

The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Christmas Story Sunday
Various Scripture Readings, Christmas and Otherwise
December 29, 2024

The Ghost Ships: A Christmas Story
By Angela Carter

Therefore that whosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas or the like, either by forbearing of labor, feasting, or any other way upon any such account aforesaid, every person so offending shall pay for every offense five shillings as a fine to the country.

*-Statute enacted by the General Court of
Massachusetts, May 1659, repealed 1681*

'Twas the night before Christmas. Silent night, holy night. The snow lay deep and crisp and even. Etc. etc.; let these familiar words conjure up the traditional anticipatory magic of Christmas Eve, and then - forget it.

Forget it. Even if the white moon above Boston Bay ensures that all is calm, all is bright, there will be no Christmas as such in the village on the shore that now lies locked in a precarious winter dream. (Dream, that uncensorable state. They would forbid it if they could.)

At that time, for we are talking about a long time ago, about three and a quarter hundred years ago, the newcomers had no more than scribbled their signatures on the blank page of the continent that was, as it lay under the snow, no whiter nor more pure than their intentions.

They plan to write more largely; they plan to inscribe thereon the name of God.

And that was why, because of their awesome piety, tomorrow, on Christmas Day, they will wake, pray and go about their business as if it were any other day.

For them, all days are holy but none are holidays.

New England is the new leaf they have just turned over; Old England is the dirty linen their brethren at home have just - did they not recently win the English Civil War? - washed in public. Back home, for the sake of spiritual integrity, their brothers and sisters have broken the graven images in the churches, banned the playhouses where men dress up as women, chopped down the village Maypoles because they welcome in the spring in altogether too orgiastic a fashion.

Nothing particularly radical about that, given the Puritans' basic premises. Anyone can see at a glance that Maypole, proudly erect upon the village green as the sap is rising, is a godless instrument. The very thought of Cotton Mather, with blossom in his hair, dancing round the Maypole makes the imagination reel. No. The greatest genius of the Puritans lay in their ability to sniff out a pagan survival in, say, the custom of decorating a house with holly for the festive season; they were the stuff of which social anthropologists would be made!

And their distaste for the icon of the lovely lady with her bonny babe - Mariolatry, graven images! - is less subtle than their disgust at the very idea of the festive season itself. It was the festivity of it that irked them.

Nevertheless, it assuredly is a gross and heathenish practice, to welcome the birth of Our Saviour with feasting, drunkenness, and lewd displays of mumming and masquerading.

We want none of that filth in this new place.

No, thank you.

As midnight approached, the cattle in the byres lumbered down upon their knees in homage, according to the well-established custom of over sixteen hundred English winters when they had mimicked the kneeling cattle in the Bethlehem stable; then, remembering where they were in the nick of time, they hastily refrained from idolatry and hauled themselves upright.

Boston Bay, calm as milk, black as ink, smooth as silk. And, suddenly, at just the hour when the night spins on its spindle and starts to unravel its own darkness, at what one could call, elsewhere, the witching hour -

I saw three ships come sailing in,
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day,
I saw three ships come sailing in
On Christmas Day in the morning.

Part II

Three ships, silent as ghost ships; ghost ships of Christmas past.

And what was in those ships all three?

Not, as in the old song, 'the Virgin Mary and her baby'; that would have done such grievous damage to the history of the New World that you might not be reading this in the English language even. No; the imagination must obey the rules of actuality. (Some of them anyway.)

Therefore I imagine that the first ship was green and leafy all over, built of mossy Yule logs bound together with ivy. It was loaded to the gunwales with roses and pomegranates, the flower of Mary and the fruit that represents her womb, and the mast was a towering cherry tree which, now and then, leaned down to scatter ripe fruit on the water in memory of the carol that nobody in New England now sang. The Cherry Tree Carol, that tells how, when Mary asked Joseph to pick her some cherries, he was jealous and spiteful and told her to ask the father of her unborn child to help her pick them - and, at that, the cherry tree bowed down so low the cherries dangled in her lap, almost.

Clinging to the mast of this magic cherry tree was an abundance of equally inadmissible mistletoe, sacred since the dawn of time, when the Druids used to harvest it with silver sickles before going on to perform solstitial rites of memorable beastliness at megalithic sites all over Europe.

Yet more mistletoe dangled from the genial bundle of evergreens, the kissing bough, that invitation to the free exchange of precious bodily fluids.

And what is that bunch of holly, hung with red apples and knots of red ribbon? Why, it is a wassail bob.

This is what you did with your wassail bob. You carried it to the orchard with you when you took out a jar of hard cider to give the apple trees their Christmas drink. All over Somerset, all over Dorset, everywhere in the apple-scented cider country of Old England, time out of mind, they souse the apple trees at Christmas, get them good and drunk, soak them.

You pour the cider over the tree trunks, let it run down to the roots. You fire off guns, you cheer, you shout. You serenade the future apple crop and next year's burgeoning, you 'wassail' them, you toast their fecundity in last year's juices.

But not in this village. If a sharp smell of fruit and greenery wafted from the leafy ship to the shore, refreshing their dreams, all the same, the immigration officials at the front of the brain, the port of entry for memory, sensed contraband in the incoming cargo and snapped: "Permission to land refused!"

There was a furious silent explosion of green leaves, red berries, white berries, of wet, red seeds from bursting pomegranates, of spattering cherries and scattering flowers; and cast to the winds and scattered was the sappy, juicy, voluptuous flesh of all the wood demons, tree spirits and fertility goddesses who had ever, once upon a time, contrived to hitch a ride on Christmas.

Then the ship and all it had contained were gone.

But the second ship now began to belch forth such a savoury aroma from a vent amidships that the most abstemious dreamer wrinkled his nose with pleasure. This ship rose low in the water, for it was built

in the unmistakable shape of a pie dish and, as it neared shore, it could be seen that the deck itself was made of piecrust just out of the oven, glistening with butter, gilded with egg yolk.

Not a ship at all, in fact, but a Christmas pie!

But now the piecrust heaved itself up to let humbling out into the water a smoking cargo of barons of beef gleaming with gravy, swans upon spits and roast geese dripping hot fat. And the figurehead of this jolly vessel was a boar's head, wreathed in bay, garlanded in rosemary, a roasted apple in its mouth and sprigs of rosemary tucked behind its ears. Above, hovered a pot of mustard, with wings.

Those were hungry days in the new-found land. The floating pie came wallowing far closer in than the green ship had done, close enough for the inhabitants of the houses on the foreshore to salivate in their sleep.

But then, with one accord, they recalled that burnt offerings and pagan sacrifice of pig, bird and cattle could never be condoned. In unison, they rolled over on to their other sides and turned their stern backs.

The ship span round once, then twice. Then, the mustard pot swooping after, it dove down to the bottom of the sea, leaving behind a bobbing mass of sweetmeats that dissipated itself gradually, like sea wrack, leaving behind only a single cannonball of the plum-packed Christmas pudding of Old England that the sea's omnivorous belly found too much, too indigestible, and rejected it, so that the pudding refused to sink.

The sleepers, freed from the ghost not only of gluttony but also of dyspepsia, sighed with relief.

Part III

Now there was one ship left.

The silence of the dream lent this apparition an especial eeriness.

This last ship was packed to the gunwales with pagan survivals of the most concrete kind, the ones in - roughly - human shape. The masts and spars were hung with streamers, paperchains and balloons, but the gaudy decorations were almost hidden by the motley crew of queer types aboard, who would have been perfectly visible from the shore in every detail of their many-colored fancy dress had anyone been awake to see them.

Reeling to and fro on the deck, tumbling and dancing, were all the mummers and masquers and Christmas dancers that Cotton Mather hated so, every one of them large as life and twice as unnatural. The rouged men dressed as women, with pillowing bosoms; the clog dancers, making a soundless rat-a-tat-tat on the boards with their wooden shoes; the sword dancers whacking their wooden blades and silently jingling the little bells on their ankles. All these riotous revellers used to welcome in the festive season back home; it was they who put the 'merry' into Merry England!

And now, horrors! They sailed nearer and nearer the sanctified shore, as if intent on forcing the saints to celebrate Christmas whether they wanted to or no.

The saint the church disowned, Saint George, was there, in paper armor painted silver, with his old foe, the Turkish knight, a chequered tablecloth tied round his head for a turban, fencing with clubs as they used to every Christmas in the Old Country, going from house to house with the mumming play that was rooted far more deeply in antiquity than the birth it claimed to celebrate.

This is the plot of the mumming play: Saint George and the Turkish knight fight until Saint George knocks the Turkish knight down. In comes the Doctor, with his black bag, and brings him back to life again - a shocking mockery of death and resurrection. (Or else a ritual of revivification, depending on one's degree of faith, and also, of course, depending on one's degree of faith in what.)

The master of these floating revels was the Lord of Misrule himself, the clown prince of Old Christmas, to which he came from fathoms deep in time. A calf's tail was stitched on to the rump of his baggy pants, which constantly fell down, to be hitched up again. His top hat sported paper roses. He carried an inflated bladder with which he merrily battered the dancing heads around him. He was a true antique, as old as the festival that existed at midwinter before Christmas was ever thought of. Older.

His descendants live, all year round, in the circus. He is mirth, anarchy and terror. Father Christmas is his bastard son, whom he has disowned for not being obscene enough.

The Lord of Misrule was there when the Romans celebrated the Winter Solstice, the hinge on which the year turns. The Romans called it Saturnalia and let the slaves rule the roost for the duration, when all was topsy-turvy and almost everything that occurred would have been illegal in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts at the time of the ghost ships, if not today.

Yet from the phantom festival on the bedizened deck came the old, old, message: during the twelve days of Christmas, nothing is forbidden, everything is forgiven.

A merry Christmas is Cotton Mather's worst nightmare.

If a little merriment imparts itself to the dreams of the villagers, they do not experience it as pleasure. They have exorcised the vegetables, and the slaughtered beasts; they will not tolerate, here, the riot of unreason that used to mark, over there, the inverted season of the year when nights are longer than days and the rivers do not run and you think that when the sun sinks over the rim of the sea it might never come back again.

The village raised a silent cry: Avant thee! Get thee hence!

The riotous ship span round once, twice - a third time. And then sank, taking its Dionysiac crew with it.

But, just as he was about to be engulfed, the Lord of Misrule caught hold of the Christmas pudding that still floated on the water. This Christmas pudding, sprigged with holly, stuffed with currants, raisins, almonds, figs, compressed all the Christmas contraband into one fearful sphere.

The Lord of Misrule drew back his arm and bowled the pudding towards the shore.

Then he, too, went down. The Atlantic gulped him. The moon set, the snow came down again and it was a night like any other winter night.

Except, next morning, before dawn, when all rose to pray in the shivering dark, the little children, thrusting their feet reluctantly into their cold shoes, found a juicy resistance to the progress of their great toes and, investigating further, discovered to their amazed and secret glee, each child a raisin the size of your thumb, wrinkled with its own sweetness, plump as if it had been soaked in brandy, that came from who knows where but might easily have dropped out of the sky during the flight overhead of a disintegrating Christmas pudding.

The end.

Epilogue:

Let me offer just one word about Carter's ending. She doesn't overthrow the Puritan order. Cotton Mather and his rigid discipline still prevail. She does, however, leave us with an exceedingly ripe remembrance. It is a kind of transitional object which can move from the world of magic to the world of the everyday. This raisin soaked in brandy is all that remains of the night's dream, but it is all that is needed for the imagination, and the life of faith, to reenchant the world, even in the smallest way. There is a Puritan in all of us, or most of us anyway, waiting to be awoken, enchanted, and lured by the festival of Christmas. Which is also the coming of a certain Christ - a nightmare to the Puritan soul, a joy and relief to the rest of us. May the enchantment of Christmas continue to find you in these long New England nights!