The Year of the Good Seed

Roger Zelazny

It was the Year of the Good Seed.

When Captain Planter came down out of the gleam-ridden night sky in his needle of power, red thread of fires hanging from its back, his aide and physicist were at his side. Machineries were at his hand, histories in his head and he came down into the Year of the Good Seed.

It was a time of celebration, of rejoicing. It was a time for the sowing of peace, happiness and hope.

It was a time of worship.

Captain Planter stood upon a hillside beneath the sky of morning and regarded the city.

Staring down across the frostgripped grasses, mists waving above them, he looked upon the spires and blocks and domes of the city, dappled by the yellow sunrise, threaded with the darker curves and lines of shadowed streets. He saw, though, only a part of it from that high vantage, because it was one of the larger cities of the world. From above, however, coming down through the night, it had looked like a two-thousand-year birthday cake for civilization, which perhaps it was, with its candles all a-flicker.

“They must have spotted us,” said Condem, his aide. “Be here soon.”

“Yes,” said the captain.

“Human, they’ll be,” said Condem, “if Anthro’s right.”

“It would seem so,” said Planter, lowering his glasses. “Looks enough like an Earth city⁠—”

“Could they be the cause of it, I wonder?”

“Possibly,” said the captain.

“Strange.”

“Perhaps.”

Beneath the sky of afternoon, the yellow sun high in the springing of the year, they met with the people of the city and established communications. They met with the people of its government and with the people of the big government of which its government was a part. They met with the people of its religion, of which the big government was a part. They were all people-people⁠—that is to say, of human appearance.

There was an air of festivity about them as they moved through the senates and the temples, the mansions and the military bases, the conferences and the broadcasting rooms, down the streets and up the stairs, through the laboratories, back to the temples.

This was because it was the Year of the Good Seed.

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The captain and his aides had to answer many questions before they could ask any of their own.

Before they could answer all the many questions they were asked the dusk-fires began.

This was upon the seventh day and Yanying, the physicist, looked into the sunset with eyes that always squinted and said. “It has begun.”

Planter moved to the window of the suite they had been given⁠—within the temple, within the city.

He stared upon an aurora borealis which pierced the eye and shattered the mind with its brilliance, its colors.

“My God,” he said.

“The whole sky’s a cockeyed rainbow,” said Condem, moving to his side.

“The explosions are closer than we thought,” said Yanying, “if the Allen Belt can trap that much. It must be that they are originating from here⁠—from the planet, not the sun.”

“Well, why then? Testing? That doesn’t seem to be the answer, because the thing follows a definite cycle. This is right on time.”

“Natural phenomena,” said the physicist, “are not the only happenings that follow definite cycles.”

“A moratorium followed by a holocaust, followed by another moratorium, followed by⁠—It doesn’t make sense.”

“They might look like us,” said Condem, “but that doesn’t mean what’s inside’s the same. For a while we did speculate that this thing might be a local Armageddon. But there’s nothing wrong here. No signs of nuclear war, or the rebuilding that follows after. Nothing. There’s been nothing like that at all, from everything they’ve said, from everything we’ve seen.”

“From all that’s been shown us,” corrected Planter. “I wonder⁠—”

“What?” asked Yanying.

“Is someone, something, dying somewhere?”

“Something is always dying somewhere,” said Yanying. “The question is one of quantity and quality⁠—and where.”

“They might look like us⁠—” said Condem.

A knock came upon their door.

The captain opened it to admit Laren, high priest of the center temple of the city.

Laren was several inches shorter and several pounds heavier than any of them. His thinning hair was brushed to cover over a spreading bald spot. Neatly tailored tweed robes covered the rest of him, shoulder to knee and a smile which might have betokened senility or orgasm opened his wide face.

“Sirs,” he said, “it has begun. I came to ask whether you would join us in the worship of the Creator of the universe. I see, however, that you already have.”

“Worship?” asked Planter.

“Your friends look upon the first outward signs of the season within the heavens.”

“The lights? The aurora? You’re doing that?”

“Of course,” said Laren, “to worship Him as He is, with a sacrifice of pure power upon the altar of the sky.”

“Those are nuclear explosions you’re setting off⁠—in outer space⁠—aren’t they?”

“Yes. For has He not always, does He not now and will He not forever so manifest Himself within the eternal cycle of the sun? Is He not the force that separates atom from atom, so that the power is freed to flow like rivers of benediction through the universe of His glory?”

“I suppose so,” said Planter. “I never thought of it quite that way before. It is the reason we are here, however.”

“To behold our way of worship?”

“Well, yes. Actually⁠—now that I think of it⁠—yes. Your sacrifices of pure power upon the altar of the sky have been detected beyond your solar system. They come at such regular intervals⁠—about half a generation apart⁠—that at first it was guessed that something unique was happening to your sun. It is rather strange to discover they are⁠—prayers.”

“What else could they be?” asked Laren.

“If not disturbances within your sun, then perhaps signs of war upon your planet.”

“War? Yes, we have war. And the unrest which follows and precedes war. More of this than actual war. This is always with us. You see, there is another power, upon the other continent… But I do not see how the celebration of the Year of the Good Seed could be mistaken for such.”

“Year of the Good Seed?” asked Yinyang. “What is that?”

“It is the year for the planting of new, good things⁠—things that will take root and grow through the cycle of years that is to follow. By the Year of a Thousand Flowers this time’s promise will be fulfilled.”

“I begin to understand,” said Yinyang, turning to the Captain.

“It sounds similar to the cycle of years celebrated in many Asian countries. There is the Year of the Rat, the Year of the Ox, the Year of the Tiger, the Year of the Hare,” he said, “then those of the Dragon, the Serpent, the Horse, the Goat, the Monkey, the Rooster, the Dog and the Pig. The procession is based on the old astrology⁠—and every astrological system is, ultimately, the representation of a solar myth. Theirs seems to be derived from an agricultural phase of their society⁠—the effect of the sun upon growing things. The symbolism has been maintained by their religion and it would seem that they, too, celebrate the times by fireworks displays. They use the greatest explosive force at their command.”

“It is just as you have said,” Laren agreed.

“That’s all they use it for?” said Planter.

“I would not be surprised if that were the case. After all, the Chinese discovered gunpowder and the only thing they used it for was firecrackers. It took a European mind to put it to such a useful end as blowing up one’s fellows.”

“Excuse me⁠—but I do not follow the conversation,” said Laren. “If this thing ‘gunpowder’ was like prayers and it was also used to destroy other men, does this mean…? I do not understand!”

“It is just as well,” said Yinyang.

“It is probably true, though,” Laren continued, “that if we were to pray directly above a city of the enemy it would cease to exist. But this would be blasphemous. No one would do such a thing.”

“Of course not,” said Planter.

Laren turned toward the window and stared at the prayer-streaked sky.

Then, after a time: “Have such things ever been committed?”

“Perhaps,” said Planter. “Long ago and in some far place.”

“The will of the Creator is that the just triumph,” Laren said. “If the ones who may have done this thing were the righteous, such as ourselves, then it may not have been blasphemy but a furtherance of His will.”

“The doings of ignorant men in other places need not concern you,” said Yinyang.

“That is true,” he replied.

“So let it be forgotten,” said Planter.

“Yes, of course.”

Together they watched the opening of the Year of the Good Seed.

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It was not much later, while still moving at a −C velocity, that rivers of light flowed about Captain Planter’s vessel. When Condem informed him that the nature of the detonations was unique for the area in that the light appeared to have been filtered through an atmosphere on this occasion, the Captain duly entered the observation in his log.

Notes

This is one of two collaborations with Dannie Plachta, to whom Lord of Light was dedicated.

Zelazny and Plachta cheekily named the captain Planter and his aide Condem (condemn), and they reversed the physicist’s name from Yanying to Yinyang midway through this moralistic tale. Yinyang is the Chinese philosophy of two opposing but complementary creative forces, represented by yin (feminine and negative) and yang (masculine and positive). The Van Allen Belt is a radiation belt surrounding the Earth; it produces polar auroras where radiation strikes it. In the story’s original appearance the phrase “Allen Bottle” was used instead of “Allen Belt” and is probably a copyeditor’s error.