

Issac Asimov

Dollars and Cents

Considering the state of the world today, a great many thrillers deal with terrorism. Again, I am at a disadvantage, since I don't want to be too grisly. (It makes me wonder why I am so intent on writing mysteries—but then when I was in high school I passed through a phase when I wanted to be a surgeon, and if I didn't have that on record, I would refuse to believe it. Anyway, I didn't become a surgeon.)

But here is a terrorist plot and, as you can guess, nobody gets hurt. At least, I demonstrate that I can do it—after a fashion.

“My own feeling,” said Jennings, as we sat in the somewhat brooding and melancholy atmosphere of the Union Club library, “is that in order to cut down on terrorist activity, it would be best to bring down an absolute curtain of silence over it.”

“You mean,” I said sarcastically, “like not letting anyone know that the President has been shot, in case he's shot.”

“No,” said Jennings, “that's not what I mean at all. I mean you don't release the name of the would-be assassin, or anything about him, or show any pictures, or talk about him. He becomes a nonperson and so does anyone who's involved in terrorist activity. What's more, you cut down on all television coverage particularly, except for the bare announcement of what is happening.”

Baranov said, “I take it you are trying to imply that terrorists do it for the publicity involved. Take away the publicity and there's no point in doing it.”

“To a certain extent, yes,” said Jennings. “Let's say there's some movement for independence for Fairfield, Connecticut. A Fairfield Liberation Committee is established by five nuts. They call themselves the FLC and begin a campaign of tire slashing in Hartford, sending letters to the newspapers taking credit for it. As the tire slashings continue and as the media give it full exposure, not only does this make the five nuts feel powerful and important, but the publicity actually gets lots of weak-minded people to thinking that there may be something to the notion of making Fairfield independent. On the other hand, if the tire slashings are investigated under cover of a strict news blackout—”

“It just isn't possible,” I said, “for two reasons. First, the people whose tires are slashed are going to talk, and rumors will get around that will be worse than the truth. Second, once the principle is established that you can set up a news blackout over something like that, you can do it over anything you conceive as dangerous for people to know, and that means *anything*.—Never in the United States, I hope. Sooner the occasional terrorism.”

“Besides,” boomed out Griswold's voice suddenly, “there comes a time when the blackout may break down. How do you keep it secret when you have to evacuate a

hotel in the evening rush hour and must send out every fire engine in the area.”

He had both eyes open, the blue of them blazing at us, and he sat erect. It was the widest-awake I'd seen him in years.

“Something you were involved in, Griswold?” I asked.

It began [said Griswold] when a reporter at one of the New York newspapers received a neatly typed, unsigned note, delivered through the mail, to the effect that a dummy bomb had been deposited in a particular room in a particular hotel. The number of the room was given.

The reporter wondered what to do about it, decided it was some sort of gag being pulled on him by one of the jokers about the place, then, after a while, decided he couldn't take the chance. He fished the crumpled letter out of the wastebasket and took it to the police. It meant running the risk of making a fool of himself, but he felt he had no choice.

The police were not in the least sympathetic. They thought it was a gag being pulled on the reporter, too, but they had no choice. They sent a member of the bomb squad to the hotel and he was gotten into the room in question. Fortunately, the occupant was not there at the time. Under the eyes of a disapproving hotel official, and feeling very much the jerk, the policeman searched the room rather perfunctorily and, in no time at all, found a box on the shelf in the closet where the extra blankets were stored. On the outside it said in straggly capital letters: BOMB. On the inside was excelsior. Nothing else.

They checked the box for fingerprints, of course. Nothing. The letter was covered by the reporter's fingerprints. It still seemed like a gag of some sort, but more serious than it had been considered at first. The reporter was instructed to bring any further letter to the police forthwith and to try not to handle it. He took to opening his letters while wearing kid gloves.

It turned out to be a useful precaution, because three days later he received another letter. It named another hotel and gave the room number again. He brought it in at once and a member of the bomb squad was sent out. A box filled with bits of cardboard was found in the bathroom, wedged behind the toilet seat. It also said: BOMB.

No fingerprints anywhere.

The police had informed all the general newspapers of the city of what had happened, had asked for no publicity to avert panic, and had urged them all to watch for the letters.

A good thing, too, for the third letter came to a different reporter on a different paper. Same as the others except that this time there was an additional paragraph, which said, “I trust you understand all this is practice. One of these days, it will be the real thing. In that case, of course, I will not give you the room number.”

By that time, the police called me in and showed me the letters.

I said, “What has the lab found out?”

My friend on the force, a police lieutenant named Cassidy, said, “It's an electric typewriter, undoubtedly an IBM product, and the fake bomber is a man of education and an accomplished typist. No fingerprints. Nothing distinctive about either paper or envelope, or about the fake bombs for that matter. The postmark indicates the letters were posted from different places, but all in Manhattan.”

“That doesn't seem particularly helpful.”

Cassidy curled his lip. "It sure doesn't. Do you know how many IBM electric typewriters there are in Manhattan? And how many good typists with some education there are? If he sends enough letters, though, we'll be able to gather more information, I hope."

I could see nothing further to do, either. I may be extraordinarily good at understanding the trifles that escape others, uncanny even—but it is only everyone else who considers me a miracle man. I make no such claims on my own behalf. Still, I stayed in close touch for the duration of the case.

Additional letters did come and they did contain more information, at least as to motive. The mysterious bomber began to express himself more freely. He was apparently sick and tired of our money-mad society and wanted a return to a purer, more spiritual day. Just how this would be effected by his antics, he didn't say.

I said to Cassidy, "He clearly doesn't have any trouble getting into hotel rooms, but then there's no reason why he should."

"Oh," said Cassidy, "skeleton keys?"

"Simpler," I said. "Every room is cleaned every day. The cleaning women occasionally wander off on some errand while cleaning and leave doors open, especially if the room is between occupants and there are no personal items in it to be stolen. In fact, I have seen hotel-room doors open and cleaning women nowhere in sight, even when there is luggage and clothing in clear view. No one stops anyone from wandering about hotel corridors so all our bomber has to do is to find an open door."

The word went out to every hotel in New York that cleaning women were on no account to leave room doors open. Some of the hotels instructed the women to keep an eye out for small boxes and to call anything that seemed suspicious to the attention of the management.

One box turned up and reached police headquarters before the letter announcing it arrived. The letter was delayed in the mail, which is not really surprising.

"I hope," said Cassidy dolefully, "that when it's the real thing, he doesn't announce it by mail. It will never come in time to give us a chance."

The precautions about leaving doors open slowed up the bomber. The letters were fewer, but they didn't stop altogether. Increasing difficulty seemed to make him more irritable. He denounced the banks and financiers generally. The police psychologists tried to work up a personality profile of the letter writer from what he said. Banks were asked whether anyone had been refused a loan who had reacted to that refusal with unusual bitterness or with threats. Continued analysis of the postmarks on the letters seemed to pinpoint some neighborhoods in preference to others as the bomber's home ground.

Cassidy said, "If he keeps it up long enough, we'll get him."

"But one of these days," I said, "it will be the real thing and very likely before we've managed to squeeze him out of the several million who live or work in Manhattan."

"This may go on quite awhile, though. He may be in no position to make or get a bomb. All this fake-bomb stuff is a way of blowing off steam and when he's blown off enough, he'll stop."

"That would be nice," I said, "but these days I imagine anyone can manage to get an explosive device or learn to make one, if he tries long enough."

And then one day, a police officer came hurriedly to Cassidy. He said, "A guy

claiming to be the fake bomber was on the phone.”

Cassidy started to his feet, but the officer said, “He’s off the phone. We couldn’t hold him. He says he’ll call again.—And he says it’s the real thing, now.”

He called a half-dozen times, at intervals, from different public coin telephones. The bomb, he said, was placed. The real bomb. He named the hotel—only the newest in Manhattan. And he named the time for which it was set: 5 P.M. that day—only the peak of the rush hour.

“You have time to evacuate the hotel,” he said in a hoarse whisper. “I don’t want anyone to die. I just want to strike at property to teach a lesson to those who place property before humanity.”

It was a little after 2 P.M. when he finally gave us the place and time. There was time to do the job, but considering not only the evacuation, but the cordoning-off of the area, and the gathering of fire engines, there would be an incredible tie-up of Manhattan traffic.

Cassidy, on the phone, did his best. “Look,” he said in as ingratiating a manner as he could manage. “You’re an idealist. You’re a man of honor. You want no one hurt. Suppose we don’t manage to get everyone out. Suppose we leave a child behind despite all we can do. Would you want that on your conscience? Just let us have the room number. Do that and I will guarantee you a fair hearing on your grievances.”

The bomber wasn’t buying that. He said, “I’ll call back.”

Fifteen interminable minutes later, during which the police and the bomb squad were making for the spot, we got the call.

“All right,” he said. “Dollars and cents. That’s all people think about. Dollars and cents. If you’re too dumb to understand that, then I’m not responsible. You are.” He hung up.

Cassidy stared at the dead phone. “What the devil did he mean by that?”

But I had heard the conversation on the conference-call tie-in and said urgently, “Hold off on the evacuation just a few minutes. The bomb squad is on the scene by now. Get in touch with them. I think I’ve got the room number, and they may be able to handle the bomb on the spot.”

I was right. The bomb, a simple but real one, was easily dismantled without disturbing anyone in the hotel. We didn’t get the bomber, but he’s never tried again. He’d apparently had enough, and since no one was hurt—

Griswold’s words trailed off into a soft snore, and Jennings called out, “Don’t go to sleep, damn it. Where did you get the room number from? What was the clue?”

I followed my usual practice of stamping on Griswold’s nearer foot, but he was prepared for me this time and kicked my ankle rather sharply.

He said, “I told you the clue. The bomber said ‘dollars and cents’ and said if we were too dumb to understand that, we were responsible.”

“That’s a clue?” said Baranov. “That’s just his standard complaint about the money-mad society.”

“It could be that, too, but I felt it to be the clue. I told you the man was an expert typist, and a typist tends to think of words in terms of typewriter keys.”

I said, “I’m an expert typist, and the phrase means nothing to me.”

“I’m not surprised about that,” said Griswold rather nastily. “But if you type ‘dollars and cents,’ and are pressed for time, you are quite likely to type the symbols ‘\$&¢’” and he made the signs in the air.

“You can do that by tapping three typewriter keys on the IBM electrics with the

shift key depressed. If you don't depress the shift key, those same keys give you the number 476. Try it and see. So I thought we might gamble on Room 476, and that was it."