

# Honey

As they passed the small shops lining the sidewalks, they waved to the people they knew, the farmers and store-keepers, all good people who had bent over backwards to help the young couple when the news of the baby had gotten around. Many of the odd jobs he had worked at were created for him specially, without his knowledge, by the businessmen out of concern for the baby.

The town was small enough that everybody knew one another. The local church had taken a special interest in the coming child by supplying many of the small essential items the mother would need for the child. Through the generosity of the neighbours and the church, the couple had received a good supply of blankets and clothing for the baby which relieved the husband of a large expense and allowed him to provide more money for food and set aside a small amount for the move to the city.

The couple felt deeply upset about leaving the close companionship of the town but they realized that the small towns had lost their potential for growth and were quietly dying in the shadows of the burgeoning cities. There was no place for the young couple in the life of the town. The city was the only place that might allow the husband to provide for his family if he was able to break through the tough job market.

As they rolled along the wide highway to the city, they saw the awful desolation that winter gave the countryside. Farms, which in summer were hidden in seas of glowing grain fields, stood out in their starkness against the brilliant snow. The age of prosperity for farmers had passed, now the grand farm houses were showing the effects of the economic depression. Most had not been painted for years, the bare grey wood showed hideously. The windows of several were boarded because there was no money to replace the broken glass, and the ridge beams of the barns sagged dangerously.

The marvelous farm machinery, which the farmers had been forced into buying at inflated prices a few years ago, lay in ragged rows near the houses, rusting quickly to the colour of blood.

Many of the farms were abandoned to rot and others held garish for sale signs with the name of some realtor or another.

The couple spent the day before Christmas Eve on the highway before stopping at a crowded motel for the night. The manager besides charging them an exorbitant rate for the room, warned them they would have a great deal of difficulty in finding a place to stay in the city.

The couple worried about this because they knew they would have to stay in a motel for a couple of days before they found a place to live. On top of that, the baby was due any time and they anxiously awaited the first signs of labour.

He knew they would also have trouble finding a hospital at such short notice but he had the name of a good doctor who would look after his wife if she was forced to have the baby without the services of a hospital.

The next day they were up early, well before the first weak rays of the sun and paid their bill. The truck started easily and they were on the road before the traffic built up.

Later in the day the city announced its presence well before it came into sight by the towering clouds of dark industrial smoke rising to join the bed of haze that hovered like an umbrella over it.

The traffic became thicker and several times the slow moving truck was passed by anxious drivers, station wagons full of jeering children, truck drivers with a harried look about them, and many tired solitary drivers pushing into the heart of the black city.

The couple grew more and more depressed as they entered the outskirts of the city in the gathering darkness of the winter night. The city was not what they had expected; everything seemed harder and brasher than they expected.

From every corner shouted large signs begging people to BUY, BUY. The radio in the truck extolled the virtues of first one merchant then another. Christmas carols were interwoven with advertisements for female lingerie, health products, all manner of dubious articles.

The bright lights of the store fronts perverted the meaning of the season through their attempt to convince the morose, expressionless shoppers, their store was better than the others, offered more products, sold cheaper, played better Christmas carols, etc.

From the constantly opening plate glass doors of the department stores could be heard a continuous ringing of cash registers, while the charity organisations on the sidewalks in the cold were for the most part inactive.

The churches, with their pseudo modern gothic architectural styles, vied with one another for the cutest Biblical quotes on their outdoor bulletin boards and the most ornate manger scenes that could have fed many hungry families had the money been better spent.

The liquor stores were doing a terrific business. From behind the huge glass windows, decorated with plastic holly and synthetic snow, could be seen long line ups of fat middle aged men with fat wallets buying as much liquor as they could carry then hustling quickly past the thin Santa Clauses outside with their tin bells and empty collection pails.

The more the couple saw of the city and its interpretation of the festive season, the more they detested it.

The night was growing longer but they had still not found a place to stay the night. Motel after motel displayed a flashing neon no vacancy sign. At each one they would stop and ask if they knew of any place that might

shelter them for the night but always the answer was no.

Out of desperation, he stopped the truck beside a youth hitchhiking along the street and asked him if he knew of a place.

To their amazement he said he knew of a youth hostel that would take them and he would gladly direct them.

The hostel was little more than a disused warehouse with rows of army type cots along the walls. Few people were staying there over the holidays and the manager easily found them a separate room for the night.

The husband offered to pay but the manager would have none of it and instead told them his wife would make supper for the couple and he would fetch the doctor for the young wife who even then was beginning to have pains.

The doctor arrived and hustled the worried husband out of the room. There was nothing else for him to do so he wandered down the hall to the manager's room where he was welcomed heartily.

After a few minutes of desultory conversation, they watched a little television before the late news came on.

The announcer went through the nightly catalogue of the latest disasters and wars, which seemed out of place considering this was to be the time of peace and goodwill to all men throughout the world. Towards the end of his broadcast, the announcer changed his tone.

"And now an item that fits right into the festive spirit. Astronomers at various observatories throughout the world are reporting the appearance of an exploding star. The star is growing in intensity and should be visible over the major part of the country by now. The star will continue to get brighter until sometime tonight then rapidly fade. Several religious groups have announced that the star is heralding the birth of the true messiah but scientists claim the star is only going through a normal process that happens once every thousand years or so somewhere in this region of the milky way."

"Say, lets go look at that," said the manager.

The husband was too nervous about his wife's condition to protest and accompanied him outside onto the street.

To their amazement, a brilliant blue light was showering down from a brilliant star, many times the size of any other. It seemed to them that the star was directly overhead.

"It's incredible...beautiful...I wish my wife could see this," he said.

"She probably already knows far more about it than you do," said a darkly clothed stranger from the shadow of the building.

"Who is that?" said the husband.

"Don't worry about who I am, lets just say I've come a long way for this night and what is to follow."

The husband tried without success to get the stranger to explain himself but gave up before returning to his wife's side.

The doctor told him the birth was imminent and he crowded close to his wife in support. She seemed to be in pain but was very relaxed about it.

As the time grew closer, the doctor got busy. The stranger was in the room with them but the husband seemed to feel he belonged somehow and made no move to get rid of him.

Finally, just when it seemed like it would take forever there was a hearty wail and the child was born.

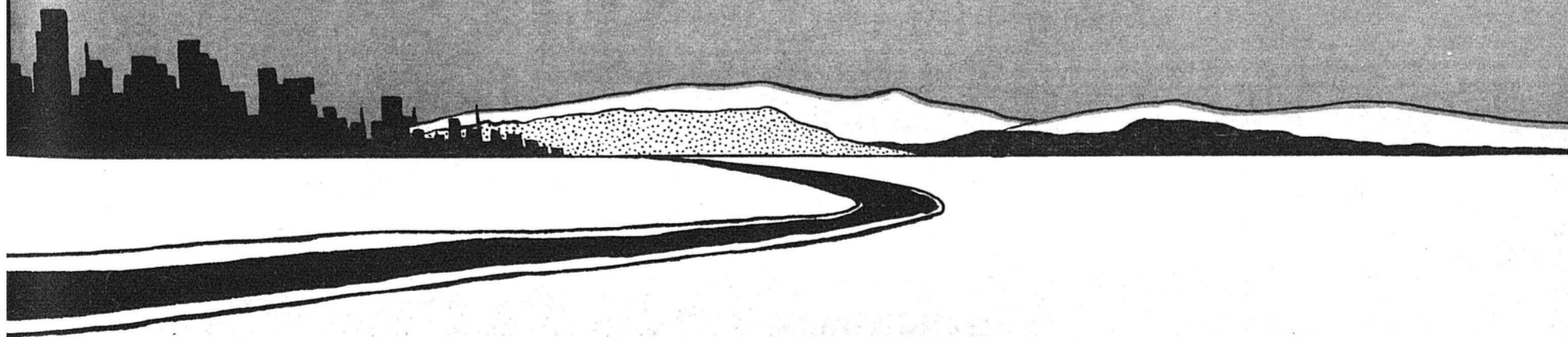
At that moment the world grew silent and the clear blue light of the exploding star reaching in through the window and shone on the child's face.

From somewhere overhead came a soul filling peal of trumpets and singing that brought tears of joy to nearly all in the room.

The light died, the sounds of the city resumed but when the husband looked around in bewilderment to find the stranger, he saw he had gone without anyone seeing him go.

He turned his eyes back to the child who was smiling happily to itself he felt the peace and googness that had been preached unsuccessfully for thousands of years reach into him.

*Back in the region that does not exist and never will:*  
"THERE, IT IS DONE," said Armace!  
"YES IT IS DONE BUT I WORRY OVER WHAT WILL BE THE CONSEQUENCES."  
"YOU MEAN WHETHER THEY ARE GOING TO LEARN FROM THIS?"  
"YES, THEY ARE TOO EASILY SWAYED AT TIMES. THEY COULD REJECT EVERYTHING IF THEY WERE INFLUENCED ENOUGH."  
"BUT YOU CAN EASILY CHANGE THINGS SO THEY ARE FORCED INTO THE RIGHTWAY."  
"NO THAT IS ONE THING I WILL NOT DO. THEN THERE WOULD BE NO POINT TO THIS EXERCISE AT ALL."  
"NO I CREATED THEM SO THEY COULD TAKE THEIR PLACE HERE WHEN THE TIME COMES BUT THEY MUST HAVE FOUND THEIR OWN WAY WITHOUT INFLUENCE FROM ME OTHERWISE THEY ARE NOTHING MORE THAN PUPPETS."



Graphics by Fiona T. Campbell