

SINCE LAST WE SPOKE

ESSAYS

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Ghost Ship

If you're a fan of Errol Flynn movies—and who isn't?—you've surely seen both *Captain Blood* and *The Sea Hawk*. The best parts of those swashbucklers are the sea battles. Tall, majestic ships face off on the open sea, cannons blazing and decks serving as hosts to dueling privateers whose skill with rapiers is nothing short of astounding. Plus, there is Errol Flynn in tights, a look so few men can pull off.

So when I read in the newspaper that a replica of an actual Spanish galleon had pulled into port at the Newburgh waterfront, where it would dock for six days, I knew I had to go see it.

I drove to the waterfront on a recent Saturday, the second-to-last day of the ship's planned stay in Newburgh. On the way, I did not listen to the radio or pop a CD into the CD player. Instead I invented a sea shanty:

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I'm off to Newburgh to see a great ship,
Aye, the floating beauty will be worth the trip.
Way, hey, blow the man down!
She's near two-hundred feet and weighs five-
hundred tons,
With a crew of twenty and replica guns.
Way, hey, blow the man down!

But as the buildings that line the waterfront hove into view, the sea shanty died in my throat. I should have been able to see the ship's main-mast rising above the buildings; galleons are not also known as "tall ships" for nothing. I could spy no mast, no sails. Something was amiss.

The Dutch were the first Europeans to colonize Manhattan, and one of the reasons they did it was to have a convenient port from which to set sail in search of Spanish galleons to attack and plunder. In his fascinating book on Dutch Manhattan, *Island at the Center of the World*, Russell Shorto describes one such attack.

It occurred in 1628. By that time, Spanish galleons had for decades been transporting riches from South America to Spain twice annually in convoys of as many as ninety ships, comprising what was known as "the treasure fleet." These ships were laden with gold, silver, and spices. In May of 1628, thirty-one Dutch gunships lay in wait off the coast of Cuba. When the Spanish galleons came into view, the Dutch pounced. The galleons were too slow and heavy to fight effectively

against the smaller, more nimble Dutch ships. The amount of the haul—twelve million guilders of silver and gold—was enough, Shorto writes, “to stoke the Dutch economy for years.”

If the actions of the Dutch seem mean, consider the fact that Spain and the Netherlands were at war at the time. All’s fair.

The ship I searched for at the Newburgh waterfront would have looked very much like the Spanish galleons that made up the treasure fleet. The replica ship, named the *Andalucia*, was carefully designed over a period of five years to ensure authenticity before being built and then setting sail in 2010. It is made of hardwood, just as its predecessors were, and has a total of seven sails and a hull roomy enough to carry tons of trade goods, which is what galleons were designed to do.

But where was the *Andalucia*? Nobody seemed to know. I’d parked the car and then stood at Newburgh’s Riverfront Marina, scanning the horizon like an old-time mariner’s wife and asking passersby if they’d seen the tall ship.

“What tall ship?” was the invariable response. Bunch of landlubbers.

I finally spied a small sign attached to the marina’s fence. It read, “Due to bad weather forecast, the Spanish galleon had to leave early.”

Alas, the ship had sailed. I never got a chance to see it, let alone board it and take a tour. As a pirate would say, Arrrgh!

In Search of a Floorwalker

At the pharmacy I frequent the cashiers have begun to ask me a question as I place my purchases on the checkout counter. The question is this: “Is there anything else I could have helped you find today?” The fact that every cashier asks this question and phrases it in precisely the same way is proof that they have been directed to do so by management.

The question is an odd one because it comes too late. By the time customers are asked if anything could have been done differently, we have already done what we came into the store to do. Mission accomplished. Or, if the mission is only partially accomplished—if, for instance, we could not, after five minutes of trying, locate the salsa—we have signaled our desire to end the search mission by joining the checkout line.

(These days, drug stores really do sell salsa. I know, right? Weird.)

The verb tense used by the pharmacy’s cashiers is a clear signal that we have moved into the realm

of alternate history. In fiction, the alternate-history genre is popular with some readers. Novelists create scenarios in which history as we know it is turned on its head—for example, the Axis powers, rather than the Allies, win World War II—and explore what the world would be like if the fake history were the real history.

I am not a fan of alternate history. The real thing is interesting enough for me. I am also not a fan of being asked if something could have been done for me at some point in the past, something that was not done when I needed it and can't be done now. The cashiers in the pharmacy are doing what they are trained to do, and management may mean well, but it's too late.

And there's this: By asking if there is *anything else* she could have helped me find, the cashier implies that she already helped me find something. In fact she did not. More alternate history.

Where was the cashier ten minutes ago, when I needed help finding things? She was stuck behind the checkout counter, that's where. She was busy ringing up other customers after asking them if there was anything else she could have helped them find even though she could not have helped them find anything because she was behind the checkout counter ringing up customers...and so on into infinity.

The cashiers themselves doubtless wish they did not have to ask such a silly question. I try to imagine the staff meeting at which they received their training. I imagine it went something like this:

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STORE MANAGER: Okay, folks, listen up. A new directive has just come down from corporate headquarters. From now on, whenever customers come to the checkout and start placing their items on the counter, cashiers are to say to them, "Is there anything else I could have helped you find today?"

FIRST CASHIER: Isn't it too late by then? Isn't it kind of reminding the customers that they didn't get the assistance they needed when they needed it?

SECOND CASHIER: Really. Won't that question just make the customers mad?

STORE MANAGER: It's always a thousand questions with you cashiers. Why this and why that. How about a little cooperation for a change? This comes from corporate.

What customers need is not nonsensical questions. What customers need are floorwalkers. Remember floorwalkers? As their job title implies, floorwalkers were store employees who roamed the store, supervising employees and, more importantly, assisting customers long before the customers reached the checkout stage.

Floorwalkers seem to have vanished, a casualty of retail's bottom line. All too often these days I find myself leaving a store in frustration, unable to find

what I am looking for and equally unable to find an employee to assist me.

The next time a cashier asks me if there is anything else she could have helped me find, I just might say, “Yes. A floorwalker.”