

CHAMPAGNE

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It was the eve of Chester Ames's seventy-seventh birthday and he was hosting a lavish party at his historic, three-story Washington Heights home to celebrate his triumph at beating the odds that had beleaguered his forbears for at least two generations.

Twenty-two years earlier, the numerology-inclined Chester had recognized the pattern of births and deaths in his family. On a whim, on the day that would have been his father's eighty-second birthday he calculated the time between his father's birth and his own, and between his birth and his oldest son's. Only a five-day difference! Thirty years, nine months, and 24 or 29 days.

What about his grandfather? Was he 30 years and 10 months older than Chester's father? He remembered his granddad for only two things, the bandages on his hands and the cherry-flavored Lifesavers he shared with his grandchildren. So he called Aunt Sue, still alive and sharp as a tack. She put Grandpa Harry's age at his death in 1954 at 76,

Champagne

when her brother (Chester's father) was 37. Then it hit him. Chester's father was also 76 at his death. And just as Chester was six when Grandpa Harry died, his second son, Henry, was six when his grandfather expired.

As a successful accountant, Chester had always put his faith in numbers. The morning of his epiphany, he looked himself in the mirror. He saw an overweight, tired, stressed, and prematurely aged 55-year-old man. His latest physical revealed high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and borderline blood glucose levels. He thought of the ailments he needed no doctor to diagnose. Reviewing the numbers again, sitting naked on the edge of his claw-foot bathtub, head drooping, he asked himself, "How the hell will I ever make it to 76?" Then he spotted, in the magazine rack next to the commode, *Prevention*, a sarcastic gift subscription from son number one, Arthur.

Over the next several months, Chester began a renovation far different from the real estate ventures that had helped amass his fortune. To eliminate stress, he liquidated his investment properties, sold his accounting business, and bought the Washington Heights house. The rest of his wealth went into annuities that returned six percent per year, enough to live comfortably till that fateful age he forecast but feared he'd never make. This was the easy part of Chester's plan.

Champagne

Health was the wealth he sought, and over the years he pursued a diversified portfolio, chasing every fad to fitness and longevity. There were the diets: Atkins, the Zone, Mediterranean, vegetarian and vegan. Then there were the vitamins and supplements: C, D, calcium, zinc, glucosamine, B complexes, and beta carotene. Next was the exercise: jogging, Pilates, yoga, aerobics, tai chi, kickboxing and ballroom dancing. Money was no obstacle for acquiring weight machines, elliptical exercisers, a personal trainer, a yoga guru, a nutritional expert, and a spiritual advisor. Pounds came off, his lipid profile inverted, acid no longer refluxed, muscles toned, skin shone, Rogaine returned his hair. And his sexual energy peaked as if he were twenty-five, so much that his wife of 33 years could not satisfy, leaving him when it became clear others did. That was five years into Chester's mid-life rebirth.

On the morning of his seventy-sixth birthday Chester awoke from a startling dream. In his dream he was riding his all-terrain bicycle down Arlington Avenue toward Pittsburgh's South Side riverfront. Although he was a careful rider, he was not one to stop at every red light. "Hey, if nothing is coming..." he'd say. And nothing was coming as he turned sharply right onto East Carson, where out of nowhere a bus hit him. His dream continued with his unembodied self hovering above a stiff, overweight Chester. When the coffin lid slammed shut, Chester snapped up from his slumber and satisfyingly

Champagne

pinched his svelte abdomen. But then a thought began that would haunt him for a year. “How the hell could a healthy bastard like me die this year, but by suicide, accident or homicide?” Too spiritual for the first, he would glance over his shoulder everywhere he went, wondering if one of the dozens of people on the short end of one of his deals was looking to even the score.

At his party 364 days later as midnight neared, Chester smiled and looked out at the many friends he’d accumulated like fitness equipment in the last twenty years: his nutritionist, his tai chi instructor, his tennis partner, the owner of the local vitamin franchise. “Friends, gather round. Take a champagne glass. Rudy, do the honors and pop open the first bottle.”

Sitting opposite Chester, Rudy held the bottle between his thighs. He removed the gold wrapping and wire. He struggled pushing up the plastic cork, which yielded with a loud pop and followed a trajectory straight into Chester’s throat, propelling him backward, pale and gasping for breath. In a panic, Rudy yelled, “Who knows the Heimlich maneuver?”

In the third-floor guest room, the only two guests who knew the Heimlich, Chester’s personal trainer and his yoga instructor, screwed like there’d be no tomorrow.