The Luck of The Draw

Jeff Hoover takes a dip in the Death Pool

September 1, 2001 By Jeff Hoover

It’s 1995. One of your best friends has just entered the hospital for the last time. You think you’re next, and you want someone -- anyone -- to come along for the ride, or even beat you to it, just for the grim satisfaction. You don’t have it in you to actually kill someone, of course, so you settle for the next best thing: You place a bet on who will die in 1996.

A colleague at work has just told you, in horrified and disapproving tones, of an acquaintance’s participation in a “dead pool” -- like all those office pools that pop up during the college basketball playoffs and at Oscar time. Twenty people have already signed up, handing over $5 and a list of 10 “generally known” people (including one who “must be under 40”) who they think will kick it during the next calendar year. You jump in with glee, carefully considering the candidates: Which actor has cancer? Which singer is pushing 80 and not looking so hot? Which president is most at risk to be assassinated? You send in your picks, receive a list of everyone else’s, and sit back and wait.

The first year two of your 10 picks don’t make it, but at least you’re still around. You feel a little bit guilty, as though your bad HIV karma has somehow played a role in their demise. Then you start to consider the ways society fetishizes death -- an inevitability -- to fearsome extremes, and that if *you’re* somehow responsible, then you’re taking the entire mortician profession down with you. Better, you feel more connected to the greater world, as though your eventual death is a grand process, not just some frustrating solo dive.

You join up the next year, and the next, and the next, each time selecting a mixed bunch of thugs who probably deserve to die (Zairean strongman Mobuto Sese Seke, Croatian ethnic cleanser Franjo Tudjman) and cultural icons whose public health battles have already rendered them with one foot out the door (Frank Sinatra, Joe DiMaggio). One year you even win, pocketing $240. That night you take five friends out to dinner, where you talk and laugh and argue and plan. You live.

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