

FIRST ANNIVERSARY DINNER

AN ACCOUNT BY

ROY TAYLOR

Origins

This happened to my parents in war-blasted London. My father worked in the docks and my mother worked as a seamstress close to St. Paul's Cathedral. They had both survived the Blitz, but this could be the story of any young couple innocently caught up in war. My mother had a great fund of stories of ordinary people caught up in that conflict. I always meant to get her stories down on tape, but to my eternal regret I always working away on the other side of Europe.

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Contact - email: retfiction@aol.com - post: BCM 3754, London wc1n 3xx, United Kingdom



First Anniversary Dinner

The train rattled noisily through the pitch black suburbs of a city at war, passing factories empty and silent for the night, and houses where families hid from the nightly terror of the bombs. The young man sighed, the lampless carriage groaned and creaked as it passed over points and slid reluctantly into a station.

The young man got out of his carriage and stumbled along the dark platform. Across the tracks he saw something that caught his breath, a train parked in the station for the night. It was a special freight train, one that dare not move by day, yet dare not rest at night.

‘They’ll know about that one,’ the young man thought to himself. ‘They always know.’

A soldier leaned against the shuttered waiting room, his rifle propped against the door, his face

lit with the dull red glow of a hand-rolled cigarette. The young man stopped to talk to the soldier.

“What the hell is that doing in the station?” he asked, nodding toward the freight train.

“No idea,” said the soldier. “The engine broke down, something like that.”

The young man nodded and walked on, the soldier took another long drag from his cigarette.

The young man shuddered as he read the notice on one of the wagons: “Danger: Aviation Fuel, Highly Inflammable, No Smoking, By Order”. He walked quickly down the stairs at the end of the platform, clutching the precious bundle he carried home from the docks where he worked. A winter film of damp moonlight reflected off the surface of the road, giving enough light for

First Anniversary Dinner

pedestrians to stumble the last few minutes of their journey home, and enough light to show a flock of thundering bombers the landmarks they needed to deliver their cargoes.

'Maybe not,' thought the young man.

He reached the steps of home, ran up them, and through the back gate into the garden. He knew from the aromas drifting around the garden that his wife was cooking something special, something not seen in their house before, something only acquired with a finely-tuned sense of barter. He pushed through the back door into the kitchen.

"Hello love," he said kissing his wife and pushing the precious bundle into her hands. "Happy anniversary. Where did you get the chicken?"

"Happy anniversary. The chicken is a long story, but it's cost us our clothing coupons for the next couple of months. Now, don't bother me for a while, everything is reaching a critical stage. What's in the bundle?"

"Open it and see," said the young man.

She cut the string around the package, and

unwrapped the newspaper.

"A pineapple. Oh my god, where did you get this? I haven't seen any for ages."

"Convoy came in today, got through the blockade okay, but you won't see these in the shops. The skipper of one ship had a box of them under his bunk, for favours."

"What favour did this cost you?"

"Nothing much, just had to carry his suitcase round the back of the customs office."

"We'll have this after the chicken."

He thought of the freight train across the road, and its cargo of aviation fuel.

"Anything I can do?" he asked.

"You could lay the table, I'm waiting for the vegetables to finish."

"How did you get the chicken?" he called out from the living room.

"The family at the back of us, the one with four children, have a relative with a smallholding somewhere. I pestered them until they surrend-

First Anniversary Dinner

ered a chicken.”

“Nice pestering, but why the clothing rations?”

“I can patch what needs mending for a few months, and children grow out of clothes so quickly. It cost me a couple of months’ worth of coupons. I need to feed for two, don’t forget,” she said patting the new life growing inside her, “and their two little girls need new dresses for spring. I expect the boys need new boots too.”

“They’ve got a bargain. Who else knows about the chickens?”

“Most shopkeepers I’d guess. Chickens are hard to come by these days. I wish we had more to swap.”

He cocked his head to one side trying to catch an inaudible rumble just at the edge of hearing.

“Dinner is almost ready,” the young woman said.

“What have we got with the chicken?”

“Potatoes, a turnip, some cabbage, nothing special, but they’re good quality. I think the greengrocer found a new source.”

“Maybe he had a chicken to swap,” sniggered

the young man. “Chicken, oh God, chicken, let me see it.”

“You finish laying the table first,” said the young woman giggling.

“I haven’t had one since we married. Not since the war started anyway.”

“Don’t get too enthusiastic, it’s only a small one, enough for tonight and a cold dinner for both of us tomorrow night.”

“Good enough for me,” said the young man listening once more to sounds outside.

“What is it?” asked the young woman, seeing his gesture.

“A train maybe, or thunder.”

He got out their best table cloth and laid it over the old oak table given to them as a wedding present. He started laying out the cutlery, listening again, hearing the drone of aircraft high in the winter sky. No wailing siren, no thud-thud of anti-aircraft guns.

There had been too many false alarms anyway. Several times in the last month they had rushed

First Anniversary Dinner

out of the house to the crude air-raid shelter in the garden, and spent a cold and damp hour while bombers passed on. This time the drone grew louder, the sirens stayed silent. The young man went through to the bedroom at the front of the house and opened the blackout curtain to look at the sky. There was nothing but the steady drone of advancing bombers. He shrugged, 'Must be ours, setting off on a raid'. He closed the curtain, went back to the living room, and finished laying the table.

The young woman served out the vegetables into her best dishes and handed them to the young man. He carried them with great ceremony into the living room and placed them delicately on the table.

"They're getting closer," the young woman said of the drone outside.

"They must be ours," said the young man, "otherwise the sirens would be wailing by now."

He went out into the kitchen again, to collect the precious chicken. It was laid out on a serving dish, roasted skin glowing golden. She put a

cover over the chicken and handed the tray to the young man. She had sliced the pineapple and set the slices on a plate. The young man put the chicken in the centre of the table, lifting the cover to smell the delicious and rare luxury it concealed. The drone grew louder by the minute.

"If they're ours, why are they coming up from the south?" asked the young woman.

"No siren, no guns," he said simply. "They must be ours."

The young woman served the vegetables. The distant thudding of a gun sounded. They looked up at each other.

"I'm not moving," she said, "nothing is going to spoil this dinner."

A siren stirred lazily into life, faltered, and moaned away to silence.

"The sirens have failed," whispered the young man in horror.

He dashed through to the front bedroom and threw open the curtains in time to hear the whistle of the first bombs falling from the moonlit

First Anniversary Dinner

sky. A row of houses on the far side of the railway erupted as the bombs tore through them and destroyed the lives within. Parents, children, the elderly, all destroyed by the fickle flight of a falling bomb. No time to run for shelter, no time to think last thoughts or crave final forgiveness for sins committed or suffered, no time to seek redemption for a wasted life, no time to pray for children innocent of the ways of the adult world. Only time to hear the scream of death tearing down through a cold winter sky. Brilliant orange flames leapt high in supplication to the bomber above, as if confirming the casual murder it wrought below.

“Incendiaries,” muttered the young man. “Fire bombs,” he screamed at his young wife as he rushed back to the living room, “the bastards are dropping fire bombs.”

The young woman stared at the ceiling as more bombs dropped further up the road. The light dimmed momentarily and the house shook as more lives disappeared in a fan of leaping orange flames.

“They can’t,” muttered the young woman in

disbelief, “it’s my anniversary.”

The young man grabbed his wife by the arm and dragged her toward the door into the garden for the dubious safety of their air-raid shelter. She pulled back stubbornly.

“No,” she said firmly. “I’m staying here, they’re not going to spoil this.”

They stood rigid. She, looking from the ceiling and back to the food laid out for the celebration of their first wedding anniversary, he at his wife, torn between self preservation and her refusal to leave. He turned his face toward the ceiling, listening to the death whine of the bombs. The young woman sat down to her anniversary dinner.

As she reached out to uncover the precious chicken, the young man shouted, “That’s ours, that bomb’s ours,” as one out of the many screamed its intent to the victims waiting below. He grabbed his wife and dragged her rudely under the table just as the world around them exploded. The house shook, the windows blew in, debris exploded around them, and flames

First Anniversary Dinner

leapt high in ecstatic proclamation to the bombers above.

Minutes later, they stirred and moaned, unable to believe that they were still alive. He brushed debris off the young woman and crawled out from beneath the still-standing oak table. Orange light flickered across the wall, but the fire was not inside.

He looked out through the shattered window frame and saw the house at the back in flames. In that house a family had had no time to run for shelter. The parents had just seen their children to bed with their last bedtime story. They had heard the faltering siren and wondered whether to take the children to safety. As they paused on the stairs, listening both to the scream of falling bombs and the disturbed murmurings of waking children, one falling bomb dropped amongst them. Dervish flames leapt and danced as the air-raid siren broke at last into life, its warning now a requiem.

High in the sky, young pilots flew their aircraft home, duty done, safe to fight another night in the service of their country. That night, whether

by dint of fate, or faulty bomb-aiming equipment, or gusty winds, eighteen families died in the flames of fallen fire bombs. Just one bomb fell harmlessly on the railway.

The young man and his wife stood at the window watching the flames grow then die as the fire engines arrived to quench the fire, too late to save any of the victims. At last the young woman turned back to the table, lit one of the precious candles, and brushed dust and debris off her anniversary dinner. The force of the explosion had brought down most of the ceiling, exposing the laths for the first time since the house had been built. The food was ruined. The precious slices of pineapple were buried in plaster and stuck with shards from the shattered window. The young woman lifted the lid from the chicken and found it miraculously untouched by the devastation, still warm. She took up two plates, wiped them clean with her hand, took the carving knife, and cut off portions for herself and her husband. The young man choked back a sob.

“I couldn’t eat it now,” he said, “not after that.”

He nodded toward the burning house at the

First Anniversary Dinner

back, where two little girls wouldn't have pretty new dresses for spring, and two young boys wouldn't know the thrill of kicking stones along the street with new leather boots.

"We have to," said the young woman, touching me where I grew inside her womb. "For him."