

Christmas memories of boys, rich and poor

There was no mistaking now that it was winter. The trees bare against a streaked pewter sky, the cold of frozen ground passing through your leather heels. Up the hill from the ocean came the salt air. Snow crystals gathered on bare spots in the grass and blew across the walkways.

But we were adolescent blast furnaces, roaring through the night, the tips of our wet hair freezing as we whisked coatless across the quadrangle in ties and sport coats toward the Gothic chapel that loomed above our world.

We took our places in the dark wood pews, looking at each other across the aisle, snuffling and glistening in the sudden warmth. We made faces and shot spitballs. We indulged in vile sign language.

Two nights earlier, the Christmas festivities had begun here with the singing of hymns and the appearance of Mary and Joseph and the Baby Jesus placed in a manger in front of the altar, surrounded by shepherds and angels.

But tonight was our more usual 15 minutes of chapel prayers before repairing to the medieval majesty of King Hall dining room, decorated with garlands and wreaths for Yule Night — an ancient and more pagan ritual before we were set free for vacation the next morning.

A faux boar's head with an apple in its mouth was borne into the hall by boys costumed as Elizabethan pages. Following them, the master and mistress of the feast. The jester followed with a squirt gun. A Christmas tree glowed on the head table's platform.

Beneath a ceiling of vaulted wood from which hung the colorful silken flags of the original 13 colonies, we boys and faculty families dined by candlelight on roast beef with Yorkshire pudding. Surrounding us on the wood-paneled walls were the engraved names of the graduates in each class dating back to the 1890s.

After dinner, tables were moved away and a space cleared in front of the massive fireplace and the Yule log was lit. We gathered 'round, forming a crescent in front of the hearth. A mummies' play of St. George and the Dragon was performed, the violent shadows playing upon the wall-carved names of Astors and Vanderbilts and the faces of their heirs that tonight stood side-by-side.

The dragon slain, as was his eternal fate, our headmaster stood in front of the leaping



flames and led us in song, starting with "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." I gazed upon the faces of my friends, many of whom would leave tomorrow for fancy vacations in Bermuda or the Bahamas, or skiing in Vail or Chamonix.

I saw faces that were young and healthy, wan and worried. I saw faculty members who made us do our lessons and wives who poured our tea. I saw boys who were confident and strong, and others so unsure; so young and lost. I saw rich boys who would go home to sumptuous apartments on Park Avenue and not see their parents, not even once. I saw a black scholarship student who would go home to a Harlem tenement not five blocks from the other's Park Avenue address.

I saw our star hockey player who just two weeks ago had a puck knock out both front teeth.

I saw Freddy, a third-former from Auchincloss Dormitory where I was a prefect, responsible for making sure he was in his room by 9 p.m., that he did his studies and kept his room straightened. I looked at his face in the glow and thought about his older sister, whom I'd gazed upon longingly when the family had visited him over Parent's Weekend. How could I work this?

I didn't think about Vietnam and the draft that could soon take me. Nor did I think about what a lucky duck I was to be a microdot of privilege.

It ended with "Silent Night." It all crumbled with singing "Silent Night," as it does for everyone, always.

I fought back tears, weeping inside for I don't know what. Everything. My mom and dad and brothers. For all of us, rich and poor and in between. For we are all in need, even if it doesn't look that way.

— Charles Pinning, an occasional contributor, lives in Providence.