

All His Christmases

(by Robert Bee)

Much to his annoyance, Max Tempe saw the red numbers declaring it was 5.37 a.m. He had left specific instructions for his door to be shut and the family to be quiet so he could have a sleep-in for once. Just once.

But no, the door was wide open and the squeals of the children could be heard from the Christmas tree down the hall. Seems like it was only yesterday, he thought, then shook his still sleepy head in resignation. May as well get up and see what marvels the kids got this year. It couldn't be worse than that Playstation thingmy and the pokerman whatsies they plagued him with last Christmas.

Max found his silk dressing gown draped over the bedside chair. It still looked brand new, with stars and Trekkie characters all over it, though he had worn it for over ten Christmases. He walked down the hall, rubbing sleep from his eyes, only to be run into by young Benjamin on a silver scooter.

"Look at me, Christmas Max," Benjamin shouted in excitement, then scooted down the hall to his parents' bedroom. Max barely had time to step aside as Tracey raced after her older brother on a purple scooter.

Max scratched his head in amazement. The last time he had seen one of those things – just over a few months ago it seemed – it had been twice as big with wheels the size of dish plates. But his whole life seemed like that now. Blink, and everything's changed.

The family went through the Christmas morning ritual, his relatives Suzie and George being kind, as usual, but distant, also as usual. He supposed it was hard for them, only seeing him every Christmas Day. But it was harder for him, much harder. He suspected they knew that, but still found it difficult having him around.

Max declined the invitation to go to the Christmas Church Service. Not that he minded church, but going once every seven days was enough for him, and he'd only been two days ago. "I'll go in 2014," he said.

Christmas dinner – Max still couldn't get used to having dinner at lunch time – was a huge banquet as usual, with Suzie using all her cooking skills to get the turkey roll just right and the pork crackling crackling like dry twigs. But just once Max would have liked something simple, like bangers and mash. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had bangers and mash, but he was hardly likely to ever have some again.

At last, just before midnight, Max shared a port with George and they talked. George was a good man and as they sipped the last of the Tawney and headed off to bed, George promised they would look after everything as usual and see Max next Christmas. "Happy Christmas, Max," George said, patting him kindly on the shoulder.

"Aren't they all?" said Max as he gently shut the bedroom door.

Next morning, Max woke to the sound of blaring music from down the hall. His bedroom door was closed this time but it didn't stop the sound of voices – he assumed they were human – shouting over what might have been a band of some kind. He heard heavy footsteps striding down the hall – it could only be George – then the music stopped abruptly. He thought he heard his name mentioned in the miffed and muffled conversation that followed, then softer footsteps – George on tiptoes – moved back up the hall, with a mumbled "Merry Christmas kids" slipping under the door crack.

Max rolled over towards the bedside clock. The numbers – they were green now – said 6.15 a.m. He rose and put his Star Trek robe on – it was folded neatly on the chair again – turned on the light and looked in the wardrobe mirror, as always, amazed by his appearance. He combed his thick mop of black hair and went out to join the family for Christmas. What wonderful gadgets would they have this time, he pondered.

Four mornings later, Max woke to amber numbers announcing it was 5.07 a.m, and watched with amazement as Benjamin and Tracey tried out their new hover-skates. On the walk home from the Christmas Service, George pulled Max aside for a quiet word. "There may be a visitor when we get home," George said.

"So?" said Max.

"Someone who wants to see you," continued George. "Just so you won't be surprised, Max."

"I'm surprised already," said Max.

Max underestimated George's power of surprise. The man waiting on the doorstep was blacker than any lump of coal Max had ever seen, not that he had seen one recently. He was dressed in a white shirt and brown sports trousers, with Nike sneakers, but looked like he would be just as comfortable in a loincloth with a spear and woomera. It may have been the feathered headband that gave this impression, or the white paint around his eyes.

"You," said Max. It wasn't a question nor an accusation. It was simply a fact.

Suzie and George ushered the curious teenagers into the house while Max and his visitor walked around the side to the garden.

"How did you find me?" asked Max.

“Are you glad I did?” the other said.

Max thought for a moment. Bangers and mash. “Too right I am. But how..?”

The visitor waved the question away. “Something to do with bones. Never mind. Do you remember why?”

“Every day,” Max said. “Every Christmas.”

“Is it fun, white man?”

Max winced at the tone, not unkind, but still accusing.

“I’d kill to see a Boxing Day,” Max whispered.

“Nothing that drastic. Just think of that day. Think hard”

“I do,” said Max. “Every day.”

“Well, do it now,” the visitor insisted.

Max closed his eyes, casting his mind back to 1801, to the bangers and mash he and Molly had for lunch on that Christmas Day. They lived a simple frugal life but managed to splash out at Christmas. He followed his progress to the pub after lunch for drinks with his shearers. He saw himself down one ale too many and swagger outside to water a tree. There was an aboriginal family there, the patriarch with white feathers for a headband and white paint around his eyes. He was dressed simply in a loincloth, and held a spear and woomera in one hand.

Max saw himself abusing the aboriginal, calling him unrepeatable names. It was the drink talking, but unforgivable nonetheless. He saw the children cowering, wide-eyed, behind their mother as Max ranted on and on. Then the black man started a low chant, growing gradually louder and pervasive, doing a slow dance on the spot in the dust, the clack of the woomera on spear beating a rhythm. “Oh come on witch doctor, do your worst,” Max had jeered. “Or...is it Wish Doctor? Yeah, Wish Doctor. Well, I’ve got a wish you can fix.” He patted his now empty pockets. “Since this has been such a lovely Chrishmash day, and the rest of the year’s so tough, I wish... I wish all my Chrishmashes can come at once.” He saw himself burst out laughing at his wit and roll back into the pub, his life changed forever.

Max’s eyes snapped open. The ‘Wish Doctor’ was gone, but the grass where he had stood wore a very trodden look.

That Christmas day went very slowly for Max. He sat quietly in the back verandah, remembering, one by one, the two hundred and nine Christmas days since that day. Molly aging a year each day of his life, all his later relatives getting older, dying, being born, dying. Day by day. He stared into his beer, realising that in the year 3000 A.D. of the new Millennium, if the human race, and him, survived, he would be only three years older. Only thirty one.

As George saw him to bed that night with “Happy Christmas Max,” Max closed the door with “Will it be?”

The amber numbers said 8.26 a.m. The sun was shining through the vertical blind slats and there was silence in the house. Blessed silence.

Max sat up and reached for his robe. It was not on the chair but on the floor where he’d dropped it. He stepped out into the hall preparing for evasive action. Nothing. He moved down the hallway and into the kitchen. Suzie almost dropped the coffee pot when she saw him and had to sit quickly to regain her breath, unable to speak.

“Happy Christmas, Suzie,” Max said ritually.

Suzie raised her eyebrows.

“What’s that delicious smell?” Max asked.

Suzie looked at the sizzling frypan on the hot plate. “Sausages and hash browns.” She turned back to Max. “It’s our traditional Boxing Day breakfast.”