

Some boys armed themselves with eggs, toilet paper and Nair bombs (an ingenious spin on the water balloon, combining the traditional device with a hair removing chemical – it also made for decent Molotov cocktail if you ever got into a real pinch). We dressed in the same costumes we did every year - a nightmarish version of Robin Hood and his merry men, complete with wooden swords, shields, clubs, bats, ball-and-chains, whips, slings, pepper spray, pellet-pistols, hand-me-down folding knives and all the other melee weapons of suburban youth. We were beyond thunderdome. We were Clockwork Orange Droogs for a single night while, three hundred and sixty four others sunsets found us subdued by Beethoven's Ninth. The scene was demonstrative and glorious. We were pocket-protector, four-eyed terrorists bringing hammers to a thumb-wrestling match. And while there were lame ducks in our rank and file, big Dave, who'd been dubbed our Little John, and me, who sported the best equipment, kept our group nimble and our battles decisively vicious.

Perhaps you've heard October thirtieth referred to as Devil's Night. You find it prevalent in Northeastern American cities and suburbs where it lives up to its name with pranks, mischief and violence. In my youth, the day before Halloween was preparation for the one night of the year that was especially intended for me – for us, for children to consider a second, masked life. Fiefdoms formed throughout the day, sometimes along old friendship ties or new alliances born from an exquisite sense of desperation the oncoming night seemed to imbue. My gang was always the same though, a group of mostly able fellas who were known to be too smart and not nearly cruel enough. But on devil's night, our reputation as the goodniks served as an immunity that surprises me even now.

Those nights we'd start on Cherry Hill and work our way back to the trailer park where all our real enemies resided. It was our Mordor. I can't believe we weren't shot to death. The eggheads would start in on us and we'd get our scarves on, or our werewolf masks down and call out our little brothers. They carried trash can lid shields, or full sized plastic toboggans and took fire from the rest of us. And before the eggheads knew the rules we were playing by, we were on them. I was yelling the curses I knew, wailing away with a wooden axe and sword. Dave, ever the pragmatist called out, "keep away from the face, boys!" while swinging low with his quarterstaff.

Our last night, I was fifteen, and there wasn't many of us doing this stuff any more. I was drunk on stolen whiskey we'd gotten out of Dave's father's parlor and getting sick on weed I had bought off a substitute teacher in the drama department. My head was spinning and the evening wore on without any excitement between reprisals. Heading home, we charged a group that looked a touch older than us. But why not, we were literal highwaymen. What did we have to fear?

We ran right into Tommie Maggs and company amidst breaking and entering – one of the less violent crimes he and his throng of dropouts were known for. That's what we had to fear. Most of us packed it in quick and bolted home. I don't know exactly what had gotten into me, but maybe a youth full of social outcast, a testosterone level that spiked between boy and ape-man, those nasty drugs and a snarl of whiskey, but I didn't run when I should have. I broke my sword on Tommie's jaw just as he was reaching for the pistol he was fabled to carry. He went down and Dave and I tore into the forest. My swing served Tom not nearly right enough. His injuries inflicted upon us had been, until then, immeasurable.

We ran for our lives while shots popped in the dark. And damn it if I didn't hear them whistle by us. Dave called out, "You're fucking crazy!" I started laughing and so did he, and we crossed over a cornfield, a creek and into the apple orchard that was just behind his house. We laughed ourselves ragged. We laughed right into a silence that prevails between Dave and I today.

Recently I went to a party on the day before New Year's Eve. In New York, the best places are all rented out on New Year's for private affairs, and the public ones gouge like mad, so all the best parties are on the night before. It was formal, the music was jazz and swing, and there were a number of people whom I suspected would attend. I'd been to twenty or so of these gatherings over the past year and a half. A small group of friends and I were becoming a regular fixture. It was nice outlet from some of the hyper image scenes in the city.

Dressing that evening I inhaled, by chance, a sharp sent, maybe smoke from a neighbor's apartment or some old clove cigarettes in my jacket. I wasn't sure, because as soon as I went sniffing around for it there was no more. But in the peaty smell I'd caught something that reminded me of those Devil's nights. There was a familiar wave of sentimentalism that took hold on me, as I thought back on those crazed evenings and their abrupt and befittingly violent end. I also felt my stomach flip over with an old excitement. It was a brand of anticipation that comes from willful misbehavior. The sense was somewhere in between the exorbitant high of shoplifting and the quiet satisfaction of public urination. It made me smile at myself in the mirror.

My friends all told me I looked chipper when I met them. I didn't really look chipper – I looked a little manic. I lost site of them quick, anyway. The place was packed

and spread out over two levels. On the dance floor you bumped elbows and heels with everyone else, but it gave you an excuse hold onto a girl really close. By chance an acquaintance of mine met me at the bar and we traded buying drinks for one another without speaking much. We leaned side by side, with our backs on the bar looking out. He ordered tequilas, which wasn't my favorite but I drank them down quick. The bartender copped us a third, and we toasted, quietly, "to evenings like this." I wondered if he'd had something like a Devil's night in the past or if he was caught up in a wave of something completely different. Not that it mattered, whether I knew him through and through or not at all.

He gestured to me with his empty shot glass. I followed his motion to where a Brooke Basinger had taken up holding court with her friends. I didn't know if my rapidly inebriating friend knew I'd been chasing this heartbreaker, or if he was just pointing out her backless dress that was threatening fall from two of the most divine shoulders. Even better, I caught her eyeing the cut of my suit. I bolted from the bar and swam through the crowd toward her. Behind me, I heard my friend doing his best to clap his hands together.

When I got to her throng of circled wagons, her friends shot me a few disappointed glances. I asked Brooke to dance anyway and she smiled slowly to get me ready for the let down. Brooke was known not to dance easily. I took hold of her hand and lead her out, looking away so I couldn't see her protest. When I turned around she was still smiling and we started dancing slowly.

"You know I don't dance," she said almost sneering.

“Its okay. We can't really move anyway. Plus, I'm feeling a little drunk.” I wasn't lying. I felt my vision tracking when I looked away from Brooke's giant blue eyes. I held on to her for dear life as the crush of the dance floor went riptide.

“Oh, me too. Vodka all night. You?”

“Tequila.”

“I love tequila!” she said and kissed me running her tongue over my bottom lip.

“But you're going to have a nasty hang over in the morning.”

I got my hand in her hair and kissed her. When I closed my eyes I felt like the room was whirl pooling around me. Brooke welted just a bit and hummed as I was pulling away.

“Yeah, probably,” I said, “but how often do we get these nights?”

Over the blast of the music I heard my friend laughing like a mad man.