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Unnecessary risk By Brandon Iam Smith

“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 Christmastime. 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 Christmastime 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.

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