

December 1953

That night in the livingroom the lights were exhibiting choreography that would have put Jerome Robbins to shame. The colors of the lights were of various hues, standing out against the walls, blurry to me due to a vision problem I was having. I immersed myself in following the trajectory of the lights in order to take my mind off of the troubling event preying on me

I had been awakened out of sleep by someone, or something, that had been pursuing me for some time. Who or what it was and how it would eventually appear, I did not know, but I was sure it was on its way and there was no power on earth that would be able to interpose itself between us and our appointed rendezvous. I recall this episode took place very early one morning, or very late one night, whichever you prefer. The house was silent and the Christmas tree lights had, for some reason, been allowed to burn all night.

Outside I heard the arrival of a storm that had been approaching for the better part of a week. The rain began to fall and, as the song says, it was beginning to look a lot like Christmas. As all children, the holidays filled me with excited anticipation, but as you have gathered by now, I was not quite like most children, and the feeling of foreboding stood side-by-side with the more festive mood of the season.

My favorite tree decorations were bubble lights, candle-shaped, and so designed as to emit bubbles when a certain temperature was reached. Their effect was hypnotic and I could sit and watch them for hours. While watching the bubbles floating through the livingroom, I suddenly heard a banging sound outside the house. It was faint but steady and its droning repetitiveness was making me uneasy. My nerves began to feel the tension produced by the mixture of the heavy rain and the unidentified noise.

The bubbles were unable to distract me, try as I might. I looked out the side window trying to locate the sound that was producing the first stirrings of fear, which wasn't helped by the heavy downpour and strong wind.

My blurry vision seemed to clear and the interior and exterior of the house came into sharp focus, even though nothing was visible to me except the wet driveway and the streetlamp perched a few yards away at the street corner.

I finally noticed that one of the boards from our neighbor's white fence had come loose and was prancing around in the windblown night. I sighed with relief at having determined a perfectly normal explanation for the mysterious noise, and turned my attention back to the bubble lights. I wanted this to be a fondly remembered Christmas, not like the year before when the gift opening was interrupted by a seizure.

My brother and I had attacked our presents with gusto, sending brightly colored wrapping paper flying everywhere. Everyone had gotten what they had wanted. Dad liked his new pipe, Mom was overjoyed by her new coat, my brother was more than satisfied with his chemistry set and art

supplies. As for me, I received two things. One was the hoped for gray castle with four turrets and drawbridge for my toy soldiers, the other was the unexpected grand mal seizure. This last did not score a big hit with the rest of the family, as the major inconvenience ruined their Christmas and, quite frankly, put something of a crimp in my own enjoyment of the holiday.

But, it was another year and another Christmas and I had been seizure free for months, a nice present in itself. I was confident I would make it into the new year without an epileptic event. I would not let even the faintest prospect of such an occurrence dampen my spirits. I was out of school on vacation, Christmas was a few days away, and I placed great faith in Santa's psychic ability to know exactly what I had written on my wish list.

I had been collecting British toy soldiers and had asked Dad for the complete set of the famed Scottish regiment known as the Black Watch. At thirty-four pieces it was rather expensive for my age and for the household income. Having already accumulated over two hundred toy Brits of various types, I needed the Black Watch to complete the collection. It would truly make my holiday to have them materialize under the Christmas tree, with no questions asked as to who actually brought them.

My Black Watch thoughts were interrupted by the realization that the fury of the storm was increasing. I loved the sound of storms in a scary sort of way. The flashing lightning and crashes of thunder took me into a mental state with which I was very familiar, one of awe mixed with fear. The house was extremely dark despite the twinkling tree lights, and each new flash of lightning lent a spooky quality to the livingroom.

The underside of the Christmas tree was already home to several presents sent by relatives from here and there. They were family-type presents, such as food and household items, "sensible" things that were intended to benefit the whole family and were no fun at all.

My mother appeared out of the darkness and asked why I was up at such a late hour. I told her I was enjoying the tree lights and listening to the storm. I knew fun time was over and a return to bed was next on the agenda. Mom didn't let me down, ordering me to turn off the lights and get back to bed.

My brother was fast asleep in the upper bunk, the lower one being my domain for the practical reason of possible night seizures. Several times I had fallen out of bed and hit the floor hard. My mother tucked me in and planted a kiss on my forehead, leaving me in the dark with all the lights out and the storm still lashing the house.

In the flash of another sheet of lightning I thought I saw a figure standing in the corner of the room. My first thought that my mother had either returned for some reason or had not yet left the room, but with the next bolt of lightning I was able to get a better look. I could see what appeared to be a very tall man attired in a dark green overcoat, with long black hair, black beard, and red eyes. I felt rather than heard him call to me. He didn't speak verbally neither did he move, he just remained motionless, with tears of blood flowing down his cheeks.

Need I say I was terrified by this unspeaking apparition? I dived beneath the covers, hoping he would take the hint and find another house to haunt. The only thing stronger than my fear at that point was plain old fatigue and despite the scenario I couldn't fight off the approach of sleep. Just as I was dropping off, I heard what at first sounded like a voice resonating solely within my head.

The words were incoherent, gibberish, nonsensical. Gradually, however, they began to form themselves into something comprehensible and carried on the wave of a deep voice I heard the words, "Be at peace" repeated several times.

"Who's there?" I asked the night.

"Be at peace," came the reply.

I threw one last look over to the corner. The man, or whatever had been standing there, was gone. I fell into a peaceful sleep.

My next sensation was of the sunlight streaming in through the windows, the storm having moved on to conquer new territory.

"Be at peace" would be my mantra for the season and I was certain that Christmas, as this new morning, would be magically filled with peace and light.