

MARGARET'S CHRISTMAS TREE

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Late in 1963, I was one of a group of policy advisers who met one evening during the holidays at the home of Dr. J. Herbert Hollomon. Our task was to propose changes in national science policy for the new president to consider in his upcoming State of the Union message. It was the first time I had been to the Hollomon house, and his wife, Margaret, answered the door. She was barefoot, dressed in a peasant's outfit, with her long, graying hair done up in Elizabethan braids. She welcomed us warmly. The Hollomon furnishings were late medieval to 17th century English, except for an old French *fleur-de-lis* tapestry on the wall. A large Christmas tree stood in front of the window in the dining room. On it hung many figures and ornaments but no lights.

President Kennedy brought Dr. Hollomon into government from General Electric, where he directed its research lab at Schenectady in upstate New York. His job was to establish the country's first national civilian science policy. I was recruited from my post in the State Department to serve as his legal counsel. After Kennedy was shot, Hollomon stayed on as a member of the President's Science Advisory Council.

The Hollomon household was busy and exciting. Three Hollomon kids were at home for the holidays--two from prep schools and one from Harvard—the fourth was away in the Peace Corps. All evening, young people full of energy and verve were bursting in and out.

Margaret brought drinks and snacks as we began our work. But instead of leaving the room, she sat down on the floor and listened. Sometimes to our surprise she would

interrupt with a comment or two. She also refreshed drinks. We finished our work and Herb Hollomon grew tired. “Stay as long as you’d like,” he said to us, “but I’m going to bed.” Margaret followed Herb toward the stairs. “I’ll be right back,” she said to us. “He needs some TLC. Please stay.” The others had to go, but I lingered. When Margaret returned, she found me in the dining room looking at the great variety of ornaments on the tree. “Men like Herb are national assets,” she said. “They are invaluable. But they think they’re invincible. They bear many scars. They don’t imagine how wounded their souls are--like gardens, they need tender, loving care,” she said.

Hollomon shared the belief that modern science grew from humanistic revolts against religious authority and superstition. He wasn’t exactly an atheist or even a complete secular humanist. He was a Rockefeller Republican--and an Episcopalian at that--for tradition’s sake if not from personal belief. The reason for living in the midst of all the old English furniture, he told me later, was that he wanted his children to be surrounded by artifacts from such a creative and innovative period. I liked that. It matched my own admiration of the English and Scottish Enlightenments—symbolized not only by John Locke and Sir Isaac Newton but also by David Hume, that happy pagan, who influenced the founders of our constitution with his skepticism about moral virtue. But Margaret’s antennae were on high alert that evening; she sensed something else.

“What are you hiding from?” Margaret asked me, rather abruptly as I stood by her Christmas tree. Good heavens, I thought. She has found me out. She must sense how little I really know. “Well, I’m just trying to help Herb with the legal aspects of science policy,” I muttered. “Why should I want to hide anything?” I winced at the sound of these words. I should have gone home.

“You’re valuable, too,” she said, “but a little blind. Just like Herb and the others.” She was deadly serious and frighteningly direct.

“What are you saying?” I asked.

“You all live among gods and shadows you cannot even see.” She swept her hand across the tree.

Margaret was drinking vodka straight, now. I was noticing how eclectic her tree ornaments were—here was an ancient chariot, there were Celtic and Greek crosses, tiny masks from Africa, a Star of David, an Aztec sun, the Buddha, a small menorah, a Canopic box, a star and crescent, and many other signs and symbols. I touched a black Egyptian figure with a falcon’s head. Margaret came closer. “That’s Horus--son of Osiris and Isis,” she commented. “Ancient Egyptians prayed to Horus. His mother, Isis, conceived him--magically--after his father died. Then she brought Osiris the father back to life in the dark underworld—in the next life.”

“You like Horus?” I asked.

“You see, when he was born, Isis had to hide him away on an island to protect him from a powerful enemy—his uncle Set who wanted to destroy him. And because Isis had powers over life, the people wanted Horus to seek his mother's protection for them, too, so they might live again in the next world after death. This is the legend of Osiris; it’s universal.”

Margaret sensed my unease. This myth eerily recalled some aspects of the story of the virgin birth and resurrection of Jesus. “Do you believe in life after death?” Margaret asked all of a sudden, as if reading my mind. “What do you teach your children

about the gods or religion?” She was curious not hostile. My answer was that we didn’t teach them anything we didn’t believe in ourselves.

“What’s wrong with stories,” she asked, “like the legend of Osiris or Santa Clause and the presents he brings at Christmas if kids are good?” She paused to reflect. Let me ask you this: What do your children like most about the holidays?”

“Lights!” I said without thinking—“Lights on the tree--lights shining out of little windows from the cottages and the church in the little village we set up under it. When the room is dark they like to watch and feel safe as they wait to open presents.”

Margaret responded, “We all turn pagan at winter solstice--when the light dies, we want to celebrate the sun and return of new life. These ornaments are our lights. Each one has its own story. They are like the gems of the Hindu god Indra—look into one sparkling gem and you see all the lights in the universe reflected in it. Each year we do light a single candle and put it on the fireplace hearth Christmas Eve. After twelve days we celebrate the final day of the old feast of Saturnalia and of the holidays. When you bring something to an end, children always remember. So why don’t you all come by and have Twelfth Night supper with us--the sixth of January? You’ll see what I mean.”

And so we all went--my first wife together with our four children. The holidays at our house were over by New Years’, and this was something new. My young children were shy around the lively Hollomons, but Margaret spoke to each of them as she would to an adult. My son Scott thought she looked like Queen Guinevere from his King Arthur book. Margaret took my daughter Lynne and her younger sister Ruth to see tree curios and then to the living room near the fireplace. She told about the time she was a little girl in Oregon and her father lost his business. The family was suddenly very poor. It was

important to keep up their spirits, she said, so they polished their silver and dressed up for dinner every evening during the holidays and observed good manners.

We ate Twelfth Night supper gathered around the Hollomon's long, old English oak table. Herb joked with my wife and everyone seemed to talk at once. But before dessert, the Hollomon sons Jamie and Duncan left the table to join their friends—they knew what was coming!

After we cleared the table, Margaret got our attention: "Listen! Do you hear them? The men are coming. Quickly now, girls, help Elizabeth take down the ornaments from the tree. But we must be very careful! We mustn't let anyone see what we are doing. Bring each one to the table and wrap it up and put it in the box over there." My girls were still shy, reluctantly furtive, but pitched in anyway with the ornaments. "Fast now," Margaret said to us, "before anyone comes. And no trace of green can be left anywhere. Don't forget the sprigs over the pictures and the wreaths." Scott and Herb pulled boughs down from around the windows. I gathered the holly bunting with red berries off the stair railing. We put them into plastic trash bags.

Soon, only a bare Christmas tree was left; no other trace of the holidays could be found except the lonely candlestick holder on the hearth. "Scrape the wax out of it," Margaret said to Lynne. "Then lay it on top in this box before I close it up. Hurry! King Herod's men are nearly here; they are coming!"

"The Christmas tree!" shouted little Ruth. "They'll find the Christmas tree!"

Herb was having fun and said, "Good heavens! What shall we do with it?"

"Get rid of it," she said. So he grabbed the tree and hauled it out to the back porch and we followed. Margaret brought a machete along. As if in a trance she began

slashing the branches off one by one from the bottom up. As the branches fell, Herb opened another large bag and we stuffed them into it. Margaret stripped the trunk bare and removed the stand. She stiffened up, breathing heavily. “Now we have to search the house for any last signs,” she panted. “We mustn’t leave any traces for anyone to find.” Elizabeth giggled. Back into the house we tramped and looked everywhere, picking up the tiniest leaf or berry, even crumbs from the table. We hauled the boxes to the basement. The trash went into trashcans beside the naked tree pole outside.

“There,” Margaret said to the children triumphantly--and allowed herself another vodka. “King Herod’s men won’t find anything here. Jesus is hidden safely in our hearts and all signs put away for another year! If they had found any trace, they’d have destroyed everything for sure.” Then she turned to me: “Next year on the darkest night, we’ll bring out all those ornaments once more and hang them on a new tree, and it will be safe to open our hearts to the world againbut only until Twelfth Night.”

On our way home in the car, we overheard talk in the back seat. “That was fun!” the kids were saying. “We never had so much fun cleaning up after Christmas!”

A few years later in Boston when it was summer, Margaret died suddenly after stepping off a bus—cardiac arrest. She was a great lady.