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The Night After Christmas

By Mary Giles

Well, it's really still Christmas. But it's the night at the end of today's big holiday. Under a crescent moon and star I walk to church and sit alone, gathering my thoughts.

Did Sasha and Seriozha have a good Christmas? For months they were so happy, looking forward to the birthday of Prophet Issah al-Messiah, peace be upon him! They were enthralled by commercials, TV movies, fake snow, the landlady's candy canes left at their door ("Tiny barber poles? A barber came to see us?"), Santas ringing bells, inflatable lawn cartoons, dogs in fuzzy antlers, donation barrels full of tuna cans, the Ukrainian Bell Carol playing at the Safeway store, grown-ups outside singing "Deck the Halls" ("How many of those la-las everybody knows to count?" Seriozha asked me.).

At least we got our 30-minute ride on the commuter ferry ("Here we are, two Leonardos on Titanic," they said happily. "Let's have a boatjacking and sail it all the way home, give free rides for all the people!"). We shopped at the church bed-and-supper shelter thrift shop, where they wound up the musical angels and jack-in-the-boxes, and tried the pogo sticks and Star War sabers. We took a Christmas Eve Eve stroll at a cemetery for famous Americans, although I got us so lost that when we finally arrived it was dark with a torrential sleet storm, so we had to slog back to the bus stop and look at those historic graves on internet photos instead, shivering in dry clothes with cups of tea. That night, with the excuse that my feet had gotten soaked, I asked each of them separately for exactly one sock, to take to my room and fill with treats. Seriozha rushed to his closet and offered me my choice of socks, suspecting nothing. But canny Sasha surrendered his sock with an innocent smile: "Auntie, you started walking on the one foot? Or maybe Papa Noel coming through the electric vent in his weeickle-for-deer, bringing me a Barbie."

Last night on Christmas Eve in our little communal kitchen, we exchanged gifts. I gave Sasha my favorite blue necklace as a present for his future bride, whenever his parents arrange his wedding some day. To Seriozha for his young wife I gave a ring with a girl's engraved profile, a Victorian cameo in our family for four generations. (Much later I learned

in dismay that observant Muslims don't use jewelry or furnishings with faces or animals. Seriozha's wife won't be able to wear Great-Grandma's cameo after all. All I can hope is that somehow she'll see in the gift not only jarring ignorance but genuine goodwill.) American writer O. Henry might have liked one Gift of the Magi twist: their present to me was a box to hold the jewelry that I'd just given away. "Listen," Seriozha said. He wound a tiny key -- and the box played a very familiar tune.

The little box will stay behind when they leave here for good in two months, back to a country with a lot of guns but no postal service and very little electricity for sending email. But last night they weren't thinking about farewells, or world politics, or the people in their country who would hate me, or the people in my country who would hate them. They were just happy finding this gift, and they wanted me to be happy too. They'd never seen "Romeo and Juliet." They wouldn't know the lyrics to the movie song:

"A time for us, some day there'll be / When chains are torn by courage born of a love that's free

A time when dreams so long denied can flourish / As we unveil the love we now must hide.

A time for us, at last to see / A life worthwhile for you and me

And with our love, through tears and thorns / We will endure as we pass sure through every storm

A time for us, some day there'll be:

A new world! A world of shining hope for you and me."

They beamed with anticipation, watching for my reaction of delight. Then the two of them exchanged stricken glances, distraught at their terrible mistake, whatever in the world that might be.

"What did we do wrong?" Seriozha asked, dismayed. "We thought it's a surprise!"

"Auntie, look here." Sasha rushed to comfort me. "Label says it's music from your popular movie. If it's a too-bad song, why they put it in the box??"

I got a grip, uncovered my eyes, caught my breath, and insisted that no, they did nothing wrong, they are fine men and it's a fine song and a grand present. But my valiant effort left them baffled and concerned. Then as luck would have it, they had to rush off and change from their comfy traditional shalwar kamiz to Western suits and ties, and head out to a festive faculty reception for visiting scholars, out into the pouring

rain.

Today they spent their first and last Christmas packing, because tomorrow their hosting graduate school is transferring them to nicer housing an hour away. A professional crew with machinery and chemicals will clean out their units; but they still scrubbed the rooms before tying their belongings in neat bundles with string bows. Then they washed up and said their prayers and rested before starting dinner. Leaving for church I knocked at Sasha's room and found them sitting tired on the floor with their tea, gazing in silence at the "Family Feud Christmas Special" on TV. The feuding family was asking their Mom the grand prize question, "When I die, I expect to see _____." On the screen, the correct flashing answer was JESUS CHRIST. Mom guessed, "Um... a lotta blood?"

The church is frankincense air and echoes from two days of prayer and song, including Midnight Mass until 2:00 a.m. How do these Dominicans stay on their feet? Now they're standing against a bank of red poinsettias, surrounded by people plying them with greetings, thanks, handshakes, urgent requests for prayers and blessings and home visits. Finally people leave. The priests in their white robes and hoods and scapulars drift through the darkness; their long rosary beads tick softly in the silence. They check the doors, blow out candles, stop at the tabernacle for private prayers. The very youngest priest, the music director, kneels at the manger scene.

I pray for my beautiful little household, just as they pray for me five times a day.

"Was it a nice holiday for them?" I ask Jesus. "Can they look back on this as a happy day in their lives? I wish you could let me know, give me some little sign from you."

Right away, to my surprise, the very youngest priest appears at my shoulder. Father's kind face is luminous with indwelling joy. He unwraps some white linen and holds it close to me with both arms. It's the baby Jesus; he's carried it from the manger to me. "Look," he whispers. "See! He is right here especially for you. You can even kiss him."

And so he is. And so I do.

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