**Confessions of a Pilgrim Shopaholic**

**by Paul Rudnick March 16, 2009**

I am Rebecca, the wife of Mister Jonathan Harnsill. We arrived in the New World in 1626 and took up residence in a small cabin in the Plymouth Colony. Toward the end of our first January, I travelled to Boston to purchase a thimbleful of salt. And now, five years later, I have travelled to Boston for a second thimbleful. I am out of control.

During our first winter, I sewed two simple black woollen dresses, which I have alternated wearing in the years since. And yet this morning I find myself thinking about patching the frayed collar on one of the dresses. Have I no shame?

My mind has been consumed with nothing but thoughts of spending, purchasing, and the wanton enjoyment of unnecessary goods. On many nights I dream of acquiring a tin milk pail, like our neighbour’s. I picture myself strolling through the town as strangers whisper, “There she goes, the proud lady with the pail.” I imagine myself attending a fancy-dress ball with the pail on my arm, filled with pinecones and soil. I fear that I shall speak these dreams aloud, and beg my husband to bludgeon me.

I have heard tales of another woman, much like myself, in the Virginia colony. It is said that she bartered her second child to a local tradesman for a wooden button. The following Sunday, the preacher railed against the need for additional buttons, calling the woman a spendthrift and a profligate. She then stood and raised her arm high, opening her hand to reveal the button. It is said that the other women surrounded her, staring at the button in adoration, and then they ripped her limbs from her torso and ate them.

I tremble for my influence upon my children. Just this morning, young Abigail came to me and said, “Mother, look. I have made a doll from a small rock. I will call my doll Rockelle.” Of course, I struck her and grabbed the rock from her hand, saying, “Be ye the Queen of the Nile, with such gilded pleasures?” I will confess only to this diary that I have kept the rock for myself, and married it to an acorn, which I have named Mister Joseph Elmsford. Has my evil no limits?

Today I entered the lion’s den, as I went to market. I was dazzled, as if dancing before the Golden Calf! To one side, there was a tray of one-inch straight pins, and beside them a spool of pale-white thread! I was drowning! I turned away, only to see a cart piled with at least three wilted leeks, along with a rusted spoon! Was I at the French court? My mind reeled—I wanted everything! The box of damp matches; the single moth-eaten stocking, removed from a corpse; the tiny empty vial that had once held extract of vanilla! In my mind, I was naked, demanding to be draped in finery, in brittle cornhusks and crumbling bark and the splintering nub of a pencil!

My fever has broken. When I awoke, I was in our minister’s home, surrounded by all the women of our village, who were on their knees in fervent prayer at my bedside. It seems that I have been possessed by the Devil himself, and that I was found in the apothecary shop, speaking in tongues and babbling about something which no colonist has ever heard of: “guest soaps.” Pastor Witherspoon has suggested that I might be hosting a demon from some future century, and he has arranged for an exorcism. I am so grateful, as I was told that, in my frenzy, I had also approached our blacksmith and demanded to know which horseshoes were on sale. I am an abomination.

At the exorcism, I was taken to the barn and placed upon a rough blanket; various plasters and poultices were applied to my flesh. Pastor Witherspoon raised his Bible high over my head and demanded, “Satan, leave this good woman! She is a simple, pious soul, with no wont for luxury goods!” At first, I responded by shrieking in an unearthly wail, “Shoes! More buckled shoes!” As all the villagers began to repeat the Lord’s Prayer, I howled, “Tallow! Scented tallow and beeswax! Tied with a decorative ribbon!” Then, as the people laid their hands upon me, my demon cackled and swore: “A bonnet! Bring me another bonnet! A peaked black bonnet as fine as any widow’s!”

“Satan, *begone!*” Pastor Witherspoon shouted, and then I lost consciousness.

Now, a day later, as I return to life, I know that my demon is vanished, gone back into his fetid underworld. I am able to walk through the village, with my head bowed modestly, without even a thought of a turnip or the cobbler’s wares. This morning, I almost picked up a pretty yellow leaf from the ground, to press in my Bible, but then I thought, I have so many leaves, and I returned it to the tall grass.

While I am wholly myself again, I am concerned for my dear husband, who I fear has been o’ertaken by his own demon. Last March, we had intimate relations, and now, although it is only November, he desires them again.