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Excerpt from Glenn Alan Cheney's *Thanksgiving*

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Chapter Six

The Crossing

Someone in this group kept a journal of that first year. It would return to England aboard the *Fortune* in December 1621. Within a year it would be published in London in 1622 under the title *Mourt's Relation*. We do not know who "Mourt" was. No one of that name went to America on the *Mayflower*. A "G. Mourt" signed a "To the Reader" introduction to the book. It is widely supposed that the name is a pseudonym for a publisher named George Morton. The publisher may have used a pseudonym due to the dubious legality of the Separatist settlement and the possible guilt by association of anyone who promoted their venture.

In all likelihood, the book has several authors. It in-

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cludes a few letters signed with initials — two letters apparently by Robert Cushman, one by pastor John Robinson (who had remained in Leyden), and one by Edward Winslow. The main narrative of the book, however, has no names or initials to indicate an author. This narrative, a journal divided into five parts, reports events from the September 6, 1620 launch of the *Mayflower* until an expedition to the Massachusetts tribe in September, 1621. The most likely journalists are Edward Winslow and William Bradford. Governor John Carver may have contributed. The journalist or journalists tended to write in the first person plural — *we* — and the third person plural — *they*. Nowhere does a sentence use the pronoun *I*. In a few cases, *he* apparently refers to the writer himself and *they* includes the author. In many cases, a confusion of pronouns leaves us wondering who did what and exactly what happened.

The journalists may have written the narrative for various reasons. In the tradition of explorers, they have been reporting on events and discoveries. They have been reporting to investors. They may have been encouraging more people to come join the colony. As a real estate advertisement, however, it fails. It reports much suffering, alludes to much danger, and hints at the difficulties of starting from scratch under the duress of New England weather. Alas, it also falls short of an ideal history. It provides a bounty

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of information, but it leaves out such obviously significant details as the dates of deaths. It mentions only a few of the people who died and nothing about grief or burials. It reports little about the activities of daily life and the human conflicts that inevitably arise among people under great stress. Except for a quick allusion to a conflict just before they landed at Cape Cod, it mentions no arguments or disagreements. It expresses no regrets, misgivings, or second thoughts. It rarely mentions women and children. It says nothing of hunger. It admits to considerable suffering, but we have to look between the lines to imagine the conditions that killed so many people in so little time. If *Mourt's Relation* sold any real estate, it was only by neglecting to mention the absolute worst of the experience.

Mourt's Relation relates little about the voyage across the Atlantic. In sixty-seven words, it takes us from the launch on September 6 to the first sighting of land on November 9. That same sentence brushes off two months of terror and hardship with just five words: ...*many difficulties in boisterous storms...* One of those many difficulties would be the sheer stress of knowing that they had shoved off two months later than planned. They would arrive on the verge of winter with dwindling food supplies, no homes on shore, no friends outside their group, and no possibility of going back until, at best, spring. But the option of sailing toward

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difficulties seemed better than the pressures pushing them from behind: persecution by the king, financial demands from their backers, the sale of most of their possessions to pay for the trip, the lack of jobs or houses to go back to, the frustrations of delay, and the certainty that a cold and hungry winter in a strange land was safer than worship with a papal flavor.

While *Mourt's Relation* tells us little of the voyage, another source, William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620 – 1647*, gives us more details. He tells us that for the first few days, they sailed before a “prosperous wind” that did much encourage them. But prosperous winds didn't keep them from throwing up all over the place. Restricted to the windowless gun deck, unable to orient their balance to the horizon, the passengers suffered explosive bouts of seasickness. Without benefit of portholes or anything that would flush, they heaved their beer-soaked biscuits, their bits of cod, their oatmeal, pea porridge, and salted pork. Maybe Brewster offered a psalm to assuage them: *He shows by the sea what care God has over man, for when he delivers them from the great danger of the sea, he delivers them as it were from a thousand deaths. They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble.*

An especially obnoxious sailor did what he could to

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make them feel worse.

...he would always be condemning the poor people in their sickness and cursing them daily with grievous execrations; and did not let to tell that he hoped to help cast half of them overboard before they came to their journey's end, and to make merry with what they had, and if he were by any gently reprov'd, he would curse and swear most bitterly. But it pleased God before they came half seas over, to smite this young man with a grievous disease, of which he died in a desperate manner, and so was himself the first that was thrown overboard. Thus his curses light on his own head, and it was astonishment to all his fellows for they noted it to be the just hand of God upon him.

For the next two months the passengers would live in a dim, wet world that smelled of seawater, vomit, chamber pots, animal dung, unwashed clothes, and every aroma the human body can produce, not to mention whiffs of the wine, tar, fish, and turpentine of cargoes past. They heard men snore, women weep, children whine, an oink-oink here, a cluck-cluck there, sailors thumping around the deck above. They heard each other pray. They heard the stutter of the

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tiller as it swung back and forth at the rear of the gundeck. They heard a continuous creaking of wood that spoke of the condition of the ship, the mood of the sea, the strength of the wind. Sometimes the creaking murmured that all was well; sometimes it screamed that man was not meant to sail across oceans. They read the tones of the shouts of the sailors to guess the ever-shifting degree of danger. When waves reared back and thundered across the upper deck, cold water dripped through the decking. During each four-hour shift, sailors manned two pumps to draw the water out of the bilge, up onto the top deck, where most of it ran to the sea but some of it dripped or trickled back down on the passengers. The passengers were moist at the best of times, soaked at the worst of times, and never truly dry, not for a moment, from late summer 1620 until mid-winter 1621.

During calm weather Master Jones may have let passengers come up onto the main deck for a bit of air, light, and exercise. At any sign of bad weather or any need to work with rigging, passengers had to descend immediately to their dim, dank quarters. If bad weather threatened, the crew fit the lids over the hatch, letting the passengers ride out the storm in the dusky gun deck.

The ship never stopped, never dropped anchor, never rested motionless. The passengers spent the entire voyage swinging between extremes of boredom and fear. Except for

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the occasional moment on deck, calm seas meant endless hours of sitting in one place, talking to the same people about a daily routine that never changed. But none would wish for more interesting weather. Winds brought waves that took the ship on a terrifying ride. The prosperous winds turned ferocious as the ship sailed into the middle of hurricane season. By sheer luck — or was it miracle? — the *Mayflower* would spend over two months in the North Atlantic without getting hit by weather of hurricane strength, but something mighty strong hit them, and more than once. Somewhere midatlantic, the *Mayflower*, so tall and solid at the dock, all but cowered under mountainous waves. At times the wind pushed her over so far that the mainyard, the fifty-foot horizontal yardarm from which the mainsail hung some forty feet above the deck, would lean over and grab the water. As the water pulled at it, it acted as a twenty-five-foot lever that tugged violently at the mast, making the whole ship shudder and groan as if trying not to tear in half. More than once Master Jones gave up trying to control the ship. When the wind grew too fierce, he gave the order to go “at hull.” Working in a murderous wind, the crew pulled down all sails and every possible piece of rigging, reducing the ship to not much more than a hull with a barely waterproof lid. They lashed everything down tight, battened the hatches, barred the doors, tucked themselves

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into the forecandle, put out the fire, and prayed for God to do what Man couldn't. They feared a wave swamping the ship and dashing it to pieces. They feared broken masts and yards. They feared the wave that would lift the ship at one end but not the other, leaving one half of her supported by water, the other half sticking out into the air. She was a ship, not a bridge, built to be cradled, not suspended. The unsupported weight could well crack her in half. To avoid such structural stress, the helmsman would turn the ship to take the waves broadside.

But the broadside pounding put a lot of pressure against the beams that arched under the main deck and kept the hull from breaking inward. One beam, oak half a foot or more thick, warped and bowed as it took punch after punch from thousands of tons of water. The passengers didn't know much about ships, but they knew beams weren't supposed to warp...

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Chapter Ten

The Great Dying

On Wednesday, December 20 (or December 30 in the modern calendar), several men went ashore to scout around for the best place to settle. The weather gave them a classic New England welcome. Cold wind sliced at them, and a bone-chilling rain dug into their clothes. These were the atmospheric conditions for which New Englanders still reserve the word *miserable*. Despite the weather, they hunkered down, built some kind of lean-to or windbreak, maybe got a fire going, maybe not. They sent the shallop back to the ship with instructions to bring more people in the morning so they could start building houses. But during the night, the weather grew worse. The landing party spent

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the night in wind and rain, hoping that come morning the shallop would return with food, tools, and help.

But December 21 was as bad as December 20. Not until 11:00 that morning did the shallop manage to go in to shore with some food. It may also have carried the body of Richard Britteridge, who had just died. We do not know whether he was married or had children. No one on the *Mayflower* shared his name. We do not know how old he was or why he had wanted to move to America. He signed the Planter's Association and Agreement and six weeks later passed away. We do not know where they buried him except that it was probably in a shallow, unmarked grave of sand.

Wind kept the shallop on shore for a second night of cold, wet misery. Friday, December 22, dawned as nastily as the two days before. Again the shallop would not sail. The people on shore were stuck there, the people on board unable to do much more than hold on. Mary Allerton, wife of Isaac, mother of Bartholomew, Remember, and Mary, went into labor. She had buried an unnamed child in Leyden, and now, as the *Mayflower* rocked in the waves and swung around on her anchor, Mrs. Allerton delivered another child, a son, but again born without life.

Saturday, December 23, all who could went ashore to fell and drag trees to be sawed up into lumber and timber

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for building.

Sunday, December 24. On this day Solomon Prower, stepson of the scornful Christopher Martin, former governor of the *Mayflower*, died. The others rested for the Sabbath. But not completely. Savages in the forest, ignorant of the day, hooted and howled. The Christians prepared to repel an assault, but nothing came from the dark of the woods besides the ferocious ululations.

Monday, December 25, all men worked, felling trees, sawing them into sections and planks, carrying them out of the forest. They collected fresh water for the ship. Again, howls from the woods sent them scurrying for muskets, but again, no attack. Twenty men stayed on shore that night. Those onboard shared a bit of the dwindling supply of beer. The Separatists made no celebration for the birth of their Savior. To do so would have been presumptuous, idolatrous, papally sacrilegious and in no way Biblical, for the Good Book makes no mention of parties for the birthday of God's son. It doesn't even say when that day is. The beer was probably a Christmas gesture of Master Jones. The Separatists would have accepted it not in celebration nor communion but simply because it was good. Those on shore slept in a storm of wind and rain without benefit of beer.

Tuesday, December 26: rain, wind, cold.

Wednesday, December 27: back to work.

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Thursday, December 28: They assume a street running east and west from the beach to a hill, which they called the Mount, that rose 120 feet above sea level. They plan a “high way” that runs south from the street to a clear, shallow brook. The street and highway would lead to three gates in the palisade that would surround the town. Eventually, the governor’s house would stand at the only intersection in town. Each house got a lot half a pole wide and three in length — eight feet three inches by forty-nine feet six inches — for each person in the household. Each lot would have its own garden and a fence of sharpened poles. To expedite the building of shelter, men with no wives were assigned to the homes of families. The first living quarters on land wouldn’t be much roomier than the gun deck of the *Mayflower*.

They wanted this business out of the way, shelter built as soon as possible because despite the grace of God, they were not surviving well. The journalist wrote that they were “growing ill with cold, for our former discoveries” [i.e. explorations] “in frost and storms, and the wading at Cape Cod, had brought much weakness amongst us, which increased so every day more and more, and after was the cause of many of their deaths.” In other words, the cold was killing them.

Friday, December 29: rainy, windy, cold.

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Saturday, December 30: rainy, windy, cold. In the distance, smoke.

Monday, January 1: The journalist complains that because of the shallow harbor, the *Mayflower* must stay a mile and a half from shore. Trips in the shallop are hindered by the tides. The journalist makes no note of the new year because it is still almost three months off. By their calendar, 1621 starts on the Feast of the Assumption, March 25.

Wednesday, January 3: People gathering thatch around corn fields see the smoke of great fires in the distance. They see no savages, but they know they are out there and are burning something.

Thursday, January 4: Myles Standish and a contingent of four or five men go to look for the fires and the Indians. They find houses, but they have not been lately inhabited. They shoot an eagle, bring it home for dinner. It tastes just like mutton.

Friday, January 5: A sailor finds a live herring on the beach. The sailor gives the fish to Master Jones for his supper. The passengers are given nothing but hope; maybe a season of fish is arriving. The herring is the second fish anyone has caught in two months. The other was a cod. The problem: no small fishhooks.

Saturday, January 6: Christopher Martin takes ill on board the ship.

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Sunday, January 7: They rest. Christopher Martin doesn't look good. No doubt he's thinking about his stepson, who died just two weeks ago, not to mention poor Billy Butten, little Jasper More, James Chilton, and Richard Bitteridge, all found cold in their beds just a few feet from where Martin lies. He no doubt saw them lifted from the ship and lowered to the shallow, rowed to shore and buried in the sand. Governor Carver comes back from shore to speak with Martin about his will.

Monday, January 8: The day starts off sunny. Master Jones takes the shallow in search of fish. They don't get far before they hit a storm, but they kill three large seals and an "excellent good" cod, giving them hope that fish are coming into season. They need it. Food is short, and they're running out of beer.

On this day Christopher Martin follows his stepson into the hereafter and a shallow grave in the sand. He leaves his wife, Mary, but not for long.

From shore, good news. Young Francis Billington, the same young fool who shot off a musket next to a powder keg in a small cabin on the most important ship in the world, unwitting ancestor of President James Garfield, has redeemed himself. He has climbed a hill and there climbed a tree. From there he cast his eyes to the west, where he spotted the Pacific Ocean. Or some other great sea. Has the elusive

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Northwest Passage been found? In need of expert confirmation, he takes a ship's mate to verify. The great sea, it turns out, consists of two lakes, one five or six miles around, the other about half that size. A brook drained the larger lake, the same Town Brook that ran through Plymouth and past a certain big rock on the beach. The lakes weren't as good as the Pacific Ocean, but they were a fine source of fresh water and lots of fish and waterfowl. They came to name one of the lakes Fresh Lake, but later it becomes known as Billington's Sea. The smaller is still called Little Pond.

While up at the lakes, Billington and his friend also came across seven or eight Indian houses. The proximity to savages scared them. They'd brought only one musket — just one shot, one boom to hold off any assault from the village. But they found the same eerie, inexplicable situation they had always found: habitations without inhabitants.

Meanwhile, the settlers were still inhabitants without habitation. While private land ownership was their long-term goal, they had to get there by way of temporary communism — a common house where those on shore could stay with reasonable comfort and safety. In a few days put up a basic structure some twenty feet square. In four days, they had half the roof up, but cold and foul weather then hindered them. After they had a roof, they built the walls and packed them with mud. They figured out that houses

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would go up a lot faster if each man worked on his own. On January 9, “a reasonable fair day,” they divided their town plan into individual lots.

On Thursday, January 11, the weather finally hit William Bradford. He was working on shore when all of a sudden he was shot through with pain. The pain had started in his ankles after wading ashore during the first discoveries. The most recent mid-winter dips had made him feel even worse. Now, suddenly, he hurt to his hipbones. He could not go on. He was ready to die. But God stepped in, and by evening, Bradford felt a little better.

Bradford, who as a boy had been too ill and weak for farm work, was now among the handful of people whose health had not faltered. Myles Standish would be about the only person to make it through the winter without falling ill, and he went far beyond the call of his duty as a military man to care for the ill and dying. The elder William Brewster also kept his health. Almost every day another person died, sometimes several persons. During the worst of the dying, only six or seven people were strong enough to prepare food, feed the ill, fetch wood, make fires, made beds, and change their “loathsome clothese.” “In a word,” Bradford wrote, “[they] did all the homely and necessary offices for them which dainty and queasy stomachs cannot endure to hear named.”

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They also had to bury the dead. If a few died each day for several days, a backlog of the deceased may well have lain among the living until the weather cleared or the handful of healthy men had the strength to move them. The chill would have slowed decomposition but not eliminated the odor that comes with death. When someone died aboard the ship, the healthy had to hoist the cold corpse up out of the gun deck (or out a gun port) and lower it down to the shallop or the longboat. They rowed the bodies in to shore, maybe passed them to someone on the famous rock, then carried them across the beach to somewhere where they could break the frozen ground. The sandy hill just above the beach was the easiest place, so that may have become the cemetery. English tradition would not have called for a hole six feet deep, and Calvinist beliefs would not have them mark a grave with a cross. Exhaustion and exigency probably conspired to let an even shallower grave suffice. To keep the Indians from detecting how quickly the English were dying off, they smoothed over the graves, left them level with the ground, and left them unmarked. The flesh of Christians rotted anonymously. ..

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Chapter Twenty

Tabuttantam

The English came to Plymouth expecting to meet blood-thirsty savages, and the Wampanoag tribes had every reason to expect the same from English ships. Both peoples expected violence. Both could have justified preemptive strikes. Yet not one word of *Mourt's Relation* or Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* expressed disrespect for the people whom the English met in America. Granted, their use of the word "savage" implied a certain unconscious assumption that these were a different *kind* of people, but all judgmental references in these documents are complimentary. They use the words *strong, honest, generous, cooperative, valiant, courteous, gentle, fair-conditioned, and personable.*

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In a letter to friends in England, Edward Winslow called them “trusty, quick of apprehension, ripe-witted, just.” Despite the skirmishes in the first few weeks, the two peoples had never really hurt each other. They had held their fears and suspicions in reserve, and accepted risk in the name of not just political exigency but, in short time, an extraordinary friendship.

In November, the settlers and Pokonoket shared a feast. We know about this event from a few sentences in a letter Edward Winslow wrote to friends in England a month later:

Our harvest being gotten in, our Governor sent four men on fowling that so we might after a more special manner rejoice together, after we had gathered the fruit of our labours. They four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the Company almost a week. At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and amongst the rest their greatest king, Massasoit with some 90 men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted. And they went out and killed five deer which they brought to the plantation and bestowed on our Governor

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and upon the Captain and others. And although it be not always so plentiful, as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want, that we often wish you partakers of our plenty.

The letter did not mention the dates of the event. It did not use the word “thanksgiving,” or even “thanks,” but Winslow’s message to the folks back home all but wallowed in the accomplishment of plentitude. After a winter under murderous conditions, they had food. They had seven houses — not much space for 52 people but certainly better than a damp, leaky, drafty, unheated ship anchored off the coast. They also had four buildings for common use. They had friends. They had their God, and they were at peace with the peoples around them.

It’s doubtful that the settlers intended to establish an annual holiday. They may have conceived the event for a combination of three reasons. For one, they had been in Plymouth for almost a year. November 11 would have been the day, but in all likelihood the feast took place between September 21 (when the shallop returned from the land of the Massachusett) and November 9. Michaelmas, a traditional celebration held on September 29, might have inspired a festival. Or they may have thought of having a feast

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as part of an *ad hoc* holy Day of Thanksgiving and Praise, a Puritan and Separatist celebration that was declared whenever God seemed to be cooperating with human endeavors. Or they may have simply decided a good harvest warranted a good meal. The harvest feast was an old English tradition that had little to do with religion beyond standard thanks to God for the harvest and the blessings of each day and each morsel of food.

Most likely the event started as a Pilgrim celebration, and when Massasoit's people came along, they were invited to join in. The presence of almost a hundred non-Christians at the feast, and Winslow's reference to "entertainment," would imply that the event was not the strictly religious Day of Thanksgiving and Prayer. Such entertainment may have included games, dance, songs, speeches, and revelry. The absence of any reference to November 11 or the end of a successful twelve months in America would hint that the celebration was not oriented around that fact or held that late in the fall. The traditional harvest feast is the most likely reason the settlers decided to do some extra hunting, break out the stored food, and invite the neighbors over.

Only by conjecture can we imagine that first feast of thanksgiving. Mrs. Hopkins, Mrs. Billington, Mrs. Brewster and Mrs. Winslow — the only adult English women north of Jamestown — served up a three-day meal for a hundred and

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forty people, ninety of whom had table manners different from those of Europeans. But the bare chests, the cultural differences, and the language barrier most certainly did not disguise the obvious: that these “savages” were good people who knew, without being told, the do-unto-others love that Jesus had spoken of. Though the Pokonoket had no word for “please,” they did have one for “thanks” — *tabuttantam*. *Tabuttantamauaa* meant “he gives thanks.” *Taubotenanawayean* meant “I thank you.” *Tabutantamoonk* would be the closest known word to thanksgiving. It derived from *tampu-* (sufficient) and *-antam* (the mental sensation of being satisfied). In the small-talk of a three-day feast, the native and new Americans may well have taught each other these words. Then they probably used them a lot...

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