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A Normal Christmas

Kenneth Robbins

The Phone Call: “911. What is your emergency.” “Help. . . I’m uh. . . shooting people.”
End of call.

The Response: “All units. To 1550 Edgemore Lane, Apt. 3. Reports of gun fire. Approach with caution. Repeat: All units. To 1550 Edgemore Lane, Apt. 3. Reports of gun fire. All units. All units. .”

First Responder: “We arrive on scene at eleven forty two and find the front door to Apt. 3 secured from the inside. No sound of reported gun fire. My partner reconnoiters to the South side of the apartment complex. He experiences no disturbance coming from inside the building. The glass main entry is curtained. I glimpse through a side window what appears to be a human body, sitting in an armchair, not moving. There are no signs of disturbance. No one responds to a repeated use of the front entry door bell or to my pounding on the door frame with the butt of my baton. Jackson, my partner, reports that all windows and exterior doors are internally secured. Entry, if such is required, must be accomplished with force.”

A Neighbor: “Yes, officer, I heard gun shots coming from inside there. A whole bunch of them. No, I did not place the 911 call. Should I have? A woman and her two daughters live here. Her name is Rashmandi, I believe. Emilia Rashmandi. No, no, that’s not right. Misha. Misha Rashmandi. I think. Her daughters, two of them, are teenagers as far as I can tell. I rarely see them. They come and go quickly. My wife says that Ms. Rashmandi—Emilia or Misha, I don’t remember—is recently divorced. Not that that means anything.”

Another Neighbor: “I don’t think it was gun shots. After all, it is Christmas morning. You know how kids love to shoot off fire crackers on Christmas morning. They’re nice people, the Rashmandi’s. I’ve met the husband—excuse me, former husband—a couple of times. He drops by once a month or so. Makes no trouble. She doesn’t let him in, makes him stay outside on the sidewalk and talk to his girls. I’m guessing they’re his girls. Never know about such things, you know. They’re real pretty girls, dark complexioned, beautiful black eyes. You should see them. Charming young people. The name of the daughters? Who can remember things like that.”

First Neighbor: “They’re Egyptian, you know. That Arabic look. They made me nervous, all of them foreigners. Muslims. Never know what to expect from them, know what I mean?”

First Responder: “We send the neighbors away. No need to attract a crowd. We should go in. Don’t you think we should go in?”

Second Responder: “Open up. Police. Open up in there. Don’t make us bust the door. We’ll bust the door if we have to. Can you hear us in there?”

Silence.

“Guess we bust the door. You wanna bust the door?”

First Responder: “We shatter a portion of the door’s glass panel, just enough to reach inside and unlatch the latches. The only sound we hear comes from an old fashioned turn table and the needle ricocheting off the end of the track. Someone had been listening to music. Anybody home? I hear Jackson gasp a bit and he says to take a look at this. What he shows me is the human body I viewed through the side window. It is a man, about fifty or so, gray hair, Arabic nose and complexion, dressed in a Santa suit, stained a darker red by the blood that has oozed from his chin and down his chest. Can you believe that? A Santa outfit? There is a revolver on the floor next to him, all rounds spent, and another in the middle of the room on the floor and a wireless telephone beside that. His—its—eyes are open. First dead person I’ve seen and I’ve been on the force for more than five years. I check its pulse. Nothing there. This one’s gone far away from us. A shame, too, ruining an otherwise nice Santa suit like that.”

Second Responder: “Jesus H. Christ. Here’s another one. Shot through the head. And another one. Holy Mother of God, this is too much. Call in for back up. Call for ambulances. Call the Chief. Jeez, the Chief’s gotta see this.”

First Responder: “There are six in all. Another man, fiftyish. Two women. Two young girls. All with bullet holes in them. All not breathing. It’s too much. It’s Christmas, for God’s sake. This ain’t supposed to be the way we celebrate at Christmas.”

The Coroner: “I arrive on the scene fifty five minutes after the call. I find corpses, two men and a female, in the living area. One on the shag carpet, shot two times, once in the chest, another in the temple, the bullet exiting through the back of the skull. DOA. The woman is in the hallway between the living and sleeping areas. She has been shot in the back of the head at close range. Dead instantly is my estimation. The third sits in an easy chair, dressed in a Santa Claus outfit, the beard removed. He has been shot from close range, the discharge entering his skull through the chin and/or mouth and proceeding into and through the brain. His wound indicates self-infliction.”

News Report: “I am at the site of a grizzly crime on this otherwise beautiful Christmas morning. The local authorities are on the scene and report that perhaps as many as six individuals, opening Christmas gifts around what appears to be a normal and perhaps gala Christmas celebration, have been mercilessly slaughtered here in Prosperity, the self-proclaimed Christmas Center of the South. Details are sketchy at the moment. More after this.”

The Coroner: “In the bathtub is a young female, perhaps fourteen, partially dressed, a bullet through her sternum. Dead instantly.”

Police Chief: “This ain’t right. It just ain’t right. Upsetting normal religious folk like this. Putting a pall on Christmas celebrations all across the city and state. There should be a law that says no atrocities on Christmas Day. It’s sacred, by God. It’s a time for joy and, and, and

all that kind of thing. It's NOT a time to be called from home for this kind of mess. By Christ, there ought to be a law."

The Coroner: "Lying belly down on a queen-size bed in a back bedroom is another female, middle-aged, fully clothed, shot through the lower back. The collection of mucus and other body fluids on the bedding indicates that she lived at least thirty minutes after being shot. The final body, the oldest of the young females, perhaps seventeen, is collapsed against a side table, the telephone beside her on the floor. One bullet entered her abdomen above the navel, a second her lower throat. This victim took at least an hour to expire. End of report. Thank God."

A Neighbor: "I watched as the first body was rolled out the front door, down the cement walk, and loaded into the waiting van. It, the body, was covered. It seemed small—smallish. I could not tell who it might have been. Then the second. A third. I watch with growing horror. A fourth. And yet, still, another. I return home and close my front door, latch it firmly, close the drapes, turn on my television. I don't care to see any more. All joy of the day is gone and will not return, hard as we might try. I tell my kids, stay in doors."

A Priest: "There is no need for last rights, not once the soul has left the body. Besides. I don't believe that any of these—these—uh, victims—would be served by a man of my cloth. They are beyond that. Far beyond. They need something else."

News Report: "We are receiving information from an unnamed source that there were six victims of the shooting in Prosperity this Christmas day. Two adult men and four women, two of them in their teens. All shot with the same weapon. No, I'm sorry. Make that two. There were two weapons. It seems that the perpetrator of this tragedy entered this quiet, peaceful part of town well armed and with malicious intent. According to our source, he took his own life before the police could arrive. More on the six o'clock news as this story continues to develop."

A Friend: "Can you believe it? Rani sent me a text message. This is just too bizarre. Note the time: eleven twenty one. She texted, 'My dad's here, dressed like Santa Claus. He's out to win daddy of the year. He's such a loser.' That is what she sent me. It's here, on my phone. Ranya Rashmandi, my best friend. Who could have suspected, Dad Of The Year? For Christ's sake."

News Report: "It has been confirmed. The victims of this horrid shooting are Ranya and Zaza Rashmandi, daughters of Misha Rashmandi and her estranged husband, Hamid Rashmandi; the mother and her daughters had been living at 1550 Edgemore Avenue Apartment 3 for seven months following the dissolution of the Rashmandi marriage. Reports of marital violence have not been confirmed at this time. Also among the deceased are Abdul el Mohammad and his wife, Salah, Misha Rashmandi's sister. The Rashmandi family emigrated to Prosperity in 1988 and have lived here in relative peace and serenity since. Hamid Rashmandi is believed to have entered the apartment dressed in a Santa Claus suit, eager to become part of his family's seasonal celebration, even though none of the victims according to our information profess Christianity as their religion. The family was in the process of opening gifts when the shooting began. Authorities are unsure as to what might have instigated the conflagration."

Police Chief: “We are devoting all of our resources to gain an understanding of this tragic event. No effort will be spared. This office and all within our jurisdiction will guarantee that this sort of event will never happen again. Not here, not in Prosperity.”

A Neighbor: “No, I heard no shouts, no signs of disturbance. Just the gun shots. I thought they were fire crackers. You know how kids like to shoot off fire crackers on Christmas morning. Is this going national? Really, that many people. Hmm.”

A Talk Show Host: “It is unbelievable what’s happening in a small village south of the Mason Dixon line, a tiny burg called Prosperity. Talk about irony. Six, count them, six Muslim extremists, done in by one another. Well, I guess they do that sort of thing in the Middle East but you don’t expect it to happen here in the good old US of A. And on Christmas morning. It’s un-American, that’s what it is. It verges on being down right sacrilegious. And should not be tolerated. No, it will not be tolerated. Send them all home, all of them with their veils and scraggly beards, back to their camels and mosques and never-say-die sheiks. Heaven help us, enough is enough. If you agree, call 1-888-555-5555. I’d love to hear from you. All of our lines are open on this Christmas afternoon.”

The Mayor: “I wish it to be known that this horrible event is not what we in Prosperity are about. No. None of these people are Prosperitans. They may have moved here and they may live here and go to school here and shop and pay taxes and own property here, but they don’t belong here. I am proud of our community and the God-fearing people who call it their home. No, I am not going to go there. Gun control and what happened here today are two totally different matters. Guns don’t kill; people do. God bless us all.”

A Teacher: “I had Ranya Rashmandi in American literature. She was a joy to have in class. Clever, inquisitive, respectful, polite. She especially enjoyed the writings of our own Flannery O’Connor. I couldn’t ask for a better student. In fact, I recommended her for inclusion in the Golden Key, an honorary society for students who excel in their work and play. She was also an actress. Perhaps you didn’t know that. She had the lead in the junior class production of *Medea*. It was performed just before Thanksgiving. Quite successfully, I might add. Mr. Pritchard’s updating of the Greek tragedy worked better than one might have expected. Due in great part to Miss Rashmandi. Her performance in the title role was riveting, one of the best I’ve ever seen by a high school student. You should have seen it.”

A Preacher: “I baptized Misha Rashmandi and her daughters last Easter. They joined our congregation and attended services every Sunday morning. They occupied pew number eighteen on the right near the stained glass window of Christ welcoming lost sheep into his fold. They were all three good, God-fearing Christians. I don’t know about the others, the Mohammad’s. I didn’t know any of them. Did they live in Prosperity? Are you sure about that?”

A Student: “I’ll miss Rani’s smile. Rani. We all called her Rani. I was going to ask her to be my date at the Junior/Senior prom. I guess now I won’t go. Sad.”

The First Responder: “I go home to my kids. I hug them. My youngest—she’s eight—said, ‘Dad, you’re hurting me.’ That’s the last thing I want to do—hurt anyone. Especially my

youngest. My wife's suing me for divorce. We meet with the lawyers after the first of the year. Shit. That stinks, you know? Who wants to get divorced after a day like today? Maybe Christmas will return to normal next year. That's a joke. You got any idea what a normal Christmas is? I don't. Never known of a Christmas day being normal. Not in this part of the world. But, you can hope, can't you?

News Report: "In other news, for those of you who long for a 'white Christmas', you should head to Madison, WI, where twenty four inches of the white stuff fell over night. . ."