for a week.) Fortunately, I'd had the good sense to keep everyone out of the upstairs rooms with the exception of mine. Picking up the tiny sticky pieces of broken glass, scraping gum off the walls, sweeping cigarette butts into dustpans, and manually getting those hard to reach ones stuck in the corners, my stomach hurries me back and forth to the bathroom.

As I retrieve a huge plastic bag stuffed with trash, off our front stoop, and read the note attached: "YOUR DAUGHTER LEFT THIS MESS. SIGNED, YOUR NEIGHBORS," I wonder if my mom and Mick have seen it and left it for me to find or whether I can possibly dispose of it without their ever knowing. I'm not above lying and keeping secrets.

The phone rings and surges through me like a loud alarm clock. Though I usually go running for it, yelling, "I'll get it," today I don't. We have two phones and one's in the kitchen where everybody seems to be, and the others in my parents' bedroom. It doesn't matter anyway, because none of my friends call today, probably too afraid of incriminating me, or themselves. It's not like we had the chance to come up with a good story in the inevitable event of getting caught.

I look out the big picture window in our living room, staring out at the millions of stars that look like they're staring back at me. While I wait for our first guests to arrive, I think about what a lousy hostess I was that night—way too intoxicated. And yet, I catch myself smirking, in the reflection of the glass.

There's something about that night. The not knowing who would come, the knowing that I wasn't supposed to, that feeling of surrender, of just collapsing into the giddiness, and I guess that's what the longing is about.

One night back in 1980, I threw a forbidden party, on New Year's Eve, for my great friends that met all of our expectations. I was a hero that night. That New Year's when nobody had too much shaking, or the whole town would not have ended up at our house.

As our first few guests start to trickle in, Jack opens the door and I greet them, graciously, and with a big smile, (which might even look devilish to some). It's because of the wish I just made.

The wish is for us grown-ups; those of us who can pretty much do whatever we want, any night of the week, that maybe, this New Year's, at the very least, we impress ourselves. But, if we're really lucky, we have a moment, if not actually heroic; one we want to freeze-frame in time.