

Feliz Navidad

C. L. Christensen

No room at the inn,
For them, anyway.
It didn't take ESP to read the situation.
Just avoiding unpleasantness later.
He had enough on his mind just then.

How had the trip been for Mary?
Days on the road,
On the back of an ass.
Nine months pregnant.
"I know your back hurts, Mary.
I'm sorry. But we have to keep up with the company.
You have to get off? Already?
I'd better tell the company to go on without us.
We should get there tonight anyway."

Travail.
That of a mother.
Labor. Was it twelve hours, sixteen.
Hard or easy.
Did Jewish women still travail on the stools?

Blood.
There must have been blood
Soaking into the straw,
Hopefully clean.
It wasn't sanitary, white,
Scrubbed. But hopefully, new straw.
Joseph could at least have spread new straw.
Or was he too busy searching for a midwife, water . . .
(Why always water, hot water?)
The swaddling clothes.

Joseph.
Did he tie the cord?
Was the cord even tied,

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Or was it left until it rotted off?
Was Joseph even allowed to be there, unclean, unclean
(Banished to a stable, then from the stable
While his wife screamed.)
Or could he hold her hand,
Wipe the sweat from her brow

From the pain.
Or did she feel pain?
Was she absolved from pain as by the touch of a wand,
Or by the spirit, or by Pavlovian methods we're now learning
To unlearn fear?

Fear.
She was only a girl.
Fifteen, sixteen?
Her first child.
Away from home —
Alone.

Or was she alone?
Was her mother there,
Superintending everything.
More clothes, hot water —
You men go away.
Yes, men. A family reunion.
Everybody was there.
All of the house of David.
Cousins, uncles, aunts, grandmothers, nephews.
The Mother dictating to the aunts,
Scolding the uncles, by her chatter frightening
Rather than helping the becoming mother.
Or perhaps they really were alone.
The aunts counting the months
From the wedding, and not — how do you say —
Wanting the trash in their houses.
Or “putting her away privily,”
In the stable instead of the guest room.
Or, slowed by her aching back and incessant stops . . .

Alone, then.
It's much more romantic.
But how did she feel when her water broke?
Had her mother told her? Did she know?
When the water, tinted with blood to a rich pink,
Flooded. Did she feel fear?
Or was she comforted?

Was it even a big deal?
Did she, hardy girl, whelp easily, naturally.
Alone, in charge,
Like a squaw with the tribe on the move.
(Can't hold up the tribe for just one squaw, you know.)

It was probably more than that,
They did lose a goodly percentage back then.
Of course, she probably had a better chance
Delivering outside of their crowded hovels.
But not an Ur-mother, with gaping womb,
Giving birth in a riot of fecundity.
A youthful virgin, unworldly-wise
Straining to birth one child,
One perfect product of God's love.

Anyway, she probably wasn't kneeling,
Bowing gracefully to her infant Lord
When the shepherds came.
With the burly, bawling baby at her breast,
She lay resting and hurting.

Joseph would have knelt, holding her hand,
Reverencing the giving of life.