The Thirteenth Day of Christmas

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This was one year we were glad when Christmas Day was over.

It had been a grim Christmas Eve and I had stayed awake as long as I could, half listening for bombs. And Mom and I stayed up until midnight on Christmas Day, too. Then Dad called and said, “Okay, it’s over. Nothing’s happened. I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

Mom and I danced around as if Santa Claus had just come and then, after about an hour, Dad came home and I went to bed and slept fine.

You see, it’s special in our house. Dad’s a detective on the force and these days, with terrorists and bombings, it can get pretty hairy. So, when on December twentieth, warnings reached headquarters that there would be a Christmas Day bombing at the Soviet offices in the United Nations, it had to be taken seriously.

The entire force was put on the alert and the FBI came in, too. The Soviets had their own security, I guess, but none of it satisfied Dad.

The day before Christmas was the worst. “If someone is crazy enough to want to plant a bomb and if he’s not too worried about getting caught afterward, he’s likely to be able to do it no matter what precautions we take.” Dad’s voice had a grimness we rarely heard.

“I suppose there’s no way of knowing who it is,” Mom said.

Dad shook his head. “Letters from newspapers pasted on paper; no fingerprints, only smudges. Common stuff we can’t trace and a threat that it would be the only warning we’d get. What can we do?”

“Well, it must be someone who doesn’t like the Russians, I guess,” Mom said.

Dad said, “That doesn’t narrow it much. Of course, the Soviets say it’s a Zionist threat, and we’ve got to keep an eye on the Jewish Defense League.”

“Gee, Dad,” I said. “That doesn’t make much sense. The Jewish people wouldn’t pick Christmas to do it, would they? It doesn’t mean anything to them; and it doesn’t mean anything to the Soviet Union, either. They’re officially atheistic.”

“You can’t reason that out to the Russians,” Dad said. “Now, why don’t you turn in, because tomorrow may be a bad day all round, Christmas Day or not.”

Then he left. He was out all Christmas Day, and it was pretty rotten. We didn’t even open any presents; just sat listening to the radio, which was tuned to the news station.

Then at midnight when Dad called and nothing had happened, we could breathe again, but I still forgot to open my presents.

That didn’t come till the morning of the twenty-sixth. We made that day Christmas. Dad had a day off and Mom roasted the turkey a day late. It wasn’t till after dinner that we talked about it at all.

Mom said, “I suppose the person, whoever it was, couldn’t find any way of planting the bomb once the Department drew the security strings tight.”

Dad smiled, as if he appreciated Mom’s loyalty. “I don’t think you can make security that tight,” he said, “but what’s the difference? There was no bomb. Maybe it was a bluff. After all, it did disrupt the city a bit and it gave the Soviet people at the United Nations some sleepless nights, I’ll bet. That might have been almost as good for the bomber as letting the bomb go off.”

“If he couldn’t do it on Christmas,” I said, “maybe he’ll do it another time. Maybe he just said Christmas to get everyone keyed up and then, after they relax, he’ll…”

Dad gave me one of his little pushes on the side of my head. “You’re a cheerful one, Larry. No, I don’t think so. Real bombers value the sense of power. When they say something is going up at a certain time, it’s got to be that time or it’s no fun for them.”

I was still suspicious, but the days passed and there was no bombing and the Department gradually went back to normal. The FBI left and even the Soviet people seemed to forget about it, according to Dad.

On January second, the Christmas-New Year vacation was over and I went back to school. We started rehearsing our Christmas pageant. We made an elaborate show out of the song “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” which doesn’t have any religion to it—just presents.

There were twelve of us kids, each one singing a particular line every time it came up and then coming in all together on the “partridge in a pear tree.” I was number five, singing “five gold rings” because I was still a boy soprano and I could hit that high note pretty nicely, if I do say so myself.

Some kids didn’t know why Christmas had twelve days, but I explained that if we count Christmas Day as one, the twelfth day after it is January sixth, when the Three Wise Men arrived with gifts for the Christ child. Naturally, it was on January sixth that we put on the show in the auditorium, with as many parents there as wanted to come.

Dad got a few hours off and was sitting in the audience with Mom. I could see him getting set to hear his son’s high note for the last time because next year my voice changes or I’ll know the reason why.

Did you ever get an idea in the middle of a stage show and have to continue, no matter what?

We were only on the second day with its “two turtledoves” when I thought, “Oh my, it’s the thirteenth day of Christmas.” The whole world was shaking around me and I couldn’t do a thing but stay on the stage and sing about “five gold rings.”

I didn’t think they’d ever get to those stupid “twelve drummers drumming.” It was like having itching powder on instead of underwear. I couldn’t stand still. Then, when the last note was out, while they were still applauding, I broke away, went jumping down the steps from the platform and up the aisle, calling, “Dad!”

He looked startled, but I grabbed him, and I think I was babbling so fast he could hardly understand.

I said, “Dad, Christmas isn’t the same day everywhere. It could be one of the Soviet’s own people. They’re officially atheist, but maybe one of them is religious and he wants to place the bomb for that reason. Only he would be a member of the Russian Orthodox Church. They don’t go by our calendar.”

“What?” said Dad, looking as if he didn’t understand a word I was saying.

“It’s so, Dad. I read about it. The Russian Orthodox Church is still on the Julian Calendar, which the West gave up for the Gregorian Calendar centuries ago. The Julian Calendar is thirteen days behind ours. The Orthodox Christmas is on their December twenty-fifth, which is our January seventh. It’s tomorrow.”

He didn’t believe me, just like that. He looked it up in the almanac; then he called up someone in the Department who was Russian Orthodox.

He was able to get the Department moving again. They talked to the Soviets, and once the Soviets stopped talking about Zionists and looked at themselves, they got the man. I don’t know what they did with him, but there was no bombing on the thirteenth day of Christmas, either.

The Department wanted to give me a new bicycle for Christmas after that, but I turned it down. I was just doing my duty.