

650,000 Hours

In no time at all the year was going to end and the new one was about to begin. Human inventions for selling calendars. After all, we're the ones who've arbitrarily decided when the years, months and even hours start. We shape the world in our own measure, and that soothes us. Under the apparent chaos, maybe there really is order in the universe. However, it certainly won't be our order.

I was putting a mini-bottle of champagne and a dozen grapes on the table – one for each stroke of midnight, as is the custom in this country – and thinking about hours. I'd read somewhere that the battery of a human life runs down after 650,000 hours.

Considering the medical history of the males in my family, I calculated that my best life expectancy in terms of hours was lower than the average: 600,000 at most. At thirty-seven, I could very well be halfway through. The question was, how many thousands of hours had I wasted so far?

Until just before midnight on that 31st of December, my life hadn't exactly been an adventure.

The only member of my family was one sister I rarely saw. My existence alternated between the Department of German Studies and Linguistics, where I am an assistant lecturer, and my dreary flat.

Outside my literature classes, I had very little contact with other people. In my spare time, when I wasn't preparing for classes and correcting exams, I did the typical things a boring bachelor does: read and reread books, listen to classical music, watch the news and so on. It was a routine in which the biggest thrill was the odd trip to the supermarket.

Sometimes, I gave myself a treat at weekends and went to the Verdi cinema complex to see a foreign film. I came out as lonely as I went in, but at least it was something to do at the end of the day. Then, tucked up in bed, I read the information sheet the Verdi supplied about the film, listing the credits, quoting praise from the critics (never anything negative) and offering interviews with the director or actors.

None of this ever changed my opinion of the film. Then I switched off the light.

That was when a strange sensation took over, the idea that there was no guarantee I was going to wake up the next morning. Worse, I'd get even more anxious when I started calculating how many days or even weeks would go by before somebody realized I'd died.

I'd been brooding about this ever since I read in some newspaper that a Japanese man had been found in his flat three years after his death. Everything suggested that no one had missed him.

Anyway, going back to the grapes... While I was thinking about wasted hours, I counted out the twelve grapes and set them out on a plate, next to which I'd placed the champagne glass and the mini-bottle. I've never been much of a drinker.

I opened the bottle six minutes before the chiming was due to start. I didn't want the New Year to catch me unawares. Then I turned on the TV and tuned into one of those programmes that link up with some famous clock or another. I think the festivities were in Puerta del Sol in Madrid. Behind the pair of beautiful, glamorous programme hosts, an excited crowd was popping champagne corks. Some people were singing or jumping, waving their arms in the air in the hope that the cameras would capture them.

When people are lonely, they amuse themselves in very strange ways.

Midnight finally came, and I observed the ritual by putting one grape into my mouth with each chime. As I took a mouthful of cava and tried to wash down the grapes that were clogging up my throat, I couldn't help feeling ridiculous about having fallen into the trap of tradition. Who said I had to take part in that routine?

I decided it was a waste of time, so I wiped my mouth with a napkin and turned off the TV.

I could hear outbursts of laughter and fireworks coming up from the street as I undressed and got ready for bed.

How childish they are. I switched off the light on yet another day.

I had trouble getting to sleep that night. I usually sleep with earplugs and mask, so it wasn't because of the noise outside, which was considerable, since I live between two squares in the bustling neighbourhood of Gràcia.

For the first time in that festive season I felt lonely and vulnerable. I wanted the whole Christmas farce to end – and the sooner the better. I had five quiet days ahead, so to speak. Then, on 6th January, the Epiphany, the last day of holiday, I was going to have lunch with my sister and her husband, who's been depressed ever since I've known him. They don't have children.

It'll be a nightmare. Thank Heavens everything will be back to normal on 7th January.

Comforted by this, I could feel my eyelids closing. But would they open again?

I'm already in the New Year. But there's nothing new about it. That was my last thought.

I went to sleep, not knowing how wrong I was.