

SELECTED
STORIES

Nicholas Gordon

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A COLD EYE ON CHRISTMAS

"Let us cast a cold and scientific eye on Christmas," Dr. B. Huston Fawcett said to his final World History class before the Christmas break.

He paused to look over the thirty-seven adolescent faces in front of him, some waiting attentively, others already sliding off into glassy boredom.

Forty-two years earlier, when he had first taught this particular lesson in his first year at St. Mary's Academy, the faces had all been white and the students all Catholic. But over two generations many of the white Catholic families had moved away, replaced mostly by black non-Catholics, and so the diocese had opened its doors to refugees from the public school system of all races and religions. Now the faces in front of Dr. Fawcett were of all shades, the children of all sorts of cultures and traditions. But the souls, Dr. Fawcett thought, the souls had not changed.

So. Dr. Fawcett took a deep breath and started rolling the boulder up the hill one more time.

"Let's look at the story of Christmas as history. For example, does anyone know the date of Christ's birth?"

Hands shot up.

"Miss Doyle?"

"December 25th," Miss Doyle said confidently.

She was a beautiful shade of brown with black kinky hair and sapphire blue eyes.

"How do we know that?"

She shrugged. "That's when we celebrate Christmas."

"Yes," Dr. Fawcett agreed. "But Jesus Christ was born over two thousand years ago. How do we know that it was on December 25th?"

Silence.

"Well," Dr. Fawcett went on, "what are the main sources of our knowledge of Christ's birth?"

Hands shot up, fewer than before.

"Mr. Singletary."

Black, moon-faced Mr. Singletary was born again, and knew his chapter and verse.

"Matthew 2 and Luke 2."

"Very good!" Dr. Fawcett said. "And do either of them supply a date for His birth?"

The class waited as Mr. Singletary mouthed the words silently.

"No," he finally said.

"That's correct," Dr. Fawcett said. "In fact, there is no source that tells us the date of Christ's birth. Mr. Pfeiffer."

"Then why do we celebrate it on December 25?"

"The truth is," Dr. Fawcett said, "that for several centuries the Church didn't celebrate Christ's birth. Easter was the only holiday celebrating Christ. But December 25th was an important pagan holiday in the Roman world, celebrating the birth of the sun god, Saturnalia in the west and the Mithraic feast in

the east. So to compete with these pagan holidays, the Church began to celebrate Christmas on the same day."

"You mean it was made up?" Miss Doyle said, forgetting to raise her hand.

"Yes, it was made up," Dr. Fawcett said.

"To imitate pagan holidays?" Mr. Pfeiffer said.

"To compete with pagan holidays. But let's move on to the year. In what year was Christ born? Mr. Santiago."

"1 A.D." Mr. Santiago answered.

"How do we know that?"

"Well, it's 1 A.D. by definition, isn't it?"

"Yes, very good!" Dr. Fawcett said. "Very clever. But of course no one called it 1 A.D. at the time, did they?"

"No, of course not," Mr. Santiago agreed.

"So when did we decide that it was 1 A.D.?"

Mr. Santiago shrugged. No hands went up.

"Actually, it was calculated by a monk named Dionysius Exiguus in 525 A.D., who counted – actually, miscounted – back through the reigns of Roman emperors up to that time. Though of course five centuries after the birth of Christ no one really knew when that event occurred. Miss Doyle."

"You mean it's not 2007?"

Dr. Fawcett laughed. "Yes, of course it's 2007. But the point is that the number 2007 is just as arbitrary as the date December 25th. These are traditions created by the Church for a variety of practical reasons in the absence of any real knowledge.

But let's go on. There are, after all, a few things we do know. For instance, who was king when Christ was born. Miss Reagan."

"Herod."

"And how do we know that?"

"Matthew, I think. Isn't it Matthew that tells of the three kings and the massacre of the innocents?"

"Yes, it is, Miss Reagan. Very good. You know your scripture. And when did King Herod reign?"

Silence.

"King Herod reigned from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C.," Dr. Fawcett said. "He died in 4 B.C., sometime after a lunar eclipse on March 13 and before the start of Passover. So what does that tell us about the year of Christ's birth? Miss Bayliss?"

"That He must have been born before 4 B.C."

"Yes. And at least how much before?"

"Enough time for the wise men to see Him and report back to Herod, and then for Herod to massacre the innocents."

"Mr. Singletary?"

"Enough time for the Holy Family to travel to Egypt and live there awhile, since they stayed there until they heard of Herod's death. And since Herod slaughtered all of the male children up to two years old, he must have thought that Christ could have been born up to two years earlier. So Christ had to be born around 5 or 6 B.C."

"Excellent! Excellent!" Dr. Fawcett exclaimed.

"But we have another piece of the puzzle to consider. Remember that Joseph and Mary traveled to

Bethlehem just before Mary gave birth. Does anyone know why? Miss Mott."

"There was a census."

"And who ordered the census. Mr. Singletary?"

"Caesar Augustus."

"And who was governor at the time?"

Again the class waited as Mr. Singletary mouthed the words silently.

"Cyranius was governor of Syria," he finally said.

"Luke 2:2, right?"

Mr. Singletary nodded.

Dr. Fawcett strolled back and forth in front of the class as if pondering the point.

"No mention of Herod, right?"

Mr. Singletary nodded.

"Isn't that strange?" Dr. Fawcett wondered out loud. "Matthew talks about Herod. Does Luke so much as mention Herod?"

"No," Mr. Singletary said.

"Now we know when that census took place," Dr. Fawcett went on. "Sulpicius Quirinius (Cyranius in Greek) was appointed governor of Syria, which included Palestine, in 6 A.D., and soon after taking over he conducted the census to aid in tax collections. Miss Doyle."

"But Dr. Fawcett. How could Christ have been born during that census if He was born around 5 or 6 B.C.? It doesn't make sense."

"Quite right, Miss Doyle. It doesn't make sense."

"I mean, Luke is saying one thing and Matthew is saying another, right?"

"But the Holy Gospel is the word of the Lord!" Miss Elkins shouted out, unable to control herself. "It can't be wrong!"

"But lookit!" Mr. Santiago said. "If Herod died in 4 B.C. and the census took place in 6 A.D., something doesn't add up."

"Actually," Dr. Fawcett said, "scholars have been attempting to reconcile these dates for many years. Some suggest that Quirinius must have been governor twice and conducted two censuses. Others suggest that the King Herod mentioned in Matthew was not Herod the Great but one of his sons. But every explanation raises other problems. The fact is that we have a discrepancy between Matthew and Luke and no easy way to resolve it. Mr. Pfeiffer."

"Dr. Fawcett, why are you doing this just before we go on Christmas break? What's the point of this?"

"Very good, Mr. Pfeiffer! Very good! We get right to the heart of things. Mr. Pfeiffer, if someone could prove to you absolutely that Matthew and Luke were in conflict, which we have only suggested, not proven, but if it were proven that at least one of them had to be wrong, would you want to know that? Miss Kim."

"Yes, I would."

"Why?"

"Because it was the truth."

"Mr. Pfeiffer?"

"I wouldn't want to know anything about it!"

"Why not?"

"I believe in God's word!"

"Even if it were true that Matthew and Luke disagreed on something?"

"It couldn't be true. The word comes not from them but from the Lord."

More hands. A forest of quivering hands. The bell rang. No one seemed to notice.

"Miss Doyle?"

The beautiful dark face with the sapphire eyes smiled. "What's the difference when He was born? I can believe in Him anyway, can't I?"

"Yes, Miss Doyle, of course you can," Dr. Fawcett said. "But I'm afraid we've run out of time. Think about what we've said here. It has to do with the relationship between reason and faith. Each of you will have to work out that relationship for yourself over the course of your life. Have a Merry Christmas, class! I'll see you next year."

"Merry Christmas, Dr. Fawcett!" some shouted back. But others had already begun to argue about reason and faith, too engrossed to call out Merry Christmas.

Beautiful! Dr. Fawcett thought. How lovely! And what a gift it was to be able to bring young minds to a new awareness.

Christmas Eve, after Midnight Mass, found Dr. Fawcett on his knees before the nativity scene in his local parish church, praying to the infant Jesus. He

had come to mass alone, having lived alone since his wife had died 23 years earlier, and was now enjoying a few precious moments alone with Jesus while the sacristan, a friend, closed the building around him.

What he knew, and his students didn't know, was that St. Mary's Academy was closing at the end of the school year. The number of Catholics in the diocese was shrinking, and the diocese could no longer keep all of its schools open. Naturally, they were closing those furthest from the centers of Catholic population, of which St. Mary's was one.

Having seniority in the diocese, Dr. Fawcett could have been transferred to another school of his choice. But he was loath to force a younger teacher out of a job when he was past retirement age, and so he took the retirement package that the diocese offered.

He prayed to the infant Jesus that he had made the right choice for his life after retirement. For 42 years he lived in the same one-bedroom apartment, for 19 years with his wife, Carmela, and then for 23 years alone, monk-like, giving much of his meager income to St. Mary's, to his local parish, and to mission schools overseas.

He had intended to become a priest but then fell in love with Carmela, and so he changed his vocation to that of a lay teacher, moving across the divide from faith to reason.

Nor did he ever regret that choice, even though Carmela couldn't have children and died early of a cancer in her brain. He was grateful that he had known fleshly love with such a beautiful person, for

however long. And the life of reason, of a scholar, had excited him to the point of getting his doctorate in history and writing one book and several articles about the early history of the Church in North America, works that elicited a good deal of controversy and some academic recognition.

In July he would give up his apartment and go to teach in a mission school in the mountains of Bolivia, and he prayed for health, since that was what most worried him about his choice, years enough of good health so that he might be of use there and not a burden.

He prayed for the students whose education would be disrupted by the closing of the school. Some would have to travel long distances to the few schools that remained open. Others would have to return to the public schools they had fled. Grant them a life of faith and reason, he prayed, and the chance to know with clarity and understanding wonders that he would never see.

He prayed that their faith would not make them clap their hands over their ears and shut their eyes in an attempt to close themselves off from truths of the mind and senses. And he prayed that their reason would never undermine their faith, poisoning their will with a skepticism that would refuse so extraordinary a gift.

He prayed in gratitude for his own faith, which had filled his life with love and meaning. And he prayed that in his new life he would have the strength

to do God's will and to accept gladly the fate God intended for him, whatever that might be.

Finally, as he heard his friend the sacristan noisily closing cabinets and drawers, he wished the infant Jesus, a plastic doll in the arms of a plastic Mary, faced by a kneeling plastic Joseph, a happy birthday.

"Happy Birthday, Blessed Lord!" he whispered, tears of happiness starting to his eyes. "Happy Birthday!"

He got up off his knees, turned, said goodnight to his friend the sacristan, and walked out into the cold Christmas morning.

A GUILTY CONSCIENCE

From: Andrew Dolittle <thedude101@hotmail.com>
To: Dante Espinoza <charmer11@yahoo.com>
Date: 9 Aug 2007
Re: Arrgh!!!

Thanks a lot! I had a mouse problem, now I have a python problem!

Last night I did what you said, took the thing out to cuddle with it, get it used to me, and bang! it shows me its fangs and hisses and I drop it, all six feet of it, and off it goes, slithering quick as a bunny for the nearest wall.

And now it's gone! Gone! Who knows where? Probably hunting for mice in the wall, happy as a clam.

What worries me is the guy right below me. He's a lawyer! And he's nuts! And he's had three heart attacks! So if he sees this thing slithering out of the wall at him, I'm cooked! I'm fried! I'm yesterday!

From: Eli Wynner <winnerwynner@gmail.com>
To: June Wynner <juneloveselvis@aol.com>
Date: 9 Aug 2007
Re: Ghosts

You say you don't believe in ghosts, but I'm

telling you, there's a ghost in this apartment. I actually saw it last night. Well, not actually saw it since it chose to be invisible. But I saw it move something.

I was as usual having a tough time getting to sleep (I know you say a guilty conscience needs no accuser) when I heard some eerie sounds coming from the living room, like someone bumping into things. Well, you know what I mess I have in there.

So I went to have a look, and when I flicked on the light one of the piles of books by my armchair suddenly spun half round like a record on a malfunctioning turntable.

Holy crap! I thought, and turned out the light. As if the thing couldn't see in the dark.

And then I felt the presence of evil in the room. I can't describe it any other way. An ancient, cold, remorseless, unstoppable evil permeating the air.

I backed out of the room and went back into bed to think about it. A ghost! Who was it? What did it want? How was I going to get rid of it?

My heart was pounding, and I thought: What if it comes in here? Maybe I should just leave. But where would I go? And for how long?

Maybe it wants revenge. Maybe it's out to scare me so much that I have another heart attack.

I decided that the main thing I had to fear was fear itself, and that calmed me down a little. I had to approach the situation scientifically. It's got to be someone's ghost. The ghost of someone I screwed big time. So I started going over all the people I've cheated over the years – as you know, a long, long list.

Not including you, of course, or any of my other exes, since you're all still alive, as far as I know. So I boiled it down to three really big-time victims, all of whom are no longer with us.

I decided to make restitution to each of them, one by one, starting with the least expensive (hope springs eternal). If the next night the ghost is gone, fine. If not, I'll have to move on to the next.

So what do you think? Sound like a plan?

From: Andrew Dolittle <thedude101@hotmail.com>
To: Dante Espinoza <charmer11@yahoo.com>
Date: 10 Aug 2007
Re: Get this thing outta here!

Next weekend? You're gonna come over next weekend? You got to be kidding me!

What if Cuddles crawls into Wynner's bed? And the guy's heart stops? And his kid or cousin or concubine sues me? What do I do then?

Don't tell me it's not an aggressive snake! It's a snake! And it's big! Get it outta here!!!

From: Eli Wynner <winnerwynner@gmail.com>
To: June Wynner <juneloveselvis@aol.com>
Date: 10 Aug 2007
Re: One Down

Yesterday I sent a check for \$14,873.33 to each of Ray Goldberg's three children. You remember Ray Goldberg. He was the guy whose suit I settled early

when I took you to Hawaii to make up for my first affair with Gloria.

Boy, was he pissed! He claimed he got only half of what he should have, but actually it was a third.

Well anyway, the ghost isn't Ray's. I sat in the armchair all night in the dark, waiting. I must have dozed off because around 3:00 in the AM I felt something cold and muscular touch my leg!

My heart pounding, I switched on the light, and the poltergeist practically lifted my chair! With me in it! I felt the center push up against my ass, as though a fist at the end of a long, sinewy arm pressed up against it and suddenly released!

"Who the hell are you?" I screamed at it. "Who? Who? What do you want? Tell me and I'll do it! Just tell me, for heaven's sake!"

Of course, no answer. The thing had done what it wanted to do. My heart felt like it was flip-flopping at the end of a broken spring.

I'd better get it right today! The second one on my list is Beryl Hyde. You remember – the widow I was trustee for. That's how I got the leg-breakers off my back.

Let's hope it's Beryl. I don't know how much more of this I can survive.

From: Eli Wynner <winnerwynner@gmail.com>

To: June Wynner <juneloveselvis@aol.com>

Date: 11 Aug 2007

Re: Two Down

It's not Beryl. I sold off my entire Hathaway portfolio and sent her grandnephew \$225,000 – that's with interest from 1983 – with instructions to distribute it as he thinks she would have intended.

Then I took up my living room vigil. I know it might sound stupid to haunt a ghost, as it were, but I want to know when the damned thing is gone.

I laid a copy of my letter to Beryl's grandnephew with my checkbook register on the coffee table, just in case the ghost wanted proof, and waited.

Nothing. All night, nothing.

"You were Beryl!" I shouted out loud to the dawn. "You haunted me out of every penny of my savings! But thank God you're finally gone! And I still have my annuity!"

I waited for the gray to turn a little brighter and went back to the bedroom hoping to salvage just a bit of sleep.

And there it was! It must have been lying in wait for me on the bed! As I entered the room the sheets began thrashing wildly, and then the night table starting rocking as though an earthquake were shaking the house.

I raced back into the living room and cowered in the armchair, waiting for it to come for me, waiting for the heart attack that I knew was imminent. But it never came. Eventually I fell asleep in the chair. I wasn't going to get back into that bed!

So it has to be Grandma. I never told you about Grandma. This was before we were married.

After Dad split with Mom and then disappeared, she made me the executor of her estate.

But her will left me only \$1,000 to compensate for being the executor. Every penny of the rest went to Beth Abraham – the nursing home that was taking care of her.

So when she was finally sinking into her last coma, I wrote up another will, reversing the priorities, and got her to sign it, telling her this was just a minor rewording to solve a technical problem in the previous will.

She was barely able to sign the thing, forget about checking to see whether I was telling her the truth. When she died I got enough money to buy into what later became my practice. Beth Abraham got the thousand bucks, which, by the way, they were very happy with.

Well, today I sold my pension. The whole thing. After taxes, that gives me \$843,295.27 – Grandma's legacy plus interest. The ghost had better be Grandma because now I'm clean, I've got nothing left. I'm going to be living on social security.

But my conscience is clean, too. Funny thing. I never felt guilty about anything I did, not to either the living or the dead. I figured that people with a conscience were just children who never grew up. You look around the world and you see what people do, and pretty soon you begin to wonder why you should be one of the only chumps.

But I feel right about this. The ghost is Grandma, and she's haunting me for a reason. There's

a power greater than me or the ghost, something that's making this happen, that makes everything happen for its own purpose in its own time.

From: Andrew Dolittle <thedude101@hotmail.com>
To: Dante Espinoza <charmer11@yahoo.com>
Date: 11 Aug 2007
Re: Yuck!

So I bought two dead mice from the pet store and I rubbed them all along the moldings of the living room walls, like you said. And I put them with the hide box beside the tank, and now I'm waiting.

This had better work! I can't believe you lent me Cuddles to get rid of mice and now I have to buy dead mice from the pet store to get rid of Cuddles!

From: Andrew Dolittle <thedude101@hotmail.com>
To: Dante Espinoza <charmer11@yahoo.com>
Date: 12 Aug 2007
Re: Cuddles is back!

Well, it worked! This morning the dead mice were gone and the thing was in the hide box, just like you said it would be.

So I picked up the hide box with the thing in it and put it back in the tank.

You'd better believe I'm not taking it out again! It's all yours! Come and get it!

I wonder if it ever did get down into Wynner's apartment.

From: Eli Wynner <winnerwynner@gmail.com>
To: June Wynner <juneloveselvis@aol.com>
Date: 12 Aug 2007
Re: Free at Last!

Yes! It was Grandma!

I spent the whole night walking back and forth between the living room and bedroom, with forays into the bathroom and kitchen – and nothing! The sense, the smell of evil is gone! I'm free!

Shows you what scientific method can do. Hypothesis, experiment, result, conclusion. Works every time.

Not that it didn't cost me. I'm down to social security. But I'm square with the world. Or at least with Ray, Beryl, and Grandma. I know I owe you, too, and a lot of other people. But you can't squeeze blood from a stone. I did what I could, under the circumstances. Thanks to the ghost.

But I forgot – you don't believe in ghosts.

A HANUKKAH MIRACLE

Rabbi Joel Feigelman's congregation fired him in August, and, having no other source of income, he was forced to put together hurriedly a patchwork of part-time positions.

On the sabbath he conducted services Friday night and Saturday at the Daughters of Jacob Home for the Aged. Mondays and Thursdays he gave spiritual comfort to Jewish patients at Bauman Memorial Hospital, and Tuesdays at the Hospital of St. John of the Cross. Wednesdays he gave classes on Judaism at the Fort Dixon Hills Senior Citizens Center.

Not the life he had envisioned for himself thirty years earlier at Union Theological Seminary. But neither was his messy divorce after twenty-seven years of marriage, nor the embarrassing dismissal by his congregation in response to some admittedly inappropriate behavior with a married congregant in the aftermath of his sexual liberation.

One evening in the waning days of November he was listening to Dave Brubeck in his furnished room when the phone rang.

"Rabbi Joel Feigelman?" came a distant, slithering voice, strained through a cell phone.

"Yes?"

"This is Murray Rosenbaum. Sorry for the bad connection. I'm in Singapore."

Rabbi Feigelman noticed the tattooed numbers on her cadaverous arm. A Holocaust survivor, once again skin and bones.

The hospice nurse explained that Mrs. Rosenbaum had been given two or three months until a metastasized melanoma killed her, but her doctor and medical proxy had agreed instead to stop dialysis, which would end her life more swiftly and far less painfully in four or five days.

The likelihood of her making it even to the first night of Hanukkah was slim. The likelihood of her making it to the end was zero.

Please, God! Rabbi Feigelman prayed, just half jokingly. Two more weeks! I need the money.

On the first night of Hanukkah, Rivka Rosenbaum was still alive, though barely. Rabbi Feigelman showed up, menorah, matches, and candles in a plastic shopping bag.

The woman was in a coma, he was told, and would have absolutely no consciousness of what he was doing. Still, he was being paid, so Rabbi Feigelman set the menorah up on the little rolling table by her bed, lit the Shamos, and then with the Shamos the candle for the first night, singing the blessings as he did so.

He set the menorah on the window sill and looked over at his audience.

She turned uncomfortably in bed, breathing heavily, then turned again and moaned, as if in pain.

She opened her eyes and stared at Rabbi Feigelman as though he weren't there.

