

The Recall Year

by Emily Schultz

It was the year that my fat friends got thin and my thin friends got fat, my parents stopped giving me money when I visited, and my girlfriend Erika ceased to kiss me on the mouth in the mornings. It was the year an exploding gun factory killed 30, an exploding pipeline killed 100, and an exploding star halfway across the universe became the farthest known object ever visible to the naked eye. Between headlines of explosions, there was also the collapse of the economy. It was the year the government would need to recall—issue a retraction on absolutely everything. I remember where I was when I heard the news. I remember little else, but that I do recollect, so clearly. Across my computer screen: *FDA demands recall for 2008 — all 365 days.*

After clicking on the caption and reading the item, I glanced around the office. No one else seemed in shock. I was about to lean into my neighbour's cubicle, when my line rang. It was Erika. She didn't even identify herself, just blurted:

"Have you seen it? It's crazy!"

"Are you sure it's real?" I felt like the screen was flickering before my eyes. I rescanned the article. "I thought maybe it was a scam story, the sources are kind of vague, aren't they?"

"What do you mean?" she hissed, "It's *Associated Press*." Then she said, "Wait, I've got it here, on the CNN webpage too. 'Entire Year Gets the Boot.' ...BBC: 'UK Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) involved in recall.'" There was a pause, the frenetic clicks of typing as she searched online, then she said, "And the CBC: 'Health Canada supports full-year recall.'" How do you recall *an entire year*? What does this mean, James?" With each news bit, her voice pitched higher and I could hear her hysteria, knew she was tearing up. My palms turned into water and I set my paper carryout coffee cup on the desk before it could slip from my grasp. I felt my chin, as if gripping it would clear my mind. I numbly rubbed at the spot I'd missed shaving.

"No one in the office has said anything yet," I told her, almost in a whisper, although I wasn't sure why I was afraid to be overheard talking about it. "I don't think they know."

Erika had turned on the radio; I could hear it in the background, and then she said simply, "I'll call you back," and the light on the phone system went out, line dead.

Processed frozen beef, French blue cheese, lunchmeat of all varieties. Baby formula, rice cereal, several organic chocolates, bagged salads, peanut butter. Specific car models with cruise control. Countertop water dispensers. Batteries and power adapters. Bicycles. Candle tea lights that posed a burn hazard. Treadmills that accelerated unexpectedly. Abdominal exercisers posing laceration danger. Poison pet food. Flammable tents, and mattresses (even sleep was not safe). Razors too dull to shave.

I stroked my chin again, feeling victim.

Cuddly stuffed animals whose plastic doll faces left risk of lead poisoning as they were kissed and mauled by children. Toxic silly string, Halloween costumes, Casper the Friendly Ghost figurines, children's jewelry. Infant cold and cough medications, and a slurry of prescription drugs so thick with syllables it made a hammering begin in the space behind my ears, and I found myself reaching inside the desk drawer for an Advil.

It had been a long time coming. Some of the recall products had simply not been on our radar. Erika and I were city-dwellers who didn't drive, did not have children, were not that adept with power tools, and unlike our friends, apparently, were not that fanatical about exercise. Even some of the food items had missed us—we did a lot of takeout.

By this time, a cluster of my co-workers had gathered in front of our boss's office. Tentatively, I joined them. A murmur hung, stunned, as if above us. Our words didn't seem our own.

"I don't understand," I added to this cloud.

"A bad year all 'round."

"I think—" someone said with a kind of saved-up authority, "I *think* it means that everything produced last year will have to be

returned. That they believe the majority of 2008 products were so bungled they've infected all around them. The natural extension is that our intellectual properties have also been affected."

"What does that even mean?"

"Shredding!" someone else called.

"They can't possibly expect that," I put in.

"How do you extend a recall that far?"

"Six countries are already onboard and the United Nations is being consulted."

"Where did you see that?"

"YouTube."

"Does anyone have a computer where the speakers actually work?"

Just then, our leader emerged, his round gray face almost jovial. Everyone shut up and looked at him. He made the expression of a sad clown, swiped a thick fist at a nonexistent teardrop. "Well, what can we do?" he bellowed. "Go home! We'll sort it out tomorrow."

We assaulted him with a burst of simultaneous questions. Some of the women were laugh-crying, and Ed who had the desk across from mine was rolling and unrolling his shirtsleeves, something he also did during downsize rumour days. One sleeve was down, and the other up, his crablike fingers scrambling over the cotton.

Our boss held up his hands. "We have to wait until they issue more information. Who knows what a recall of this size entails, whether they'll change their minds. There's no point in doing any more work. It would only cost us, be more to *undo*—if that's where this is indeed headed. Seriously," he said and he waved his hands like he was shooing pigeons, "off you go." It was just like him to be so cavalier.

The phone rang. I ran back to my desk, made a grab for the receiver, and knocked over my coffee. As the liquid quickly spread across my desk surface, I sopped up the brown mess with my white sleeve before I realized it probably didn't matter. The company

had bought the keyboard and mouse in 2008. I stared at my ruined sleeve; I'd bought the shirt in 2008 too. I grabbed the receiver. It was Erika. "Dean and Adam are coming over," she informed me. "They said they didn't want to go through this alone, that if we're going to lose a whole year of our lives we should all be together. Come home."

I nodded, dumbstruck.

We went to our local because we each needed a drink and because there was a large-screen TV to keep up to date on what was happening with the recall. Dean and Adam were strangely in bright moods, talking about fate, saying that maybe it was for the best; maybe it would prevent the awful direction things had been heading. Prop 8 would be recalled: cause for immense celebration. Then again, so would Sean Penn's Hollywood portrayal of Harvey Milk.

It was past noon when we got there, but the bar wasn't serving. "I'm sorry," the server squeaked. "We could be shut down, because of the recall."

"Don't you have anything that's from today?" Erika pressed. She could be insistent and logical at the same time.

"Oh!" the server exclaimed. "We get a keg drop-off this afternoon." She dashed into the kitchen to check the time it usually arrived, and then we saw her making the rounds to the other tables, placating them with the knowledge that beer would, at some point, be available.

In the meantime, we made lists—as we were being instructed to do by our local news station—of things we had said and done last year. Ideas we'd had, projects we'd begun, household items and articles of clothing we could remember purchasing. All of these things would need to be returned, erased, or destroyed. We worked through month by month, room by room.

"Fug 'n snug," I reminded Erika. "You coined the term 'fug 'n snug' sometime last spring."

"No, I didn't." It was clearly something she wanted to hang onto in spite of warnings issued around the globe.

"What's a 'fug 'n snug'?" Adam asked.

Erika shot me a look.

"It's dirty," I muttered.

Erika glared harder.

"You heterosexuals," Adam dismissed.

"Don't worry about it," Dean comforted Erika, patting the back of her hand.

Just then, a driver in a beer-logo'ed jacket arrived and the whole room stood up cheering. Unfortunately, he was pushing an empty dolly. He explained to the staff that the beer he would have brought had still been brewed over the past few months—he was sorry, but it would be a dry establishment for a while. Worse, he took the existent kegs from behind the counter away. He was lucky to get out alive.

Just as the chaos was dying down Erika burst: "I thought you *liked* fug 'n snug!"

I had a lot of things on my list I didn't want to give up either: a method I'd found for bringing out the flavour in the spaghetti sauce, recent additions to my porn collection, and a new position I liked to fall asleep in. But I supposed if those things were contaminated, who knew what damage I'd been doing to myself?

We had a long list of things we had acquired that would have to be gathered together and deposited at one of the Designated Areas, things one didn't even think about buying at the time, like elastic bands and thumb tacks, extension cords, cleansers, socks.

"We're so much richer than we thought," our friend Adam said cheerfully as we rolled up our papers and prepared to leave the morose bar where last year's hits were being struck from the juke box with a black marker.

"Compensation," I said, as we stood. I jabbed my finger into the table. "How are we going to be compensated for all of this? And who's going to pay?"

Erika just stared at me stonily. "People are dying," she said. "There were 941 recalls in 2006, almost 700 in 2007, and now this. That's all you can think about?"

It was true: a long list of symptoms had been released and we were supposed to monitor one another. All of the afflictions they pointed toward seemed to end in "osis." However, it was also true that hundreds of billions of dollars had been spent around the world, and I knew that when the companies were affected the people who worked there would also be affected, that businesses and countries and even little neighbourhoods like ours were going to fall, but I kept my mouth shut about that.

Later that night, Erika said she needed some air. There wasn't much to do. Our laptop, which we used to watch DVDs in bed and to play music, though used, had been a new addition to our household in, yes, the recall year. Erika had her stationary computer, on which she checked the news every twenty minutes, but eventually it just got to be too much. At a loss, she suggested we walk our cat around the garden. She had a small dollar-store leash for Twinkle but insisted it was *not* from the recall period.

Ever since Twinkle had joined our household, on occasion Erika would take him outside to sniff around and paw about the garden, get some sunshine lying on the edge of the sidewalk, or see him tentatively pad around in the snow. There were only a few feet that were "ours" outside the building, but Erika insisted that Twinkle should get to make use of them too. When we had first adopted Twinkle from the Humane Society, she had been afraid to let him roam, that he might forget this was his home, so she'd begun this futile task of cat-walking. A black-and-white ten-year-old male, Twinkle always looked a bit stunned. He had a facemask like the *Phantom of the Opera*. That was part of his odd appearance, but we still weren't convinced there wasn't actually something wrong with him.

As he was roving at the end of the red woven lead, Erika suddenly started crying. "I can't believe I forgot," she said. "My mother—my mother died in January last year."

"Oh god," I said, putting my hand on her elbow. "I forgot too. It probably had to do with the recall. Maybe what made her ill...."

Erika took deep breaths, throat thick with saliva. The sun was starting to set, and people were walking by looking at us.

"Can't they just recall *her death*...? Huh, can't they?" Erika sobbed.

I told her I didn't think it worked that way. Then she remembered she had bought new shoes for the funeral. She told me to go inside and write it on the list before either of us got ill. "Now!" she gestured, and Twinkle's leash, which was draped loosely around Erika's wrist, slipped from her hand as the cat lurched across the pavement. A man was going by, and Twinkle seemed bent on following. He dodged away as Erika cried, "Twinkle! Twinkle!"

Twinkle ran with a spryness we'd never seen from him. He hopped, side-stepped, and skittered around the stranger, who kept walking although it was obvious Erika was trying to catch the cat at his heels. She ran after them, but Twinkle dove through the hedge only to appear a few feet ahead of the man again. "My cat!" Erika yelled, pointing. The stranger didn't glance back. Twinkle trailed the red dollar-store leash in and out of bushes, and Erika flip-flopped after the two of them in the large rubber clogs she'd slipped on to go just outside our place. She pursued them around the corner, the snow no doubt seeping in under her socked heels.

I took the opportunity to light an on-the-sly cigarette. The evening had fallen, and sat particularly damp and weighty on us. When I'd phoned my parents earlier, my dad had grumbled with absolute apathy, "Well, that's life. When you get older, you'll see, that's just what happens." Like it was the most ordinary thing to scratch an entire year of your life away. I watched my breath full of smoke meshing with the quickly darkening sky.

When Erika came back, she was catless and foul. "Why didn't you help me?" she implored.

"We got Twinkle in the recall year. I thought of it before. I just—I didn't want to say anything in front of Adam and Dean. But, you know, maybe it was meant to be."

She eyed the cigarette.

"Should you really be smoking that? I mean, you don't know where that came from... The tobacco leaves..."

If I knew Erika, she was still peeved about fug 'n snug. Plus the cat. And now my bad habit. "I suppose you're also going to tell me that kissing me is like kissing an ashtray?" I challenged, and took another puff.

"No, it's like kissing the trash can that twenty ashtrays got emptied into."

"Take it back," I begged, dropping the cigarette into the snow as if it had burned me.

"I can't." She stared off in the direction that Twinkle had gone. "I said it *this year*."

Erika did not take the loss lightly. She made posters with Twinkle's picture on them and pasted them up on telephone poles all over the neighbourhood. She was furious with me when I wouldn't help her post them.

"Maybe that man was sent by the government to take Twinkle back," Erika spat. "If you don't fight the system, you're part of it."

The Recall Year—as the media soon dubbed it—was hard on Erika, but it was hardest on small businesses. Somehow the large ones got off the hook. "How can I assure you of this?" the corner store clerk said a dozen times when I asked him if his product was new and not part of the recall. The store had newspapers up in its windows the same week Erika moved out.

It's funny, but I don't remember much of the life we lived together. They couldn't take everything back, but they did enough of

a job, I guess. In the end there were negotiations, and the words “mass compensation,” a lawsuit that wallpapered the headlines but didn't really seem to go anywhere. After work, I would walk home with very carefully selected grocery items, which I would scrub. On several poles there were still posters for Twinkle, ghosts, growing fainter and fainter, ragged and washed-out white, hanging in the air of a new year.

