New Years Eve at the OQ
Caitlin Campbell

I’m not the type to wander Seaside Heights alone on New Years, not when I’m in my right mind. The sky was black with bright white stars. It was cold—the kind of cold that feels like breath mints when you inhale, the kind of cold that sobers you up like a slap in the face. And I needed that, like I needed the beers in my stomach to please stop sloshing.

I walked past the dark marsh lining Cedar Bridge Ave and crossed Ocean Avenue. My body wobbled and my head swam, but the ocean was rhythmic. It breathed slow and deep. I ran up the steps of the boardwalk. Cold as it was, the familiar Seaside boardwalk was better than Amanda’s house.

BANG! BANG-BANG!
The sounds stabbed my ear. Panic sprinted through the synapses of my brain.

BANG! BANG! BANG-BANG!

What an awful hour to end it all on. My heart trashed in my ribcage and my stomach lurched. I threw my hands over my head.

There was crackling. Then a shimmering noise, like the rain sticks they sell in the Rainforest Café in Atlantic City.

An older man’s voice called out, “didn’t mean to scare ya, there!”

“Just fireworks, hun!”

I stood dumb, bathed in the fluorescence of the light post above me. The people were down the boardwalk in the dark.

“Hey! Are you alright?” the man bellowed.

“Well you scared her, Hank.”

I came to, spun on my heel, and kept walking, as straight as I could.

The way from Amanda’s to the Ocean Queen Diner is instinctual to me. Since we were middle schoolers, Amanda, Kristen, and I walked the mile to the beach every week each summer with towels under our armpits, pretzel rods and iced tea in WaWa bags, and sweat dripping down our backs. We’d unload our wet towels at the door, hop our sandy butts onto the OQ stools, and order spinach-bacon omelets, rye toast, and Diet Cokes.
I passed the lifeguard station. The green glow of the OQ lit up the Ferris Wheel behind it. The door jangled when I stepped in. The diner smelled, like always, of a sweet mix of pie and lemon-scented cleaner. Frank Sinatra sang “Black Magic” from a radio in the kitchen.

Down and down I go
Round and round I go
Like a leaf that's caught in the tide.

I thought, I feel you, Old Blue Eyes.

A gaggle of local twenty-something hippies sat in a booth with their shoes scattered about them. They were in the throws of an all out monopoly game. There were hotels and mortgages and everything.

“Happy New Years!” they called out.

I nodded at them.

A teenage couple sat a few booths away eating pie. The girl, tall and gangly, had her arm around her boyfriend, a pudgy kid with thick curly hair and glasses. She kissed his cheek, the way you’d kiss a baby’s. He giggled and blushed. She did it again and again. They smiled at me as I passed them.

At the counter, a man was asleep on his face. I hopped up on the stool furthest from him and grabbed a plastic menu from underneath a Heinz bottle. Greasy foods sober you up right? Sounded like a terrible idea.

In the summer this place was packed with tanned teenagers and families cutting up the hamburgers and hotdogs for their little kids. I’d bite my straw as we searched for kids from school and gossiped about them. The girls would have some choice snotty comments for this crew. The door jangled.

“Oh! Quit pinchin me!”

“BAH-haha! Guess I can’t help it.”

“Oh sweetheart! Oh, there she is, Hank!”

I spun slowly in my stool. An older man and woman were staring at me with cocked eyebrows and guilty smiles. I looked behind me.

“Oh you’re the one we scared just then, huh?” The woman plopped her bulging purse on the counter and scooted her fanny onto the stool next to me. She gave an extra oomph when she got stuck on the red vinyl seat. She was cute, your typical plump grandma. Except she wore a sequined blouse atop her pleated pants. Her eyes glinted framed by light blue sparkling shadow.
Hank pinched her fanny again before easing himself onto the school next to her. “I said quit it!” She batted at him and smiled at me. “Anyways, we’re sorry.” She patted my leg. “It was dumb of us not to look around and make sure we weren’t going to scare the taffy outta somebody before we shot that firework off.”

Hank leaned over and smiled at me. “You know, fireworks are illegal in New Jersey.”

“But you had to buy them!” The woman winked at me. “I’m Sue. And this is my boyfriend, Hank.”

“Happy New Years!” Hank hollered. He turned to Sue. “I manned guns in the Pacific, and a bunch of idiots in ties mean to tell me I can’t light some sparklers for my gal?” He held his menu up in the air. “Fuck ‘em!”

“Here-here!” the hippies called out.

“Hank! Don’t talk like that in front of a nice young lady.”

“I’m I sailor, baby!” He gave her a devlish peck on the cheek. “That’s why you like me so much.”

I hadn’t said anything yet. I was half-expecting to wake up on Amanda’s floor.

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” I said. “I’m Chelsea.”

A tired-looking waitress stood in front of us and pulled a notebook out of her apron. “What can I get you?”

“I’ll have a Diet Coke and a spinach-bacon omelet with rye toast,” I said automatically. I handed her the menu. The waitress turned to Hank.

“I’ll have the honeymoon salad.”

“I’m not sure we have that.”

“Sure, it’s simple. Lettuce alone with no dressing.” He beamed.

“Hank!” Sue socked him in the arm.

The waitress finally cracked a smile.

“We’ll have a strawberry milkshake with two straws,” Sue said. “And how bout the seafood combo with two forks.” The waitress took our menus and slipped into the kitchen. Frankie was still serenading the staff. If you can use some exotic booze, there's a bar in far Bombay… They must have a CD back there… My head bopped along.

“Honey?” Sue was gently shaking my shoulders.

“Hmm?”

“I said are you waiting for your friends?”
Frank was looking at me with his head cocked. The waitress had her ear pointed my way, too.

What’s a girl doing alone at the OQ on New Years? Good question. My head felt like fishbowl. I really wished there were backs on the stools so I could leannnnn back.

“Yes. They'll be here soon.”

I looked at my watch. 1:13 AM January 2nd. Seventy-three minutes ago, the ball was about to drop on my senior year of high school.

“What’s WRONG with you?” Kristen knocked on my head.

“Nothing!” I forced a smile and bumped my red solo cup with hers. I forced more of some slimy concoction back. The truth: I wasn’t down for binge drinking, making out with strangers, and acting like an idiot—and my best friends were suddenly all about it.

“Yeah right! You suck tonight!” She leaned in like she was telling me a great secret.

“You’re the TURD in the punchbowl.”

The room stirred in anticipation. The ball was sinking in Times Square.

“I just feel,” I started and stopped. Deserted. Dumb. Stupid. Sick. Embarrassed. Anxious. Like my best friends have moved on, or I’ve moved on. And I didn’t really want to drink this much, I told you that. And aren’t you worried about Amanda? She’s got a boyfriend! And who are you two anymore? Since when do we do this?

But whatever, she was gone.

“Here we go!”

“TEN!”

Senior year is for friends and reckless fun.

“NINE.”

I’m in a room packed with my friends.

“EIGHT.”

I’m still alone.

“SEVEN.”

Some friends. Some fun.

“SIX.”

Beer will make this better.

“FIVE!”
I’m going to punch Amanda if her boob pops out one more time.

“FOUR!”

*Why am I even here? Hello?* 

“THREE! TWO! ONE!”

*Happy New Year.*

Sue was watching me. She patted my leg again. “I remember… oh, I guess I couldn’t have been more than sixteen, I went to the boardwalk with a boy for the first time. He was nineteen and we had been an item for a few weeks. Charlie Bradock. Very handsome. He had quite some money, too.” She smiled at Hank. He rolled his eyes kept smiling at her. “Charlie said something that day—we were all talking about colleges. He asked why on earth would I go to college when I was so pretty.”

She did her best rich prick impression, “you need to enroll in another home economics course, is what you need to do, he said. I’ve ate this one’s casserole, trust me she’s got a thing or two to learn. I’m going to expect dinner when I get home—and I’m not eating that crud!”

“She’s still a bad cook!” Hank ruffled her silver hair.

“What did you do?” the waitress asked. We were all leaning on the counter, listening.

“I took my funnel cake and dumped it on that idiot’s head!” Sue burst into giggles. “I said, *eat this, Charlie!* I heard he was shaking powered sugar out of his hair for days!”

“And after?” One of the hippies, a girl with green eyes and long brown hair in a braid, had stopped by the counter to pay.

Sue spun her fanny in the stool. “I went to college! Studied Art cause I thought I couldn’t do too much with it! Oh, but then I did! Started my own store, and called in *Sue’s Nightmare.* It was great. But then I got married. I had kids and settled down, you know. But my late husband, he passed when I was only sixty-two, and my kids they grew up.”

“That’s when she went looking for me!” Hank grinned.

“Oh no, I don’t think that’s how it went.” Her cheeks flushed.

“Sure!” Hank leaned across her to look at me. “See, I lived across the street from her daughter. One look at me at her granddaughter’s graduation party, and woo-gee this one was love struck.”

“Oh, hush you peacock!”

He rubbed her hand. “I can’t help it, I guess.”
“But Hank and I,” Sue stole a sideways glance at her boyfriend, “we got to do everything we didn’t do before.” Like set off fireworks on New Years.

“She nearly killed me along they way! Wanting to go climb pyramids and SKEW-BUH dive.” He poked her side. “This one’s more dangerous than any war I fought in.”

“Oh, would you hush. Oh! But I was getting at something! Shoot! I’m always losing my train of thought these days.”

“Train of thought! More like a rick-shaw!”

Frank’s voice rang out as the kitchen door opened. These little town blues, are melting away/ I’ll make a brand new start of it… My omelet appeared under my nose. I didn’t even like omelets that much. But that’s what we always got. And rye toast? Why?

Sue looked at her watch. 1:45. Nobody was coming for me. She touched my arm. My shoulders slumped into her a little. I don’t know what it is about old ladies that makes them so comforting.

“What I was getting at, is that I know what it’s like to need to get away.”

I felt tears well up in my eyes. I sucked at my soda to suck them back in.

“Sometimes a girl can get to feeling really bad…”

I nodded.

“Sometimes she’s gotta dump funnel cake on somebody’s head.”

I opened my mouth and closed it.

“… or come to the OQ.”

“I was at a party.” I heard myself up-chucking my story. Damn old ladies and their empathy.

The waitress, the hippie chick, Hank, and Sue nodded.

“For as long as I can remember, it was me, Kristen, and Amanda. Middle school, junior high, high school. You know?” No way I’d be this regaling this group if I wasn’t still buzzed. I shrugged. Whatever. “Now we’re all seniors, and it’s like they’re moving ahead, boys and beer and smoking and whatever. And I’m not. But I don’t want any of that crap. And, and I’m just starting to realize… I don’t really know what. I guess that we aren’t even friends. They don’t really care.” I checked my phone. Not a single call or text. “They haven’t even realized I’m gone. I walked here.”

And then I felt stupid and childish. Like when a kid that can’t be calmed finally runs out of tears.

“But I guess no one told me I was too pretty to go to college or anything like that…” I added. Dumb dumb dumb.
The more my buzz faded the crazier this all was. What the hell was I thinking, walking alone to the Ocean Queen in the middle of the night? And why would these people care about my lame story.

“You’ve got lady balls, sister,” the hippie said. She pierced me with her knowing green eyes. “I’d say, leaving was a pretty big deal.” Another girl came up behind her and put her arms around her waist. She gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“Yeah.” I shrugged and bit my lip.

“No really, you had to leave.”

“Friends are nice. Sometimes they’re not,” Sue said.

The hippie girl’s girlfriend spoke up, “you don’t need to do anything because everyone else is doing it. And if they don’t get that well… maybe they aren’t your best friends anymore.”

“Don’t worry, high school sucks for everyone,” green eyes chimed.

We nodded.

“You know my favorite quote?” Hank asked.

We all looked at him. “You can’t cross the ocean, if you’re afraid to lose sight of the shore.”

I smiled.

“Here-here!” the hippies yelled.

“Get this girl a milkshake, please!” Hank handed the waitress a five. He scrunched his nose at my plate. “That’s no New Year’s Eve dinner! Whaddaya like? Strawberry? Chocolate?”

The girls and I always got vanilla.

“Can you make peanut butter banana?” I asked.

“Sure thing.” She smiled at me.

I was glad for the whir of the blender. Time to think. The waitress clanked my glass shake on the counter. We sat there, me sipping my shake, Hank and Sue sharing theirs.

“So what now?” Sue asked.

“Well now the whole year starts over with January. Sweetie, I thought you understood by now!”

“Oh, hush Hank!” Sue looked me in the eyes. “I mean, where are you going tonight? You need a ride home?”

“The bigger question is where are you going in this life,” Hank said. “Where to, kiddo?”

“Sure, a ride would be great,” I said to Sue. I looked at Hank. “I don’t know that yet, Hank.”

“Wherever you want.” The waitress tapped my hand and smiled.
I went to a bad party, that’s all. Who knew the OQ was filled with such sweethearts on the nightshift. Still, it was nice.

“Aren’t you kids on break?” Hank asked. “You know, we go out on the Gambler head boat every Sunday for bluefish.”

“You do?”

“Yeah we own it!” Hank beamed.

“Don’t be braggin!”

“What? An old man can’t tell a young gull he owns a boat?” Sweethearts and fishing boat owners.

“Oh, it’s impossible to get that smell out of your clothes!” Sue held onto my elbow. “But they have such a cute galley area with snacks and everything! And watching the mates run around helping everybody isn’t so bad!” Sue nudged me and giggled, “makes me want to yell fish on!”

“Would you cool it?” Hank said.

No, that’s fine thank you. I have homework. Hanging out with an old couple is a little weird. I have plans with friends. Oh, what the hell.

“I’d love that.”

Their smiles pulled up to their ears.

“Goodnight everybody!” I called out. The hippies were sleepy. Too long of a Monopoly game. The teenage couple looked up. The waitress stood in the kitchen door. The man asleep at the counter finally came to with a start.

“Goodnight!” they all replied.

“Happy new year!” Hank hollered.

Frank’s voice carried out the door as we stepped outside.

For what is a man
What has he got?

If not himself, then he has naught,

The record shows, I took the blows and did it myyyy wayyyy!

When we stepped out, I saw. The black inky sky was giving way to the friendlier hues of dawn. The sky stretched to so many places. I wasn’t the type to befriend two firework-setting-fishing-boat-owning old people at the OQ. The ocean still breathed steady, but quicker with anticipation. It was a new year.