

## Secret Agent X-9

This is the story of how I finally learned the truth about my mother and father. Or maybe I should say it's the story *before* that story, which—well, I guess you could say I'm still working on that one.

My Dad was a secret agent. Code name: X-9. He tried to act like a normal dad around us kids, but there were clues to his double life. His gold cigarette case had a strange symbol with an eye in the middle, like the one on the back of the dollar bill. I figured that meant he worked for the government. He carried a pocketknife with commando tools and a silver pistol disguised as a cigarette lighter. I'm pretty sure his wallet was a two-way radio.

He was always traveling. Mom would say it was for "business," but I knew better. I watched all the spy shows—*I Spy*, *The Man from Uncle*, *Secret Agent Man*, even *Get Smart*. "Business" meant adventure. Derring-do. Hair's breadth escapes. Dad was out every day, fighting for America, but still he found time to spend Wednesdays and Thursdays with us, sometimes even a Friday morning. If he came in the daytime, Mom would send my sister and me into the backyard to play. After awhile, she would call us inside, and we would eat supper and watch TV and get tucked in at bedtime just like a normal family.

We never saw his car. I pictured a sleek British roadster with ejector seat, bullet-proof windshield, and machine-gun headlights. Usually, he came by taxi. But sometimes, my sister and I would wake in the morning to find him already sitting at the breakfast table, well into his newspaper and bacon and eggs. How had he come? I would stay awake all night watching for him, but, like Santa Claus, he always eluded me. Was there a secret panel in the walls? A tunnel into the garage? A trap door into the sewers below? If so, I was never able to find them.

Secret Agent X-9's cover name was "Phil." I figured out it was a cover name, because Mom always told us, "If anybody asks about your Dad, just say it's Phil." I don't think she would have said it that way if Phil had been his real name. She told us so often we got in the habit of calling him Phil instead of Dad. The funny thing is, whichever we called him, he'd smile and shake his head, like we'd made some kind of joke.

Mom liked for us to call her "Belinda." (One time, when I called her that in front of a neighbor, the old lady sniffed and said we had a "very modern family.") Belinda's code name was more complicated than Dad's, and he was always testing her on it, like he thought she might slip up, but every time she said it the same: 36-24-36.

I overheard Phil tell one of his contacts that Belinda was a "platinum blonde with legs all the way down to ground." I didn't really get that about the legs, or why he said her hair "came out of a bottle." She used to complain about her nose, but Phil said it gave her character. Her eyebrows could tell stories. She was the opposite of Phil, who was very tan, with hair like Superman's. And just the opposite of Phil, who was all the time away, she never left the house, except to go shopping. She spent her days decoding messages planted in magazines and talking in cipher to her contacts over the phone. I got a look at her decoding device once. It was round and made of plastic, and it opened up like her compact, but instead of a mirror inside it had dials

with numbers and a bunch of little slots. One thing that kind of worried me was that two of the slots held what were obviously cyanide pills.

My baby sister was called “Sandy,” because of her blonde curls, and I was “Carrot-Top.” Sometimes Dad would call my sister by her regular name, Sandra, but with me he only used my code name. Our dog was “Skippy the Wonder Dog.” Belinda helped me make a cape for him once, but it wouldn’t stay tied, and anyway, he really didn’t have any special powers.

Mom and Dad were a team, but they had a lot of disagreements. One I remember was about Operation Overdraft. I guess it wasn’t going well, because when dispatches came from Headquarters about it, Belinda hid them to keep Phil from getting upset. But he found them anyway. He got red in the face and waved the dispatches around and yelled about getting a call from “Mr. Ratroy” at the “Main Office.” It sounded scary to me, but it didn’t scare Belinda. She just said “Mis-ter Rat-roy” in a very exaggerated way and rolled her eyes. “You’re worried about that pencil-pusher? It just so happens I talked to the President, and we worked everything out.”

The President! Even Secret Agent X-9 had to be impressed by that.

One time Phil parachuted in unexpectedly. Mom was surprised, but she didn’t seem happy. We were having a late breakfast after being sent into the backyard to look at the moon with my telescope. Phil thought it was strange for us to be sent out so early, and he asked Belinda a lot of questions. She answered them in her usual cool way, but then I saw Phil’s eyes get very big when Belinda picked up the bottle of milk from the table to pour over my cereal. Phil dashed it out of her hands, sending bottle and milk crashing to the floor. We were all stunned, but when Skippy went to lap at the milk, I immediately sized up the situation and grabbed him into my arms. From the unearthly glow of the milk on the linoleum floor, I knew it

could be no other than luminous toxin, a poison that brought certain death within forty-eight hours!

Phil and Belinda stared at each other, abashed at the close call. But then there was a familiar squeal of brakes from up the street, and Phil shouted “Ha!” and flew out the door.

While he was gone, Belinda cleaned up the mess from the floor, warning my sister, Skippy, and me to stay clear. I noticed that she put on rubber gloves to protect herself from the highly dangerous luminous toxin.

After a time Phil returned, his hair plastered to his forehead with sweat, a cut under his left eye. Belinda asked him what happened.

“Nothing,” he said, sitting down at the table and pouring his coffee. “Just had a little talk with ‘The Milk Man.’”

(The way he said the name, I knew it must be code.)

“And?”

“And from now on you’ll be getting your milk at the supermarket.”

Another time Dad showed up unexpectedly, he wanted to go to church with us. When Mom asked why, he said he’d heard we’d “got religion.” Mom said he was “being stupid,” because she’d always been a church-goer. I thought she must have been talking about before I was born, but it was true, we’d been going a lot lately. Anyway, she told him she wasn’t planning on going to church that day, she was still in her housecoat and she just wanted to sleep in. Right in front of us, Phil pulled her housecoat open and said, “So what’s with the girdle?”

That’s the only time I ever remember Dad helping me get dressed. He made sure I put on my best clothes, even a bow tie, because he wanted me to “look good for Jesus.”

Mom said he was being sacrilegious, and he said, “You should talk.”

So we went to church, but instead of sitting near the front, like we usually did, Secret Agent X-9 had us sit in the back, behind one of the pillars, where he slouched in the shadow, glaring at every face on the altar. When Deacon Haze stepped up to the lectern to read from the Gospel of John, Phil hissed, "Is that him?" so loud that people three rows ahead of us turned around to look. I thought he would duck down out of sight to preserve his cover, but he just stared and stared at Deacon Haze like he was memorizing every pore on his face and every blond curl on his head. But then something about the reading made him smile, and it seemed like he relaxed a little. After the reading was over, he kept his eyes on Deacon Haze the way Skippy keeps his eyes on the neighbor's cat. And he smiled again, but it wasn't a nice smile.

When we were walking to the car after church, he said to Mom, "Your friend did a nice job with the reading. Funny topic, though, huh?"

Mom said, "I don't see anything funny about a woman being stoned."

Nobody talked after that, and we didn't even stop on the way home for donuts like Mom usually did. (Donuts were Mom's favorite.) Sandy and I were sent to the backyard to play without any breakfast, like we were being punished, but we didn't know what for. It got loud in the house, but not the usual way, with music or anything. By the time Sandy and I went back inside, Phil was gone and Mom was locked in her room. No donuts for breakfast. No fried chicken for Sunday dinner. Nothing but cold cereal, until Mom finally came out just before dark and put some fish sticks in the oven.

When Dad didn't come back that week, Sandy asked me where he was. I told her he was on a super-secret mission, but I didn't believe it. Mom seemed unhappy at first. Her dark brows were in a wrestling match over the bridge of her nose. But after a day or two they unclenched and arched their backs like lazy cats. She spent the whole day on the phone comparing notes with

her contacts. Phil was the number one subject, and it bothered me that she was so loose with her talk, even if it was with fellow agents. I only hoped the line was secure.

A troubling development during Dad's absence was the reappearance at the breakfast table of the daily bottle of milk. I refused to touch it, and Belinda saying "It isn't poison, you know," only further convinced me of the danger. I manfully stood up not only for myself, but for Sandy, insisting that we would eat our cereal dry, or go hungry, rather than risk the milk from these suspect bottles.

After two days—I made sure it was a full forty-eight hours—Belinda hadn't succumbed to luminous poisoning, and I was getting tired of canned milk on my cereal. I decided to allow Sandy and myself the bottled milk. Apparently, Phil had been wrong about "The Milk Man." But how had Belinda known? And even if "The Milk Man" was trustworthy, and the milk was safe, how had she dared to defy Secret Agent X-9's orders?

When Phil returned, it was with flowers and a bottle of champagne, and Sandy and I spent the night at "Aunt June's." The next day, we returned to find Phil in the backyard grilling hamburgers. Sodas and beer were in the cooler, a baseball game on the radio. It was a lovely time. All was forgiven, the family was back together, and democracy was safe again. Belinda seemed happy to have Phil back, and she smiled and hummed to herself and waited on him just like the moms on TV. But when he left in the morning for another mission—dedicated patriot that he was—I was disturbed by the change in her attitude. All that day she was on the phone, drinking wine from early in the afternoon, ignoring her encryption work, sharing with her contacts the most intimate details about Secret Agent X-9—and *laughing* at him!

I was appalled, not just at the breach in security, but at the rank disloyalty she showed toward her fellow agent, her comrade-at-arms, her most loyal and trusted compatriot, the man I

considered not just a father, but a hero. It was the first time I truly suspected Belinda's motives, but as I lay in bed that night pondering over the problem, I realized that I had long had inklings that Agent 36-24-36 was less than trustworthy.

Why had she really hidden those dispatches from Headquarters? Why would the President of the United States speak directly to a lowly operative like her? Was that a lie? Why did she only confer with her contacts when Agent X-9 was not around? And why, even on days when he was away, were Sandy, Skippy, and I often locked out of the house to play in the backyard?

I got the answer the next morning. After a fitful night's sleep, I was wakened by hushed voices from the kitchen. It was still dark out, and I wondered who Mom could be talking to, so early in the morning. I realized it must be Agent X-9. Would I finally catch him, still in his wetsuit, emerging from the subterranean labyrinth beneath our house that led to the sea?

I crept down the hallway, eyeing the buttery sliver of light that spilled from under the kitchen door. The voices grew louder as I approached, but remained indistinct. I put my hand to the door and pushed, just enough to see inside. I saw Belinda sitting at the table, her eyes relaxed and welcoming under brows like open arms, her face smiling, the fingers of one hand playing at the collar of her housecoat. On the table was a freshly delivered bottle of milk, as yet unopened. But sitting across from Belinda was not Secret Agent X-9 in a wetsuit, nor even "The Milk Man" in his white uniform. Instead, there was a large, doughy-looking man, smiling back at Belinda, one hand under his chin, the other under the table, stroking her knee.

I didn't recognize him at first, in plainclothes, out of his apron and paper hat. But there was no mistaking the broad, freckled face and the mop of curly red hair. Even so, I couldn't believe it—he looked so out of place there in our little kitchen, out from behind the big display

counter at the shop, where he reigned like a ginger-haired giant, always with a smile and a treat for me as he roughly tousled my crown. But even if I somehow could have mistaken the man, there was no mistaking the neat square box on the counter with the cellophane window. It was him all right. Code name: “The Donut Man.”

I didn’t gasp. I didn’t shout. I didn’t fling the door open with an accusatory “Aha!” or let it swing back on its hinges and flee the scene. I was my father’s son. So I observed—keenly, stealthily, gathering my intelligence—and made silent retreat. Actions would be taken, but not here, not now. I had to consider what I had seen, work out the puzzle to make sure the all pieces fit. If what I suspected was true, the implications were mind-boggling. I had a thousand questions, but one thing was for certain, the evidence so plain I wondered how I had never seen it before. I tried to console myself that it had been no great trick to fool me—a rookie agent with no field experience—but my heart broke to think of the wily and confident Secret Agent X-9, and how it would be for him when he learned the terrible truth: Belinda was a double agent.

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