

The author says: "I am retired, but writers of course never fully retire, they just go right on writing. My typewriter provides me with a sort of raison d'etre. Many people, when they retire, move to Florida, where they meet people with whom they play golf. I suppose that if a person looks hard enough, s/he can find a raison d'etre in a golf ball. Be that as it may, if I ever move to Florida, I plan to take my typewriter with me." The following story is a harsh look at a future on the verge of repeating history.

This morning I take Sandy and Drew into the woods to look for a Christmas tree. The woods are full of them, but finding a good one is difficult, for most of the conifers indigenous to this part of McMullen's Planet lack the natural symmetry of their counterparts on Earth.

Sandy is ten, Drew eight. Christmas Eve is tomorrow night and they can hardly wait for it to come, even though no Santa Claus will come down our chimney. When I reminded them of this, they assured me it made no difference. Christmas this year, they said, will be special enough in itself. In this they are quite right.

Usually when you go into the woods you see some of the Stoops. One of their villages is only a mile from our settlement and the women and children often dig up tubers out of the forest floor. But the woods are empty of them today. No doubt the number of colonists looking for Christmas trees scared them away.

I spot my neighbor, Jake Best. He has his three kids with him and he has just cut down a six-foot "spruce." "Merry Christmas, Glen," he calls out to me.

"Merry Christmas, Jake," I call back.

We find a conifer which is almost pyramidal and just about the right height, and I set to work with my ax. Sandy and Drew insist on carrying it home all by themselves. My wife Melissa meets us at the door. There was a rain last night and she tells us to wipe our feet good before we go in. Our house is a small, square, one-story building without any trimmings, but we are proud of it. Like all the other houses of the settlement and the two churches and the various other buildings, it is built out of plastiwood. Plastiwood, while ideal for setting up a colony in a hurry, isn't a viable building material for cold and windy regions because it's so thin and light, but on this part of McMullen's Planet, winter is barely distinguishable from fall and a close sister to spring, and throughout the year only breezes blow.

After supper I put up the tree in the living room and Melissa and the two kids begin trimming it with strings of popcorn and homemade ornaments. I leave them to their task and head for the square to help trim the big community tree which some of the other colonists and I put up yesterday. The square is in the center of the settlement. It is surfaced with gravel which we hauled in from a nearby creek. We couldn't, of course, bring cement with us because of its weight, and our buildings, unfortunately, lack footings. But we've begun making our own cement, and since it's too late to pour footings, we plan instead to cover the gravel surface of the square with a thick layer of concrete.

The tree is about fifteen feet tall. The children are excited about it and would be running all over the square if Joe Holtz, the mayor, hadn't put it off limits till tomorrow night. Before we put up the tree we affixed the aluminum-foil star, which we brought from Earth, to the peak. We also brought a big box of real ornaments and twenty packages of tinsel and two dozen sets of Christmas tree lights. The Agency for the Development of Extraterrestrial Acres (ADEA) didn't object because the extra weight was negligible.

After we finish trimming the tree, we position the figures of the crèche beside it. ADEA had set up a howl about the creche, saying we should take something practical instead, but we had the American public on our side and, more importantly, the media. "Of what worth are we to Christianity," a leading commentator demanded, "if we deny to these stalwart colonists, who are going to be present at the first

Christmas, the sacred scene which commemorates it?"

When Joe Holtz turns on the tree lights, the tree explodes into multicolored magnificence. The aluminum-foil star seems to shine with a light of its own. We rig up a canopy over the crèche to give the impression of a stable, and Rich Jefferson, the colony's electrician, installs a light under it of much softer radiance than those illuminating the square and which bathes the figures of Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the Christ child with a candlelight-like glow. I guess all of us are a bit awed by the effect. The baby Jesus seems to look right up at us out of His crib, ready to bestow His love upon this new world.

To add zest to the occasion we tap a keg of homemade beer. Figured in McMullen time, only a year has passed since our arrival, but a McMullen year equals almost two Earth years, so we've had more than enough time to introduce into our lives some of the daily pleasures we used to take for granted on Earth.

As the beer warms us, a feeling of camaraderie, tinged with self-satisfaction, envelops us. Rich Jefferson puts the way we feel into words when, his black face mirroring the tree lights, he waves his ceramic cup of beer back and forth and says, "We worked hard, men. We worked together, day and night. We came to a strange world and turned it into a new home for mankind. A world so far from Earth it ain't been touched yet with the love of Jesus. We brought some of that love with us. Tomorrow night the rest of it will wash over us like a Wave from heaven." He holds up his cup. All the rest of us hold up ours. "To brotherly love!" he cries, and everyone joins him in the toast.

I leave the square before the others do. I want to get up tomorrow morning with a clear head.

I am thoughtful as I make my way homeward through the narrow streets. The warmth of the beer is still with me and so is the sense of camaraderie.

We named our little colony Bethlehem. I savor the word in my mind. I speak it aloud in the night. "Bethlehem."

Because of the forthcoming miracle, no other name would have done.

I know that in a scientific sense the miracle won't be a true one. It will simply be the result of the forces of nature. Nevertheless, in it, it is possible to find the hand of God.

At 10:16 tomorrow night Christ will be born.

He will be born on Earth, on the third of April, 33 A.D.

It is 2053 light years from Earth to McMullen's Planet. But interstellar ships travel through infraspace where light years do not count, and our journey only lasted a day, ship's time. We traveled back into the past, and although on Earth it is the year of our Lord 2086, were we able to see the planet in our skies, it would be the Earth of 33 A.D.

Early in the twenty-first century time-probes pinpointed the moment of Christ's birth. Before our departure the master computer at Space Base informed us exactly when the wings of light would bring the reality of the event to us. In setting the McMullen date, we chose the traditional rather than the actual month, but moved the day back by one, for Christmas Eve, in the minds of most Christians, has become even holier than Christmas Day.

Although our months are much longer than Earth months, the length of our days is approximately that of Earth days. And, incredibly, the month we have named December is the month when winter in this temperate zone begins!

The Advance Team, which studied the planet and chose the spot where the colony is now located, consists of men and women of diverse religions. Some of them are atheists. After they radioed their report to Earth, they set up their own colony well to the south of the land they had staked out for us. ADEA decided it would be sacrilegious to send any more non-Christians to a planet that was soon to know the birth of Christ, so for the main colony, equal numbers of Neo-Catholic and Neo-Protestant families were chosen.

We haven't given much thought to Easter. It's too far in our future and some of us may never live to see it. Hopefully those of us who do will be ennobled to an even greater degree when the reality of the resurrection reaches across space and touches our shores.

The next morning Rich Jefferson, Doc Rosario and I set out for the neighboring Stooptown to barter

for wild turkeys. The big ship which brought the colonists here stands in a large clearing in the woods just outside the settlement. We walk through its morning shadow. Its rusted hull bespeaks the fact that it is here to stay, just as we are, and will never again see Earth.

In the strict sense of the word, McMullen turkeys aren't true turkeys, but they look enough like them to rate the name, and, when roasted, taste almost the same. Despite their ungainly bodies, they're so fleet of wing none of the colonists has as yet been able to bag one, but the Stoops, using nothing but primitive bows and arrows, bring them down with ease.

In the Stooptown we make our wishes known. By signs, of course, since we can't speak the Stoop language. The Chief, who, like all the members of his race, is bent slightly forward at the waist, summons two of his hunters. We show them the bright-colored pieces of polyester cloth we brought with us and they feel of the material with their dirty fingers and peer at it closely with their sad, brown eyes. The Advance Team classified Stoops as human beings, and despite their awkward posture, they aren't particularly unpleasant to look at, although they're a dirty white in color. Not only are all the adults stooped over, the children are too. Centuries of working in the fields turned what once was an unnatural deformity into a "natural" one.

It might be said that the colonists call the natives "Stoops" because they condemn them. Nothing could be further from the truth. We call them that because the word, logically enough, leaped into our minds the moment we saw them.

After the hunters set forth with their bows and arrows, the Chief asks us about the "Great Tree" that took root in our village and grew lights on its branches. One of the village boys, he "says," saw it from a tree which he climbed in the woods. I know he's lying, that the boy must have sneaked into the colony. This angers me, for Stoop kids are always doing this, and it angers me even more because we'd made our own kids stay home when we trimmed the tree.

I tell him that the tree is an offering which we have made to our God so He will increase the fertility of the women of our tribe, since it would take forever to tell him by signs the real significance of the tree, besides which I'm not altogether certain what the significance is.

While awaiting the return of the hunters we go for a walk through the village. It consists of thatched grass-huts, and there are dozens of ugly little animals running around that look like dogs. Presently we come to the outskirts and look at the fields which, come spring, the Stoops will plow with their wooden plows and then seed, mostly with grain. The soil is dark and rich, and their harvests are phenomenal. Ironically, our own fields, despite their proximity, consist of a soil comprised mostly of clay, and all we've been able to grow so far with any real degree of success are tomatoes.

"Just think of what we could do," Doc Rosario says, indicating the Stoop fields with a sweeping gesture, "if we had *that* land!"

"Well, we ain't going to get it," Rich says bitterly.

And we aren't. Because the Stoops, having been classified as human beings, have human rights, and ADEA made it clear to us before we left Earth that we could plant only the land which the Advance Team had staked out for us.

I am glad when at length the hunters return. I share Rich's bitterness, as do the rest of the colonists, and it's galling to be exposed to thousands of acres of fertile land which your own countrymen have denied you. The hunters bring back three beautiful birds. We pay for them with our bright pieces of cloth and depart.

Melissa cleans and stuffs our turkey that afternoon. Pastor Rilke pays us a visit while she's still at work. He has decided, he says, to hold midnight services tonight, although it is generally the custom of Neo-Protestant churches to wait till Christmas Day. But since this Christmas Eve will be the first Christmas Eve, he is of the opinion that it would be improper to wait till tomorrow. He has discussed the matter with Father Fardus, he says, and Father Fardus thinks it will be a grand idea for the members of both religions to give their thanks to God at the same time. "I know there's no need to ask you if you'll be present," Pastor Rilke concludes. "I'm merely informing you and the other members of my flock well ahead of time so that our little church will be full."

Sandy asks him if we will be able to feel the Wave of Love when it arrives. He smiles. He is a short, rotund man with a round face. "Yes, Sandy, I think we will. Those of us, that is, who are pure of heart, and I don't think for one moment that any of us are not, especially the little children, of whom He said, or rather of whom He will say, 'Suffer them to come unto me, and forbid them not; for such is the kingdom of God.' "

After he leaves, Sandy and Drew pull the shades in the living room and begin reading a microfilm of "A Christmas Carol." Melissa washes and dries the pots and pans she has dirtied; then she sets about making Christmas cookies. The women's movement, which took such giant steps forward on Earth, has of necessity, here on McMullen's Planet, taken several giant steps backward. Not that the women of the colony have lost their equality—far from it. Someday on our brand new world there will be a wealth of opportunity for the members of both sexes, but at the moment our little settlement has far more in common with the one the Pilgrim Fathers founded in New England than with the ultra-modern world we left behind us, so for the time being, women must do women's work and men men's.

We have a light supper. I have but little appetite and the kids only pick at their food. Melissa leaves more on her plate than she consumes. Since our arrival on McMullen's Planet we have lived for this night. It has made the hardships we have suffered endurable. This is true for all the other colonists. None of us are "Jesus lovers." Catholics and Protestants alike, we are hard-minded, down-to-earth people. But we are true Christians nevertheless, and we are awed by the thought that tonight our Savior will be born.

Sandy helps Melissa with the dishes. Afterwards the four of us don our best clothes. Best, that is, by our own standards, but to the people of Earth, were any of them around, we would look like farmers as we set out for the square. But neither Melissa nor I would find this offensive, for farmers are what we have become.

The night sky is rich with stars and they seem to have acquired an added brightness. How marvelous it would be if we could see the Star over Bethlehem! But we won't be able to of course, since it won't be a true star, but a syzygy of Jupiter and Saturn.

But it will be in our skies even though we won't be able to see it, and its light will be one with the Wave of Love.

In the square Melissa and I and the kids join the others who are standing around the tree. Its lights have been turned on and glow warmly in the night and the star on its peak shines forth much like the one the Magi will see from the east, even though the light from the syzygy has yet to touch our world. Mary, Joseph and the shepherds gaze down with adoring eyes upon the Infant in the crib.

Pastor Rilke and Father Fardus (who is as tall and thin as Pastor Rilke is short and plump) are standing near the creche. They join in when we begin singing carols. We fill the night with the words of what for us is the most beloved carol of all—

"O little town of Bethlehem!
How still we see thee lie;
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by . . ."

Many of the people are visibly moved; I glimpse tears in some of the women's eyes. Tears of joy and love.

At 10:15 Father Fardus begins the countdown. Except for his voice, there isn't a sound in the square. "Six . . . five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . ." All at once a brief brightness illumines the land. Cynics would call it a distant flash of lightning, even though the sky is clear and no sound of thunder reaches our ears, but there are no cynics among us tonight.

Father Fardus and Pastor Rilke kneel. The rest of us follow suit. And so help me, I can *feel* the Wave of Love.

I love my neighbors and I know my neighbors love me. My love reaches out over the land and I feel

one with the world we have come to call our own. Around me, both men and women are crying. I feel tears running down my own cheeks.

"Hallelujah!" Pastor Rilke cries. "He is here!" cries Father Fardus. "He is here, He is here, He is here!"

We get to our feet. I see then that three Stoops have come into the square. They make their way through the crowd to the tree. They halt before it, staring up at the star.

No one says a word.

Then the three Stoops go over to the crèche. They stand staring at Mary and Joseph and the shepherds. They look down into the crib. Then one of them kneels before it and places a little bundle on the ground. One of the others reaches into the crib. The silence is broken then. By Father Fardus's voice. "He's touching the Christ child with his filthy hands!"

The priest's horror spreads through the crowd. The horror becomes anger, and then fury. "Drive them away!" Pastor Rilke screams. "Drive them away!"

The gravel covering the square consists of big stones as well as small. I seize one. Men and women scramble for them. One of the Stoops shrieks as a stone glances off his shoulder. They try to make their way out of the square. But the crowd has formed a circle around them.

Pastor Rilke steps over to the crib and kicks away the little bundle as though it were a bomb. It falls apart and tubers tumble over the ground. The air is thick with stones now. The children are throwing them too. One of the Stoops has fallen down. Blood is gushing from his forehead.

"Dirty land hogs!" Henrietta Holtz screams, but the stone she throws goes wild.

Melissa's aim is better. Her stone strikes one of the Stoops on the chest. "Because of you stupid creeps we have to farm dead land!" Maria Rosario shouts.

"Kill the dirty land hogs!" screams Dorothy Best. "Kill them, kill them, kill them!"

Rich Jefferson picks up a great big stone and heaves it. It misses one of the Stoops by inches. The two who are still on their feet pick up the fallen one. Dragging him, they try to force their way through the crowd. Both are bleeding. The colonists in their path claw at them and strike them with their fists, but they weather the blows and at length they drag their companion off into the darkness. We let them go.

Slowly fury fades from our faces. Love takes its place. The Wave from faraway Earth is still washing over us. Rich Jefferson, who is a soul for neatness, gathers up the scattered tubers, carries them to the edge of the square and throws them into one of the drainage ditches. We begin to sing again. "Silent Night." "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing." "Good King Wenceslas." The voices of adult and child rise heavenward to the stars. Afterward we file into the two churches where Pastor Rilke and Father Fardus give thanks to God for sending us His Son.