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COMMONWEAL



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IT'S COMING ON CHRISTMAS

SCHLOCK & THE INCARNATION

PETER A. QUINN

It was twenty when I decided Christmas was an irredeemable cliché. Every year the same evergreen optimism gave rise to the same expectations and excitement. Every year the same tinselly hopes were tossed out with the tree. By the time January slouched in, all the gadgets were broken or on the blink, all the silly, repetitious music blended into one long echoing drone, *You better watch out, a little town of Bethlehem, the red-nosed reindeer are roasting on an open fire and Jack Frost's nipping at your silent night.*

I can date my epiphany about Christmas with some precision. On the back cover of my medieval history textbook, among phone numbers and the name of a girl I was trying to summon the courage to call, is this: "12/17/67; O God, is there any more dreadful time of the year?"

In those days iconoclasm came easy. It wasn't hard to build a consensus against the gift-mongering of the yule-ing classes. The horror of it: An overweight Northern European businessman who exploited midgets and whipped flying reindeer, the world's most endangered species, into pulling his sled across the heavens. First-world imperialism at its worst.

Time softened my college views somewhat. But as the fires of radicalism died down and I cast a cold eye on Christmas, I decided my initial revulsion wasn't all that misplaced. It seemed obvious to me that Christmas came but once a year because the country couldn't handle hangovers of such ferocity and duration without endangering its military and economic security.

Certainly, Christmas was the most wonderful time of the year; that is, if you were a manufacturer of high-tech corkscrews or the purveyor of overpriced perfume, tacky ties, or stale fruit cake.

It was the season to be jolly if your powers of self-delusion were such that you could believe this annual recitation of every cliché about joy, goodwill, and world peace had anything to do with life as lived in the last sorrowful decades of the twentieth century.

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Worst of all, I understood Christmas was inescapable. Love it or loathe it, but unless you were willing to book accommodations in Mecca or Teheran, you couldn't leave it. It wouldn't be ignored. Like Willy Loman's wife, it would demand, "Attention must be paid."

It was. Even in my days as a lapsed Catholic, I still went to midnight Mass. I told myself it was a harmless concession to the habits of childhood, a ritual bow to the faith of my ancestors. I need not have worried. Invariably, I left with my agnosticism reconfirmed and renewed. The sermon was so awful, so trite and repetitious, the ceremony so long, the church so overheated (the energy crisis notwithstanding), the air so choked with the aroma of incense and alcohol (I made my own contribution to the latter), that I reveled in my escape to the secular cold of the December night.

When I later found myself drawn back to the church it had nothing to do with putting Christ back in Xmas. As far as I was concerned, the Puritans were right. Christmas was paganism masking as Christianity, and nothing would be lost by giving it back. *Have yourselves a very merry saturnalia.* Let the neopagans have their sacred trees and boughs of holly, the vestiges of the crudest sort of animism. At the end of the Christmas octave, let them gather in the valley of Times Square and try to coax a spherical replica of the sun back to earth. My sentiments were contained in a refrain from a Joni Mitchell song: "It's coming on Christmas/They're cutting down trees/They're putting up reindeer/And singing songs of joy and peace/I wish I had a river/I could skate away on."

When I returned to Catholicism it was to the stark, real, powerful events of Holy Week, the doubts, betrayal, and pain of the Passion, the existential drama of the Days of Awe, the terrible beauty of the cross and the empty tomb. But Christmas pursued me down the labyrinthine ways.

I got married and our first Christmas together my wife and I argued over whether to get a tree.

"It would just be for us," I said. "It would be wasted."

She struggled to control herself, "Wasted?" she asked, and

the word rang with savage indignation.

We got the tree. We decorated it. I kept my opinions to myself. *Damn Dunder, damn Blitzen, damn all these empty clichés* when all that lies ahead is the killing emptiness of ordinary time.

Then, in my thirty-ninth year, came Genevieve.

The worst cliché of all! Star-struck father gets a first glimpse of his squealing daughter. Newborn, she is taken from her mother and handed to a nurse who washes and swaddles her and then puts her in her father's arms. Holy St. Joseph, as soon as she gets there she stops crying and her father becomes a weeping fool. It's September but a snatch of music keeps running through his head. *A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices.*

If this were TV, the next scene would be just as melodramatic: "Scrooge Revisited," brought to you by the United States Christmas Corporation. Genevieve's old man skips through the snow in his Santa Claus costume, goose in one hand, the tree on his back, the other hand trailing a great sack of presents. Mother and daughter wave gaily at father from behind the frosted windowpanes. *And now a word from our sponsor.*

Since this is real life, it's not quite that bad. I still have serious reservations. I still hate almost every piece of Christmas music, secular or religious (except for the wonderfully dolorous "O Come, O Come Emmanuel"). I still resent the commercialism and the phony good cheer and the molded plastic junk retailing at \$59.95. I still dread the trial of winter that the post-Christmas letdown only succeeds in making drearier and more painful.

And yet, well, maybe for the first time I have a fuller sense of the implications of the Incarnation. Maybe having been a witness to the process of childbirth, to the suffering my wife endured, I feel a new measure of understanding for the particulars of the narrative of Jesus' birth, however apocryphal they might be.

Perhaps I grasp now what I didn't before; how an infant can change the world, landing in the midst of our carefully delineated plans and reconfiguring the landscape; how, instead of being confining or constricting, a baby presents us with an invitation to let go, to love without reservation, to open ourselves right into the frozen center of our existence, slipping past all the fortifications around our hearts, embracing all the pain and possibility of another life.

Last year, for the first time I can remember, I looked carefully at a crèche. Seeing with the eyes of a new father, I was struck by the ridiculous size of the infant Jesus. He was ready for kindergarten. Joseph and Mary looked as if they had just come from a wedding feast at the Bethlehem Hilton instead of the shared ordeal of childbirth.

As with so much of Christmas, everything was unreal. But everything was there: the infinite potential of God's love; the challenge of his presence in the world; the utter inclusiveness of the Incarnation: women, men, Jews, gentiles, black, white, yellow, ox, ass, everything.

For Genevieve's first Christmas, I managed to put on a fairly convincing charade. I went without even a murmur of dissent to get the tree. I managed to do a little shopping without being overcome by that familiar wave of paralyzing exhaustion. I ate, drank, and was merry, and tried not to think too much about grim, bleak, harsh January.

This year, I'm doing even better. The clichés seem less offensive, the music a bit less grating, the festivities less hollow. I guess I'm just mellowing. Or maybe there's something to Christmas after all. Who knows? In any case, *Have yourself a very merry Christmas, because Santa Claus is coming to hark the herald angels, and to all a good night!*

Anne Porter **La Bella Notizia**

We're at the winter solstice
With its long nights
Wars are still not over
Weapons are heaped on weapons
Terror is hoarded like grain
Those who have no houses
Are sleeping out on the street
Scorched by the burning cold
And children are learning to starve
Before they learn to speak.

But this December night
Is like no other night
Angels blaze in the pasture
And all the sheep are kneeling
The brambles have thrown open
Their sweet-smelling flowers
While somewhere back in the hills
All the cocks are crowing
And there are brooks of torchlight
Streaming down the hillside
Where the shepherds are.

I'll try to catch up with the shepherds
As they go out searching
For that holy Child
Who's offering us his peace
Who out of love for us
Has chosen to be born
Of a young poor woman
In a cattle-shed.

Swaddled in strips
Of a torn shirt
Just as the angel told us
He shines in the dark valley.