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Unnecessary Risk

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Unnecessary Risk

A low-voltage ... AC current through the chest for a fraction of a second may induce [lethal] ventricular fibrillation at currents as low as 60 milli-Amps.

I had a peculiar personal tradition during Christmas time. It lasted at least four years, probably ending in fifth grade.

After our family had trimmed the tree and the banister and the front door, we always had decorations left over. These were extra-old — far older than any of us kids. Just where does that yellowish film come from, anyway?

The paper covering of one electric window candle had grown increasingly yellow over the years. We stopped putting it in the window, and I put it to another use.

Each yuletide season I would steal away with this candle into the living room bay window, where the tree was. Slinking behind the tree, with no one else around, usually after nightfall, I would unscrew the flame-shaped light bulb.

I would plug the candle into the floor socket, which was installed in the 1950's before safer grounding plugs were used. And I would shock myself.

I would hold my breath and slowly lower my index finger into the hole for the bulb, either choosing to stop or being forced to stop (who knows which) when I felt a jolt.

I wouldn't call it painful, because if it had been, I wouldn't have continued doing it. It was a waker-upper, like the caffeine from a whole field of coffee bushes hitting my system at once. I didn't feel an entry point or an exit point per se — just a full-system hit of Ex, kiddie version.

The first time I did it, as I can recall, was an accident. The surge of energy ignited my curiosity, so I immediately did it again.

I don't think I even realized what I was doing. I had, of course, heard of being "electrocuted" in relation to downed power lines, wall sockets and silverware, bathtubs and hair dryers. But all those things seemed too serious set against my little Christmas-time game. Eventually it became a tradition.

By the winter break of sixth grade, I must have put two and two together. One night I took the familiar yellow candle around the back of the Christmas tree. I plugged it in. And I sat there for

a minute, legs crossed on the hardwood floor. Is this unnecessary risk? I thought. How much fun am I actually having? I sat some more, shifting the paper cylinder from hand to hand.

No, I thought. It's over. I stood up and returned the candle to the bottom of the decoration basket. Goodbye, old friend.

Last time I checked, a couple years ago, the candle was still there—out of use but itching for current to course through it again.

Holiday Cheer

I never saw such great happiness on my parents' faces as when they watched my siblings and I tear through giftwrap. The act of unwrapping seemed to have some mystical power I didn't quite understand.

Later I realized our surprise and joy each Christmas kept them going until the next—maybe even kept them together as a couple.

In the true spirit of American consumerism, they ditched the normal budget every December. How much did they spend? I don't know. Other families in our town put us to shame, but my siblings and I always got at least a couple things we had begged for in the previous months. To that end, my mom would keep a little list of what she wanted to get us, usually on the back of some electric bill envelope.

The following incident occurred when I was seven or eight years old, which would put Mom at thirty-six. That day she was running errands in the car, with me in the passenger seat. Her olive skin, just like mine, never faded over the winter months. She had some attractive smile lines—"been there forever," she had told me—but I was beginning to notice a wrinkle here and there besides. Her nose, big and Jewish like mine. Her hazel eyes were deep and kind; curly black locks like a Spaniard's tumbled down her cheeks.

When Mom headed into a pharmacy to pick something up, I fished through her purse. On one side of an envelope, Dayton Power and Light. On another, jackpot. I don't remember if I was trying to be mischievous or just looking for a pen. But I had always, always, at all costs, wanted to discover what I was getting before I got it.

So when I found the list, returning it was not an option. I pocketed the thing, and read it whenever Mom left the car to do