

Christmas with Russell Banks

The title, "X-Mas," somewhat puerile in its abbreviation of the holiday, suggests something comfortable and domestic and altogether severed from its religious origins. This is how people communicate in the age of illiteracy. Gregory Dodd, the only real character in the piece, is traveling from New Hampshire and is attacked in an impoverished neighborhood when he gets to Boston, his destination. A political science professor, his work in the social sciences deprives him of contact with reality—such is Banks's suggestion—and the gap in his education is about to be filled in by an excursion into streets that he should have avoided. A specialist in politics, he receives a lesson from the "real world." Nothing in his academic career has prepared him for this; Gregory teaches at what we assume is a liberal arts college in New England, and his students come mostly from comfortable families. In Boston, Gregory is about to have an encounter with a pair of black men who hate whites generically. Repetition of a familiar theme—academic life versus the "real world"? The ivory tower and the daily reality most of us inhabit? But I think that Banks has something more in mind.

Gregory's trip to Boston, the narrator tells us, is "a flight from two failed marriages." But this is the narrator's language, not Gregory's; he prefers more sanitized language. Gregory believes that his marriages simply "ended," and that the two phases of matrimony were simply "distinct blocks of time." By becoming involved with Susan—the woman he is meeting in Jamaica Plain—he plans a new marriage, which will become a third "block of time" and one (I assume) that he expects to last longer than the other two. This is described in faintly derogatory language; Banks writes that Gregory is "one of those men in their mid-forties who enjoy casting their past in a slightly elegiac light," one who conceives of life not as the meaningful

accumulation of years but as a succession of stretches of time to be made as pleasant as possible. "Renewal," a very American idea, always a possibility, is part of the unreality created by money and comfort, an unreality that carries a risk. The sensitivity to "value-laden language," another of Gregory's characteristics, inhibits the awareness of danger in poor neighborhoods.

Is Susan's conception very different? We learn far more about Gregory than about her, but perhaps not. A decade younger than Gregory, she too is divorced and has three daughters; the third was conceived some months before the marriage "ended." Her former husband was active in the Weather Underground, which had a deserved reputation for violence in the 1960s and '70s. "Her radical past and marriage," Banks writes, "she regarded as a chapter in her life that had ended, although the momentum of that chapter had carried over long enough for her to have been five months pregnant with her third child before obtaining a divorce." By then her husband "had gone underground" and become involved in an armed robbery that led to the death of a Brinks guard. Susan attended Brandeis, presumably comes from a comfortable family, but has cast all that aside for radical politics and easy sex. That too is rejected in favor of a life of poverty and the arts—a new chapter. But even her artistic medium, photography, is somewhat marginal. Thomas Hess, the art critic, pointed out in an interview that pictures try to imitate painting and thereby capture the prestige of an established art form. The camera lens is round, but photographic images are nearly always blocked in squares and rectangles. And even twenty-five years ago, when "X-Mas" was written, making images of the poor--Susan's subject--was a bit shopworn. Dorothy Lange, Edward Hine, Jacob Riis and many others may have exhausted the subject.

But Gregory finds her story engaging. Susan's past life, the activities of her former husband, now in prison, fascinates him, and he is "slightly aroused in a sexual way." Like

Margaret Mead, he wants to know how the savages do it, and though he is reluctant to press her for the details, he is avid to hear them, "instances, dates and times and specific circumstances" of their sexual activities. They probably differed in no way from the activities of others, but Gregory—and this is part of his taste for slumming—is titillated. The gifts he has chosen for Susan indicate the economic gap between them, and Gregory suspects that he overspent; both the sums involved and his choices are another manifestation of fantasy. He has bought an espresso machine, a velour robe, an antique pin, and three volumes of Braudel's *Capitalism and Civilization*, books his lover is unlikely to read.

The story concludes with that dangerous excursion on the way to Jamaica Plain. It is a snowy night, and the contrast between Robert Frost's New England and the violence of the city is about to get sharper. Gregory drives through Boston's South End, which at the time had a long history of working class and lower-middle-class neighborhoods, depressed, remote, and home to Irish immigrants and their descendants living far from the cultural attractions of the city.

It is a part of town where Gregory makes contact—literally—with a reality he has been shielded from by his life as a "popular" college instructor. Very well done, that brief description, and how well we know them, those of us familiar with Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis, cities filled with "pot-holed" streets running by warehouses and public housing, wretched little brick homes and apartments that were built a century ago, with their peeling paint and defective plumbing and lighting, warnings of rat poison in the alleys; areas, in other words, where no one would ever think of going save the people who have to live there. (Perhaps the final touch—"a zone of half-destroyed buildings . . . a no-man's-land still being fought over by opposing armies"—is somewhat overdone.) It is here that Gregory has what he imagines is "an accident." It has in fact been staged by a pair of middle-aged black men exploiting the possibilities that open up when a

white man driving an Audi unexpectedly shows up in their neighborhood. Their car bumpers lightly touch when the black driver suddenly pulls out from the curb in front of Gregory, and the driver leaves his vehicle "half-turned in the middle of the street, blocking Gregory's passage." Instead of maneuvering to get out of the stretch as fast as he can, Gregory stops to engage the two men who seem "irritated but not threatening." They have gotten out of their car; he imagines there is going to be an explanation of matters and prepares an apology for having "ruined Christmas for all of them." That both men get out of the car, "a battered ten-year-old Chrysler," with a barely attached license plate and walk up to his should have been warning enough. But Gregory unwisely rolls down his window to begin his polite discussion. Instead, the black man standing by his car suddenly punches him in the face, breaking teeth and drawing blood. His assailants remain insouciant. They return to the car and slowly pull into the street, assuming correctly that the white man they have attacked does not have a gun and will be too stunned and frightened to chase them. He even hallucinates somewhat, imagining briefly that there had been an accident and his face had hit the steering wheel. But he slowly registers the extent of the injury and suddenly feels "like an unattached speck of matter afloat in space." No concern by Banks here for political correctness, obviously; that would cast the author in the same light as Susan and Gregory, and the violence is Banks's comment on how remote from reality the proponents of PC are.

After the attack, Gregory continues on to Susan's apartment. But he has abruptly come to an understanding of the world she inhabits, which suddenly appears much less attractive. "He was a fool," Banks writes, "a man whose life was unknown to him and out of control, a man whose past was lost to him and whose future was a deliberate, willed fantasy." He had been contemplating a new and agreeable "block of time," one that might last. What he now prefers is

"to be in his own home with his own children and their mother, in his proper place," and—the critical point—"his life intact, all of the parts connected and sequential." He continues on to Susan's apartment, but all the while has "to fight against the new and terrible longing to turn back."

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