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Cosmic Raccoon for January 2009

Because I don't have cable or satellite, I watch a lot of television that might otherwise be missed. Not only do I get to watch Lawrence Welk with all the brightly colored suits and toupees (I think of it as Mickey Mouse Club for Old Ones) but I get a Spanish channel and what to my wondering eyes should appear on it but Charro. Yes. The same Charro you remember, doing "hoocheecoochee" and playing the bejekus out of her guitar in supertight spangly outfits. The last time I saw her perform was twenty years ago in Hanalei when she owned a condo unit I was renting, and went to the nearby restaurant called Charro's, and she was there as the hostess with the mostess and she was the floor show and she was the bar tender. She was marginally geriatric back then, so may qualify as fossilized at this remove. My children and I have seen the sun set over Bali Hai, we have seen whales close enough to kiss them off the shores of Kauai, we have sat in the shadow of Kalalau where the Pacific sends up cold rogue waves and the beach at Ha'ena point is hot as a Kansas cornfield but I doubt we will ever see anything that looks like Charro at 96.

Speaking of hot, a guy in Portland is doing brisk sales with t-shirts that say, "I survived the Arctic Freeze 2008". PDX was closed for days. Roads were totally impassable. Semi-trucks festooned the highways like Christmas tree garlands. Ice and freezing rain made chains mandatory, and things pretty much ground to a halt punctuated by power outages caused by trees falling on power lines. This is in a place where it "never snows much" or so I was told. Good thing I kept my knee high snow boots! Rumor has it there was a fellow in Lake Oswego who worked about five hours to clear a parking place for his

car. When he walked around the corner to get his vehicle, he returned to find a woman in his parking spot. Would he or wouldn't he be charged if he shot her, that was the question.

What there should be, no matter what, is a bumper sticker, "I Survived the Rickreall Christmas Pageant." It was a delightful, traditional and surprising extravaganza that included a real live donkey, a real live sheep dog, a cast of dozens, and a standing-room-only audience. Evidently in years past, the tickets have all been given away by February, so I was really lucky to get into the last show of the season. The audience was filled with all ages, mostly local folks, lots of Mennonite families and their calm quiet children.

One couple--both as round as Christmas ornaments--reminded me of the "Pat" character on Saturday night live. Hard to tell who was Mr. and who was Mrs. in this set of piebirds. They dressed alike, their haircuts were even identical. But they thoroughly enjoyed the pageant, they assured me. I asked them, hoping to be able to detect from their voices if one or the other was, well, you know. Meanwhile, out in the parking lot, the fire department was in charge of traffic, so they got to use all their Homeland Security floodlights, flashlights, and riot gear, but they didn't get to see the show. Nice to see our tax dollars fighting Christmas pageant terrorism.

In the foyer of the old Rickreall School (vintage 1910) were scrapbooks chronicling almost three-quarters of a century of this event, including a touching tribute to Billy (the Burro) who valiantly performed until 1967 when he clip-clopped off to donkey heaven. The scrapbook did not reveal the details of his departure. I hope it was not onstage. This year's pageant itself was in nine acts with a white-robed 30-person chorus providing musical interludes during extensive scene changes and doing their best to disguise the thumping and bumping of props (and the donkey) on stage.

Early in the pageant, John the Baptist comes from stage left looking somewhat like a refugee from *Quest for Fire*, espousing the dietary benefits of honey and locusts, urging us all to "make way a straight road in the desert." For those new to show, the quiet murmur of children asking, "When does the donkey come on?" was heard up and down the rows. An unusual scene that was never included in any of the Christmas pageants I had previously attended in my sheltered life featured the circumcision of the Christ child and included a memorable scene with the rabbi having a good stiff drink before the clipping. Imagine! A real live bris on stage for the Christmas pageant! That ought to pack the aisles if nothing else does, but there was much else to recommend the show.

The new donkey, JJ, made his appearance during "The Taxing", and played his part admirably. Then during the "Shepherds in the Fields by Night" scene, Happy the black and white sheepdog did HIS part admirably, and a chorus of child-angels sang from way above the stage, making me wonder if they were hoisted up by harnesses or stood on very tall ladders or what. The final scene had the Christ child glowing in the manger, lighting up the faces of Mom and Dad, like a kid from Chernobyl. It ended with Silent Night and it struck me as odd that the audience did not sing along, which would have been most touching of all. But all remained silent. Just like the song says.

There was thunderous applause after the chorus filed out and the house lights came up. Obergammerau it ain't, but it's a close second and it only took me seven minutes to drive there. Quite an event for someone old and unsurprisable as I am, and quite inspiring. Hope stirs that JJ and Happy will be with the show for many a year. There were no kids in the audience with their stupid hats on backwards, and nobody had stove bolts through their ears, which was a whole 'nother layer of Christmas delight as far as I am concerned. There were no cell phones allowed, and no photographs either, so it was all very old fashioned and dignified. I liked it a lot. I was hoping that there would be reruns on the local Prozac channel (you know--the one that

broadcasts the School Board meetings in all their tedious splendor and features the endless scroll of YMCA activities and who did/did not make the honor roll, all with canned classical or Fifties music.) No such luck. However, there is a burning yule log video playing on the anesthesia channel.

Brenna and I decided to quest out for Christmas dinner in the manner of "A Christmas Story" after the Bumpus hounds eat Ralphie's father's turkey off the kitchen table. We found virtually no Chinese restaurants open, but in downtown Salem the Marco Polo restaurant (which has a somewhat checkered sanitation history) was for sure open. We actually went looking for a Denny's, which nobody in the history of the universe has ever done.

The snow and ice storms have been like something out of *The Dark Is Rising*. The power lines next door came crashing down with blue lightning due to two or three inches of solid ice on the lines, not to mention what was on the roads. I can understand now the chagrin of the fellow who told me how he had pulled off the road in Newport (up on top of the hill by the turnoff to Nye Beach) to get out of the storm, and while he was waiting it out in the Safeway, the 80mph winds blew his car onto the parking lot ice, onto the icy street, down the icy hill, right into icy Yaquina Bay.

It's a good thing weener dogs have a remarkable capacity for resting. They've been pretty much cooped up with me since the 15th, and I'm not that much fun even under GOOD circumstances. These are the kind of days where you wonder about doing things the way Steven Seagal would--"Just give me an unmarked car and a shotgun."

So let us keep in mind it was just this time of year in 1949 that the Pennsylvania legislature mandated the daily in-school reading of 10 Bible verses, sandwiched between the Pledge of Allegiance and the Lord's Prayer. It was also about this time of year in 1962 that the Schemps who were in my high school homeroom challenged that law.

The case went all the way up the court system and eventually struck down the mandated reading of Bible verses and recitation of prayers. It was actually a relief, I must say. The daily radio squad (there were four of us) were always challenged to read 10 innocuous Bible verses. No Song of Solomon allowed. No smiting of Philistines or even Midianites. Lots of Psalms, and nothing that would excite the listeners who were hormone ridden teenagers cooped up alphabetically in homerooms for twenty minutes each morning. Speaking of time....

Along with other revelations, I now wish to share an insight on how Santa gets to all the worthy children in one night, a theory originally explicated by Kathryn Katzenberger back in 1984. You know how time expands infinitely when you are in the dentist's chair? And how it shrinks to practically nothing when you are having a good time? Well, that is how Santa fulfills his mission. It's now called string theory. Just ask your local neighborhood particle physicist and you'll see it's true.

I've spent a good bit of time this month learning the difference between a blog and a webpage, and figuring out what to do with this new knowledge. I also am learning that even though I cannot read novels (I feel like I am being lied to) I am able to listen to them in the car. I just finished a most delightful book called DREAMERS OF THE DAY which stars a weener dog named Rosie (thank you to the Cosmic Raccoon reader who recommended this one!!!) and it an absolute delight. I pretty much read nonfiction and recently devoured THE WISDOM OF YOUR FACE which teaches you how to read personalities by their facial characteristics (e.g a jutting chin signifies stubbornness) and it has totally screwed up my brain because now I can't help but look at people's ears and eyebrows, hairlines and noses a whole new way.

Speaking of faces, now we face a new year, a new president, a new paradigm. I hope all of you have your hats screwed on real tight and

your holsters tied to your leg. It's gonna be a memorable ride. Till next month when I'll be a whole year older....Gwynne

This month also marks the publication of THE SECRET DIARY OF NIKOLA TESLA and DOWN THE SHORE 1956, both by yours truly and both available on amazon.com. More to come in 2009.