**SHOPPING FOR CHRISTMAS DINNER**

*Our meddling intellect misshapes the beauteous forms of things.*

William Wordsworth

“Strange Fits of Passion”

It was Christmas Eve Day, as they call it in the South, otherwise known as the day before Christmas. I was rushing to the nearest Winn-Dixie (known by the locals as Lose-Yankee) to pick up items that I had neglected to buy on my “big” shopping trip two days before. I had, after all, invited 24 people for Christmas dinner. I needed a can of cranberries, some fresh mushrooms, and a can of peas. I was in a rush.

As I entered the canned vegetable aisle, I was struck to see an unusually large young lady unintentionally blocking my way. She was wearing a huge, tent-like dress that served to hide most of her corpulence, except for her massive claves. Around her top she wore what was probably a hand-knit sweater, which was both unbuttoned and unbuttonable—due to her girth. The sweater had several holes in it.

Her husband, unshaven for several days, tried to keep up with her, as she slowly pushed the cart ahead. He appeared to be slightly crippled and wore a constant smile on his face. He was also overweight, though his younger wife must have outweighed him by at least two times. His pant hung dangerously low because of his rounded tummy.

They had a daughter, about eight or nine years old, I would guess, who was slightly overweight herself. The dress she wore seemed too small, and her hair looked dirty.

This scene captured me, and I was no longer in such a rush. They didn’t seem to notice my presence, so I lingered and pretended to study the shelves, now with a can of buttoned mushrooms in my hand, instead of the fresh ones I had come for. Here is what I saw and heard.

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The mother asked the little girl to find the best price on a can of baked beans. The girl quickly scanned the different brands and called out the price per once for each brand and then handed her mother two cans of the least-cost brand. What was amazing was that this store did not have a listing of the prices per once, which is not required by law. The little girl had done it in her head! The same thing happened in the selection of the canned corn. She deftly found the least-cost brand per once, rapidly calling out the cents per once, seemingly seeking her parents’ approval. She did it rapidly as though it were printed in front of her, which it was not.

They continued down the aisle in the same fashion until they had eight or ten cans in the cart. The father said, “Do we half enough for this much? How bout the meat?” The mother started picking up the cans in the cart and said, “This un is 89 cent, and so is this un.” He said, “Well, ain’t that already a dollar sixty?”

The little girl, who had wandered down the aisle and had been admiring the applesauce, returned and said, “It all comes to $9.37, including tax.” To my amazement, her parents ignored her and continued to argue the cost of what had been selected. The little girl went down to the fresh meat counter and checked out the hamburger. I walked in her direction, and I overheard her stating the prices per ounce—not per pound—of the various meat selections.

The parents by now had gone to the canned meat aisle, next over, and selected two kinds of canned meat. The little girl caught up with them and immediately asked her mother to substitute the cans for the cheaper brands. “These are cheaper,” she said. Her smiling father said, “No Wilma, we want them ‘uns.” She smiled back and said, “O.K., it’s now $13.23.” The father said, “We had better check out then.”

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I write this 30 years later from my best recollection of what happened then. The prices might not be exactly right, but the main points—and especially Wilma—have stood out vividly in my mind, as I have thought many times about that lovely family shopping for Christmas dinner: Two nearly retarded parents and a precocious child. They did not treat her as remarkable; she treated them as one should have treated parents.

(I would not have ever recorded this small but precious past event if had not been for what happened the night before last.)

But I need to explain myself.

All of this happened back in 1990 when I was a middle-aged professor of geography at the University of Georgia. The next year I left the University to take a position at a fairly well-known university in a large metropolitan area in the western part of the United States. My duties at the new institution challenged me and consumed me, though I certainly kept in contact with my many friends and colleagues at the University of Georgia.

In 2020, when I was a very old man, I was asked to serve as honorary chair of a “Blue Ribbon” committee at the University of Georgia to select a distinguished scholar of world renown to assume a chaired professorship at an annual salary of $50 million with an additional 5 million in discretionary funds to be used for any professionally related expenses. This was to be the planet’s first so-called “Fifty-Professorship,” named in honor of the generous benefactor, I.C. Reed, who earned her only “A” at the University of Georgia in Geography 4405, Geographic Information Systems for Teachers, back in 1999. She is now the Monarch of World Peace in the Chelsea Clinton administration. I was delighted to be called back to the old campus. How it had changed!

I flew into Athens, Georgia, on the Trump-Morman Airbreeze and checked into the Dan Quayle Presidential Hellicop-Port. That evening I reviewed the dossiers of the four finalists being considered for this distinguished professorship. One clearly stood out as having the most remarkable and unbelievable credentials. But I had studied the nominees carefully before. Besides, I was eager to see the new campus and the new town.

I found myself in my old part of Athens. I found myself in the same old grocery store location, now named the Yankee-Siko mart. It was so different 30 years ago. I found myself standing in front of the fresh meat counter beside a slightly plump middle-aged woman who was rapidly mumbling numbers to herself. She said, “Kangaroo is $13.94 per ounce; hog-cow is $19.16 per ounce; the tuna-turkey is $17.87 per ounce.” But the meat prices, as required by law, were listed per pound!

I turned to her and blurted, “Wilma!” She was startled. She said, “Excuse me, but I used to practice my arithmetic in this store when I was a child. This was a special store to me, where my parents and I used to shop for Christmas dinner. Usually, we just shopped in Wider, which was exactly 12.56 miles from where I used to live.”

I nodded.

“I haven’t been back here in a long time. My parents are both dead, and I am back in Athens where I am being considered for a distinguished faculty position at the University. My interview before the selection committee is tomorrow.”

I did not speak!

She handed me her business card. Here is what it said:

Dr. Wilma A. Strong

Member, Planetary Academy of Sciences

The Carl Sagan Professor of Mathematics

University of Earth

Moscow, United States of America

738U-24K

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Needless to say, she was the unanimous choice of the committee the next day.

(I never told the story; I just flew home today and wrote this.)

Merry Christmas!