

Christmas Nightmares

Like many children growing up in the 1950's, he looked forward to Halloween even more than to Christmas. It was, admittedly, a difficult choice, because at Halloween, all he got was candy or a disappointing piece of fruit, while Christmas was a bigger bonanza even than his birthday. Nonetheless, after the anticipations of Christmas Eve and the visitations of carolers, the unwrapping of presents on Christmas morning was anticlimactic. Quickly working through the soft presents to get the socks and shirts out of the way, he moved on to the pair of Roy Rogers six-guns, chemistry set, or truck until his parents would bring out the big present—his first two-wheeler, a new sled, a pair of hockey skates. But then what did he have to look forward to? After an hour or two of showing off and comparing loot with his pals, there was the long slow day of losing interest in the new toys, ended by a dinner—worth looking forward to, certainly, for the food, but ruined by too much grown-up conversation or, worst of all, his grandparents who spoke some language they claimed was English but which he could never understand. If he was lucky, he would be permitted to escape to his room to read, though all too often his parents made him stay in the living room to make “conversation” with their friends. He obliged by showing off his amazingly boring set of astronomical statistics: the circumference of the earth, Mars, and Jupiter; Earth’s distance from the sun, Alpha Centauri, or Vega; the surface temperature of Venus and Mercury. A half-hour of this was usually enough to earn him a reprieve from the mind-numbed grown-ups. “Smart kid” was their polite way of saying, “Send him to bed.”

As he grew older, the finest moment was looking out the window at the stars glittering hard upon the heaped-up snow, knowing, with a sigh, that it was all over for another year.

Halloween was just the reverse, an ordinary day punctuated by the stupid parties at school that seemed designed to take the magic out of the holiday. In the early years, when he had been dressed up as a ghost—blinded by the sheet whose holes never matched his eyes—and dragged from house to house by an exasperated sister screaming, “Come on, hurry up, you little dope,” he came back more than once bruised and bleeding from running into a tree or splitting his head on the boulder that a crazy old woman kept in front of her cottage. But by the time he was eight or so, he could go out with his friends and face the terrors of a cold autumn night. If Christmas was a prison ruled by domineering old people who refused to let him play with his new toys—“Just keep that in the box until we have time to read the instructions”—Halloween was the GET OUT OF JAIL FREE CARD so sought after when losing at Monopoly with his sister; a born plutocrat who did not hesitate

to cheat. (She was, after all, the banker.)

He and his friends never actually soaped—much less waxed—any windows, though, in the case of old Mr. Van Horne, who spent September nights protecting his garden with a shotgun loaded with rock salt (so they said), they were sorely tempted. They did lie in wait behind bushes to jump out and scare the littler kids who came by, but that was the extent of their mischief. It did not matter what they did because they were free, free even to eat so much candy that they would be sick all night.

But as much fun as it was to demand—and get—the treats by methods that sounded a lot like the techniques used by the hard boys in the blackmail or protection rackets, the real thrill of Halloween was the eerie sense of something inexplicable out there, something that could not be explained away by an atheist father or by the rationalist moralizings he heard from Christian friends, who cheated, lied, and stole more than he did. Sure, Jesus must have been a swell guy, but as presented in school and at the occasional Sunday-school class he attended with neighbors, he was a little too much like the YMCA camp counselors who talked a good game about playing straight and leading a good life but were no less likely to write bad checks or abandon their wives. Less crudely generous than Santa Claus but certainly more real than the Easter Bunny, Jesus sometimes reminded him a bit of the Pilgrim fathers they had to pretend to be on Thanksgiving, despite the fact that among the Swedes, Polacks, and Micks in his class, none of them could trace his ancestry back to Plymouth or even Massachusetts Bay. At least Capt. John Smith had been an Indian fighter, but Jesus fought nobody, not even the Devil, who won in the end. That is what Easter was all about—dying on the cross with no complaints and then, oh yeah, some story about pie in the sky when you die, as Rev. Ike, the “success and prosperity preacher” on the radio, dismissed the immaterial blessings of the Faith. Perhaps his dislike of Christianity came from his father, but it was exacerbated by the preacher’s kid in his class—a nasty little piece of work who flattered the teachers and tried to get the other boys in trouble when they beat him up as he deserved.

On Halloween, there was nothing or no one you could put a name to, no cut-out figures in a pageant, no Squanto who betrayed his own people to curry favor with aliens, no gentle Jesus meek and mild, who refused to resist evil even



to save himself. There were only fearsome things with no name, dead people who walked the earth and the demons let out of Hell on a one-night pass.

He grew up and learned how wrong he had been about the Crucifixion, but he retained his distaste for the smarmy race-traitor Squanto. Instead of turning against Halloween, he appreciated it even more now that he understood its significance as the eve of the holy days of All Saints and All Souls, when Christians everywhere are supposed to honor those who have died in faith and fear. Yes, he understood the objections of fundamentalists who spotted borrowings from pagan cults such as the Roman Parentalia and Lemuria, but the same fundamentalists, so eager to put the Christ back in Christmas, took pagan trees into their houses and exchanged pagan rings at their weddings. What they really objected to, he began to suspect, was the sense of dread and awe the night inspired. All their chipper talk about dying and going straight to Heaven seemed to conceal a terrified refusal to consider the terrors of death. If death is such a pleasant thing for people who say the right magic words, then why did Christ Himself, praying in the Garden, say “Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me”? In a stronger age of faith, William Dunbar’s refrain “*Timor mortis conturbat me*” made sense to the most ardent believer, but in the age of Dale Carnegie and Norman Vincent Peale, no right-thinking man or woman had anything to fear. There was no *Dies irae* awaiting mankind, only an air-conditioned retirement complex in St. Petersburg.

Perhaps he was wrong, but each year, as he entered the Christmas season, he was appalled by the irreverence of public celebration. It was not just the cynical exploitation of a Christian holiday by non-Christian retailers—though that was bad enough—but professing Christians joined in the desecration, putting up Christmas decorations at the beginning of Advent, replacing the solemn carols and hymns he had sung in his atheist youth with foolish jingles concocted for megachurch theatricals and degrading the solemn joys of the season with their irreverent billboards that treated the Son of God like some miraculous detergent: “Kmart isn’t the only saving place.” Is it any wonder that people willing to trivialize the Creator and His Son with every breath they take and every horn they toot—“Honk if you love Jesus”—treat Christmas like one more excuse for a dance party, music provided by Kristal Myers and Hawk Nelson?

Walking down the street one late October day, he noted the yard displays for Halloween, especially the graveyard a family puts up every year with an expanding set of victims: “Tom Buck, he forgot to duck.” Silly but harmless, and not so irrelevant as the Santas and reindeer, Frosties and Season’s Greetings signs that greeted the birth of Christ. He thought, for some reason, of a truly revolting movie, Tim Burton’s *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, in which Jack, the “King of Halloween,” decides to displace Santa Claus and take over Christmas. Jack inevitably learns his mistake and restores Santa to his rightful place.

For all he knew, Tim Burton meant no disrespect; he may even have intended a positive message—that love and hap-

piness trump the power of fear—but it is the triumph of Hallmark sentimentality that he celebrates and not Christ’s birth and triumph over the grave. The trivialization did not start with Tim Burton or even with the Grinch fable of the leftist propagandist Ted Geisel or the American version of the Santa story, concocted largely by Charles Nast and Frank Baum. Baum’s *Wizard of Oz* is a more Christian story, he realized, than *The Life and Adventures of Santa Claus*. Going back still further to a childhood favorite, he began to understand that Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* is a moving and, despite the sentimentalism, largely wholesome fable, but there is hardly an allusion to the real Christmas story, and, such little faith was there in the 19th century, Dickens felt the need to invent his own supernatural characters and events—Marley’s ghost and the three ghosts of Christmas—which replace the miracles of the Incarnation, the Annunciation, the Visitation, and the choirs of angels singing, “Peace on earth to men of good will.”

The neopagan desecration of Christmas has been matched by a process that turned All Hallows Eve first into a gold mine for candy butchers and dentists and then into a glorification of all that is twisted and perverse. What films do people watch on October 31? It used to be wholesome moral cartoons like the Wolfman and Dracula. Now, people are more likely to watch Michael Myers in *Halloween* or Freddy Krueger in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. In addition to these examples of tasteful filmmaking, *Reader’s Digest* (that bastion of Middle American family values) also recommends *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Night of the Living Dead*, and—for 12 and above—*The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Instead of confronting supernatural evil and defeating it, these films glorify and worship it. Small wonder that decent evangelicals in their confusion have declared war on Halloween, though they might just as well declare war on Christmas, while they are at it.

The ancient pagans, from whom we have borrowed so many of the petty customs and rituals that enrich the Christian calendar, knew that life and death are serious matters. They also understood something basic that we have been trying to forget for centuries, though it is summed up in the Anglican Prayerbook’s burial rite (with no apologies to Job):

Man, that is born of a woman, hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay.

In the midst of life we are in death.

There were pagans who believed in a heaven for the virtuous, but, for the rest, their awareness of life’s brevity and the imminence of death gave a richer savor to their experience. *Una nox dormienda*, the poet warned his mistress: There is a night that must be slept forever. A Greek or Roman household was alive with the spirits of the dead, who had to be honored and propitiated. Post-Christians today, in fleeing death, are really denying life, not just the

life in the here and now, but the abundant life that has been promised to us. We sing (with Miss Peggy Lee), “If that’s all there is, my friends, then let’s keep dancing. Let’s break out the booze and have a ball.”

Even otherwise solid Catholic theologians have come to overvalue the here and now to such an extent that they oppose the death penalty. Yes, there are also reasons of prudence and humanity that should give a Christian pause

before signing his fellow man’s death warrant, but in this age of fear and denial we cannot see much beyond the end of our nose that is said to grow sharp when we are at the point of death. To the arguments of fear whined from every *New York Times* editorial page and preached from every electronic soapbox, we should do as the Pilgrim did when he “put his fingers in his ears and went on crying, ‘Life, Life, Eternal Life.’”



Saint-Séverin, I

by Catharine Savage Brosman

Left Bank, Paris

To pass the time, and get another caffeine fix
before the beadle opens up Saint-Séverin,
right at eleven, we sit down on a café terrace, just
across, and order our *express*. Except for bustle
at the doors of tiny restaurants—unloading vegetables,
rinsing down the sidewalks, putting out the chairs
and pocket-sized iron tables—it is very quiet
here, with tourists still in bed, or having coffee

and croissants in their hotel, and not yet ready
for another day of obligations. The only other clients
at this hour are from the neighborhood,
most, I think, *habitués*, one slightly drunk already.
The church is buttressed in my memory: *porche*,
nave, rose window, late Gothic spires, hooking clouds
today—and the cloister, where ten years ago
we drank champagne; and at the prow, breaching

waves of the old town, the apse—rebuilt from rubble
after explosives, sparing the rest, sheared it off
in nineteen-forty-four: low vaulting, mellow
stone, glass of garnet and Aegean blue, a cipse
of tracery and branching pillars, and the spiraled lines
of the famous twisted column at the center,
—a sinewy torso by Michelangelo, or a woman
in a swirling gown, cut along the bias, arms lifted,

dancing for the Lord. That May morning, fugue,
toccata, and chorale by Bach leafed out, with sprays
of bridal white and, niched into the great trees
of the nave, greenery like resurrection vine. Tourists
lingered, stared a bit—I heard some whispers
at the side—then ambled on, as the officiant read
the vows, and you two repeated them. Visitors
this time, we’ll walk there now, recalling Cana’s wine

and benediction, gracious gifts from One who made
life more abundant, whose long torture—nailed
to a denatured tree, his body writhing in great pain—
caused earth to quake, split rocks, extinguished
day, and rent the veil of the old covenant,
until an angel pointed to the bare sarcophagus,
and light restored the world—stone, wood, and bodies
reconciled and whole, all holding heaven’s word.