**THE CHRISTMAS MYSTERY GUEST**

When I was in my early-to-mid 40s and unmarried, I almost always had dinner parties on the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. My mother always flew down from Indiana for Christmas.

At each of these feasting adventures, I would always invite a mystery guest, a person of character: unique, distinctive, and captivating. If dinner was to be served at, say, 1:00 p.m., I would invite everyone at 11:00 a.m., except the mystery guest who was due to make his or her much-noted and much-anticipated entrance at 12:00 noon. It got so the regulars at my dinner parties always titillatingly looked forward in anticipation to who the mystery guest would be. The mystery guests did not know of course that they were mystery guests. I picked people basically for their entertainment value.

For example, I once invited Mr. Jones, a retired civil engineer who had worked for many years in Brazil and now had just retired from a second career as a statistics professor at the University of Georgia. Dr. Jones was from Wales and had no local family. I knew him to be a well-read and lonely man. After a couple of beers, he was the center of attention, regaling us all with his stories.

I once had Mr. Ed Weeks as a mystery guest. He was from a prominent Savannah family but drank too much beer to live near them in Savannah anymore. Mr. Weeks had become a local character who would recite his poetry in bars to college students for free beer. Mr. Weeks was also known around Athens, including the University of Georgia campus, as the Sandwich Board man, as he would walk around with a wooden sandwich board with advertisements hanging from straps on his front and back. He would advertise an Athens restaurant, owned by a man from New York. When James Dickey, the famed literary figure and distinguished poet from the University of South Carolina, visited Georgia to present a campus lecture, Georgia’s poet-in-residence, Coleman Barks, encountered our local poet, Mr. Weeks, on a downtown street. Coleman asked Mr. Weeks to recite one of his own poems. Mr. Weeks said he would recite for Mr. Dickey the shortest poem in the English language” “Fly Dies,” as Mr. Weeks reached out and clapped his hands simulating the squashing of a fly. (It turns out that the mystery guest in this story refused to clap or clasp other people’s hands because of something he had read in the Bible.) I once told Coleman Barks, that his name was a sentence. He never seemed to like me much after that.

Mr. Weeks recited numerous poems from memory during one of my Thanksgiving dinners, but ceased his entertainment role after his fifth beer (since his arrival), after spilling nearly half of it on the carpet. Mr. Weeks ended up spending the night in the back bedroom, but aroused himself the next morning and slipped away. And I thought he stayed too long!

One fourth of July, I had two mystery guests, an anorexic teenage girl and the largest lady in Clarke County. It was outrageous! I even took a photograph of them together as they ate. The anorexic girl out-ate the large lady, and then insisted that my lady-friend drive her home immediately upon completing her most plentiful dinner (bulimial?).

I could tell you about a lot of others, such as the Native American on Thanksgiving Day, the talented but hard-of-hearing violinist, the teenage boy who walked on his hands throughout the house carrying a plate of food on his foot. But this story is about Pilgrim, which was his last name.

It was curious how I came to know him. All of a sudden, there was this homeless guy (Pilgrim) hanging out in downtown Athens. He had a very long, unkempt red beard and flaming, flowing red hair. He dressed in a greenish Mao-like outfit that came almost down to his knees. He was a large, sturdy man about 30-35 years old. He toted a gigantic backpack, holding all his belongings, on his back. I struck up several conversations with him over more than a year during which I saw him in downtown Athens, and he turned out to be an intelligent, witty, gentle person. He also had unclassifiable religious beliefs which he enjoyed proselytize and perpetrating on other Athens homeless people or anyone else who would listen to him. His odd views were nevertheless Bible-based, such as his refusing to shake hands because the Bible says somewhere, according to pilgrim, “There should be no striking of hands.” All of a sudden, I saw Pilgrim no more.

During Fall Quarter of 1983, I lived in Bloomington, Indiana, on sabbatical where I had been a graduate student 20 years before at Indiana University. I was “doing research.” And there was Pilgrim, now the owner of a bicycle, before it was stolen, but still with his backpack and greenish Mao-coat. Despite his fierce appearance, he was tolerated pretty well in college towns, and again we had several conversations. He didn’t smoke, drink, or take drugs. When he started on his religious interpretations, I would tell him to stop. I didn’t want to hear it, and if he kept on that topic I would walk away. So we talked about a lot of interesting but nonreligious concerns. I told him I was an atheist and that seemed to frighten him.

One time he asked me, “Do you remember when the world changed?” I didn’t know what he meant, but I said, “Yes, but I don’t remember exactly what year it was.” He appeared astonished and said, “In 1967, of course, right after I graduated from high school.” I asked him, “Just how did the world change for you?” He peered at me in disbelief and said, “Don’t you remember?” Everything suddenly got mixed up. Everything was confusing and nothing was the way it used to be.” I said, “Yes, that’s right.”

I didn’t have my Thanksgiving dinner in fall of 1983, but I moved back to Athens in time to have a successful Christmas dinner, when my mystery guest was a microbiology professor in his mid-50s who had suffered a stroke. He spoke proudly and eloquently about the major scientific breakthroughs of the past couple of centuries but could remember nothing that happened in the last two years since his stroke. He couldn’t even remember who I was or why he was in my home. But when he and his wife came into the house, he soon became of great entertainment value.

Then in 1987, the Association of American Geographers held its annual meeting in Portland, Oregon. Walking downtown the first afternoon of the meeting, I encountered Pilgrim! He recalled my name. “Mr. Wheeler,” he called out. I remembered not to offer my hand. As I was rushing on my way to a meeting, I told him to meet me right here on this corner tomorrow morning at 8:00 and I would buy him breakfast at McDonald’s across the street.

Sure enough, Pilgrim was there the next morning at 8:00, but he wouldn’t let me buy him anything to eat. He ordered grapefruit juice. He said Americans throw away so much good food that it was a sin to eat in restaurants. He said he got to know when different restaurants and grocery stores throw out their food, and he planned his daily schedule accordingly. He had once given a few dollars to a pal who was down on his luck, and Pilgrim recounted his infuriation when he saw this person a few minutes later actually eating in a restaurant. No more generosity to that guy.

Pilgrim told me he left Athens and hitchhiked to Georgetown near Washington D.C., where he stayed for several months. Then he traveled to New England where he grew up, though he refused to tell me which state it was, never mind the city. He had checked the telephone directory in his hush-hush hometown and found the listing for his mother, Mrs. Alice Pilgrim. He concluded that his father must be dead. He put money into the pay phone to call his mother, but he said something told him at the last minute not to talk with her. So, he went to Evanston, Illinois and caught a freight train to Portland, Oregon, where I was now talking to him in McDonald’s.

When we departed, without a handshake, I said, “Look me up if you ever get back to Athens, Georgia.” He said he might just get back to Athens someday.

It was December 10, 1988, when I feigned exaggerated astonishment in meeting Pilgrim on College Avenue in downtown Athens, Georgia. We continued our strange relationship where it had left off in Portland, Oregon, hardly missing a beat. Naturally, Pilgrim was my mystery guest that Christmas of 1988, which was my mother’s last Christmas to visit Athens before her death.

After all the regular guests had arrived, Pilgrim made his timely entrance with his flaming red hair and full unkempt beard, his huge backpack, and his green Mao-outfit. He was quite a fright, and the smaller children shied away.

Soon Pilgrim was talking and entertaining the other guests. He seldom, if ever, drew street crowds this sizable, and especially confined basically to one small room. When he started his religious spiel, I asked him to leave out religion “so as not to offend anyone.” Pilgrim obeyed and had much to say about many other things that only a street person would know. I was taking photos of various people, when Pilgrim told me never to photograph him. He did not believe in photographs. You already know I am outrageous, so I do not mind telling that I covertly took his photograph.

After dinner, most of the guests left, except for the house guests and Pilgrim. In fact, it turned out that Pilgrim became a house guest. I knew he would politely leave when I asked him to, but his frightening appearance had been modified by his gentle and intelligent nature.

Later that night we had leftovers. I thought Pilgrim would leave after that for the weed patch behind Dudley Park where he said he slept. But he stayed, stayed overnight.

The next morning he was apparently up early and he fixed a loose doorknob on the back door. He had cleaned and reloaded the dishwasher, and was sweeping the walk when I got up. He took it upon himself to do odd jobs around the house and yard, including washing my car and finishing my back fence. He stayed for all the meals and fit right in, doing stray jobs and tasks I had put off.

He did this for three days and had finally exhausted all the outstanding tasks. He was extremely warm and friendly with my family, walked to the grocery store to buy cokes (I gave him the money), and was interested in my mother’s stories about her life as a young girl in Indiana.

Nevertheless, I finally decided it was time for him to leave. I said, “Pilgrim, we have all enjoyed your visit and all the help you have been here these last few days, but now it is time for you to go. Take some fruit from the bowl as it is too much for us to eat.”

He responded good-humoredly, “O.K. I was just testing to see how long you would let me stay. Do you know what?” Pilgrim said, putting some apples and oranges in his enormous backpack, “I decided last night that I will go see my mother and her family in Somerset, Massachusetts. I know I never told you exactly where I was from. My stay here brought back the good memories of my childhood and growing up. After the year the world changed and I had a big fight with my father, I vowed I would just retire from life and live as I have been successfully living for the past 21 years. But now, I think I am ready to go back home. I’ll pay you the charge if I may use your phone to tell my mother I’m on my way. I know the number.”

I said, “There will be no charge,” and I walked out of the room for his privacy.

Every Christmas since 1988, I have received a Christmas card and a short note from Pilgrim in Somerset, Massachusetts. He is now unretired at age 49 and working as a librarian.

Merry Christmas!