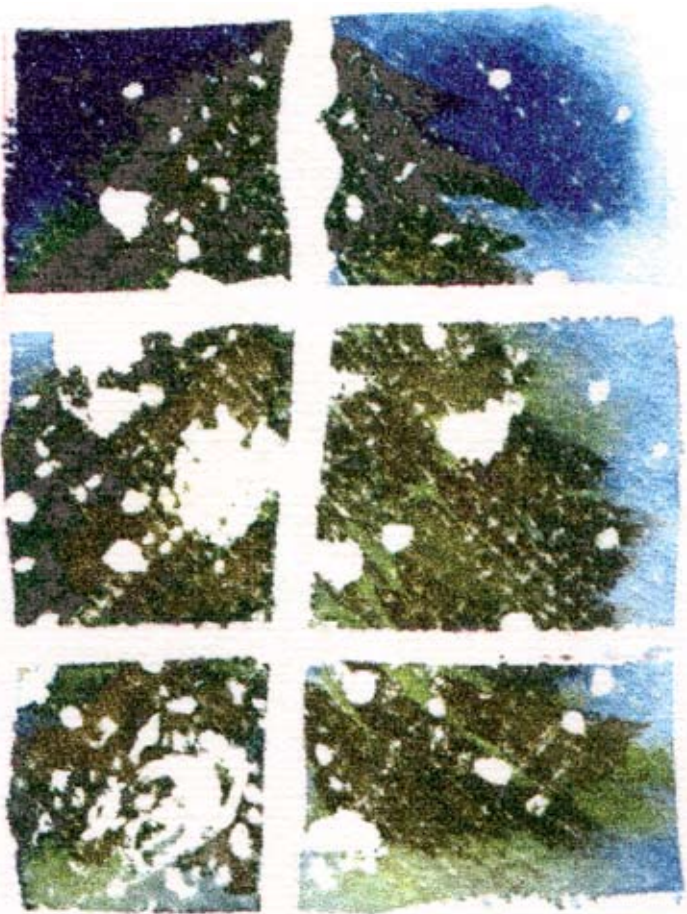


CHRISTMAS  
*in* GOTHAM



JULES SIEGEL

*From FORBIDDEN DREAMS, A NOVEL.  
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# Christmas in Gotham

By JULES SIEGEL

**D**ESPITE being afflicted with a chronic melancholy that hung in his brain like wet laundry on a smoggy day, Franklin Cornish found it difficult to complain about his life with any great sense of righteousness. It was true that he had experienced grave unhappiness and worse pain, but he had also known times of great ecstasy. If he was not especially productive, at least his work was respected for its professional solidity. And even though he was unable to consider himself famous, an occasional compliment from a stranger would make him realize that he was not completely unknown to the public.

On the balance, then, it was not really a bad life, but balance is a concept of the reason, and reason, it seemed to Cornish, was the least likely window through which one might attempt to look at the nature of things. Righteously or unrighteously, reasonably or unreasonably, he was unhappy with the condition of the universe and, more particularly, of the world immediately outside his eyes. In fact, he was so unhappy there was not one day, sometimes not one hour, in which he did not think of suicide.

It was an obsession he tried to keep to himself, a comfortable corner to which he could retreat whenever things got particularly unpleasant, constructing in his mind various scenarios of death with appropriate solemnity, rebellious flippancy, or magnificent sentimentality. But when he came close to the action itself he found himself arrested by the insistent question, "Why am I doing this?" Unable to find any reason to continue living, he was also unable to find any

reason to stop. As a result he had lived nearly half his likely term on earth without doing much of anything at all.

More and more, however, he was convincing himself that death was the answer to this impotence. One thing he was hopeful of was that it would have to be at least different from life. For when it really came down to the truth of the matter, Cornish had to admit that all he was looking for was a change. Yet all the changes he had tried so far—change of climate, change of wife, change of career, change of attitude—led him to the belief that nothing helped. He had a few well-tried emotions and was unable to find any new ones to replace them; as a result, every new situation turned out to be a repeat of the old. All that changed was the color of his car, or the furniture in his apartment, or the intensity of the way he felt about things. The feelings remained the same. If there were no new feelings to be had in life, he thought, he might as well die. This change of amplitude, up and down, was not satisfying enough.

Now, at Christmas time, he swore not to fall for the illusions of tinsel and holly, not to be aroused by the mania of gift-giving nor by the gay cards that arrived from friends all over the country. The gray winter snow cloaked him in an insulated blanket of chill that seemed to be the shroud of inexorably oncoming infinite sleep, and he was content that it should be that way, despite the revelers who seemed to be trying to convince him to interrupt his frozen dream.

Cornish and his girl friend were living in a vast, empty apartment whose undraped windows overlooked a grim vista of factories, dirty houses, littered streets, and granite skyscrapers painted on a dark sky that could have been imported from one of those English movies in which the sun never shines. He had lost his job as a commercial artist and was dead broke. The telephone had been turned off for more

than two months and his usual contacts were unsympathetic to his requests for help. His only recreation was long walks through streets filled with smiling robots mechanically buying useless trash.

On almost every corner there were groves of fir trees bundled in front of delicatessens, florists' shops, hardware stores, supermarkets, and curbside trucks. They looked like the remains of some violent infection that had destroyed lovely forests, the still-living, fallen hair of beautiful women ruined by an incurable disease. Trimmed and lighted with plastic angels, aluminum foil stars, and flickering electric candles, they would glitter momentarily throughout the city like the flash fever. The wiring would fail and whole buildings would blaze in fires that would kill sleeping children. No one would feel any guilt; no one would be accused of any crime; no one would be punished; and no one would ever care what else of value had been incinerated in these insultingly accidental holiday fires. It was Christmas and no one could do anything wrong. It was a brave show against death, Cornish thought, but this time he would remember the truth.

Christmas had not always had such a special meaning for Cornish. As a child he had learned what a Christmas tree should look like in an annual ceremony in the janitor's apartment, where a lovely, conical evergreen glazed with artificial snow and dripping tinsel lighted an otherwise shabby home. As the days grew colder and colder, his childhood world would fill with these reminders placed by those who sought to bring about the coming of the spirit. Yet, as the red and green and the silver and gold began to blossom outside, none of it managed to penetrate physically into the Cornish family home.

His father never believed in Christmas, nor did his

mother, and he had never discussed the matter with his brother, a student at a technical academy who took him to museums filled with electrical machinery and cutaway models of submarines controlled by buttons that made miniature lights and motors move. In fact, the topic of the trees was one of the few that was forbidden in their home by absolute silence from above.

Cornish's first contact with the spirit of the season came through relatives who lived in a nearby suburb across the river. He no longer remembered how old he was when it first happened, but it might have been when he was in the eighth grade. As a treat, his father let him stay for a few days at the home of a favorite uncle and aunt, a cheerful and modern couple.

For a variety of reasons Cornish preferred his uncle above all the other relatives, not the least of which was that he owned a four-passenger Piper Cub. The uncle also had a darkroom in which he developed his own pictures, a Packard convertible car, and a cabinet full of medals earned in competitive sports ranging from ice skating and skiing to bicycle racing and swimming.

From his uncle, Cornish learned about photography; from his aunt, he found out about antiques; and from their daughter and son, he heard, for the first time, about the meaning of the trees.

"You hang up your stocking by the chimney," the little boy told Cornish as the uncle drove the packard through streets lined with small houses whose clustered arrangements of colored lights filled the town with picture-postcard visions. "Then Santa Claus comes down the chimney and fills it with presents."

"Not at my house," said Franklin Cornish. "We don't have any chimney." The Cornish apartment did have a white

false mantel with a secret compartment in the side—presumably for a radio—and a set of andirons and ruby glass coals beneath which bulbs, flickered by rotating little fans, cast a modest, electrical version of fire-light. Once, he had hung one of his socks on it, but even though he put a few pieces of candy in it himself, he never did get anything else. He began to suspect that the whole thing was just another fraud, like the Good Fairy who replaced your milk teeth with money when you put them beneath your pillow.

“What is Santa anyway, Daddy?” asked the girl, who was a couple of years older than Cornish. “Is that Santa Claus thing really true?”

“We like to think of it as the spirit of giving,” said Cornish’s uncle. “The spirit of children who want peace and beauty around them.” That night, Cornish hung his stocking on the fireplace downstairs in his cousin’s home, next to the grandfather clock whose face showed not only the time but also the phases of the moon. The following morning, after a night of turbulently dreamy sleep on a studio couch in his aunt’s sewing room, he awoke and went to his stocking. It was full.

There was lined writing paper and envelopes stamped with snowmen, green holly leaves, red berries, and a dripping lighted candle in a saucer with a handle, just like the kind Jack jumped over in Jack Be Nimble. There were also assorted candies and nuts, crayons, and a gyroscope.

On another Christmas, many years later, Cornish sat in the home of Phillipa, a girl whose cold loveliness triggered a flare in his viscera. He had just returned from planet X, where he had seen not war but a kind of deadly peace in which the casualties were the men who committed suicide, those who got venereal diseases, the ones whose wives and

girl friends grew weary of waiting. In the arms of quick whores whose short embrace yielded him only spasmodic seconds of interrupted pleasure, Cornish had longed for a homeland girl who would think deep thoughts. Now he was with one, her face illuminated by the tiny lights of the brilliantly precise tree she had decorated.

They lay on the floor facing each other, her slender hand suspended before her face in a motionless moment that was neither invitation nor refusal. I want you, Cornish wished silently, I want you more than anything in the world, which was the way he thought at the time. Her pupils opened a stop wider, the almost unnaturally full lashes forming shivering borders about her white and hazel eyes. The hand moved forward and touched his face. Later, she moaned in long and sobbing climax.

In nine months they were married. Four years later they were divorced. In the interim, there had been no tree, but branches and a soft, gentle, female tortoise-shell cat who died a few years after the divorce, a death Cornish always secretly felt was his wife's fault, though for what reason and on what basis, he could not say.

The third time Phillipa put up the branches around the gold-painted school-room pendulum clock, the marriage was really almost over. His consulting work never seemed to produce more than a bare survival income. They were unbearably poor and trapped in misery. His father, who had once been an alcoholic and had attempted suicide on two occasions, was mired in a moody quicksand of business troubles that was slowly pulling him under. Her mother, dying for eight years of cancer of the breast, pelvis, and lungs, was becoming mentally unbalanced. Phillipa spent more and more time with her and changed from extroverted and aggressive to brooding and passive. They had an

old car that refused to start in damp weather and needed new tires which they couldn't afford. They lived in an apartment whose walls were supposed to have been painted white but turned out dingy gray. He could not remember the last time he had had a fresh orange and he was beginning to hate sex.

"Why won't you speak to me?" Phillipa pleaded.

"I do speak to you."

"But that's what's wrong," she said, her voice loud and squeaky with frustration. "That's exactly what's wrong. If only you could see that. You think you're talking to me but you're not."

Cornish looked up at the fir branches with the colored cards pinned to them and wished for a new life.

The world speeded up into a dark blur through which distant lights appeared and disappeared and the telephone brought the message that his father was missing, then that he was dead, then that his wife's mother was dead. On a wet highway, at fifty miles an hour, Cornish's car skidded, jumped the divider, and hit a light pole just in time to avoid careening into the oncoming traffic.

In the mirror, he saw his bleeding mouth, the broken teeth, and the bruise that was beginning to form on his forehead. He began to weep in rage, not so much for his injuries, but for the loss of the car. Then he realized that no one would blame him for anything and he let the bystanders help him out of the wreck.

"Who got killed?" the wrecker asked.

"I was the only one in the car," Cornish answered.

"You're a lucky boy," said the other. "That's a killer if I ever saw one." Lurching grotesquely, the car was pulled off the pole, its front end dented unto a deep U embrace. A thin wash of wet was making Cornish's pants stick to his legs.

When he investigated, he found bleeding bruises on both shins where the motor had jammed against them coming through the front of the car. Another inch, he thought, and he would have had no legs.

He stood on the dividing mall in the foggy rain and saw people driving to work, station wagons full of children laughing and shrieking with joy, a river of energy flowing about him, rushing and turbulent, and he knew that there was no end to it ever. And above it all, behind the chaos of the clouds, the sun in all its splendid burning torment drove forward through eternal space.

Unable to speak, Cornish stood alone among the little crowd of spectators, wreckers, and policemen and waited for them to tell him what to do, neither afraid nor joyful, but simply . . . unafraid. In the emergency room of the hospital he let the doctors examine him and paint him with antiseptics with the passive acceptance of a corpse, not even bothering to tell them at the end that they had somehow let a piece of broken tooth remain lodged in his lower lip, hidden in an island of drying blood.

When Cornish came home from the emergency room, Phillipa was still out shopping, unaware of what had happened. He lay down on the double bed in the gray light of their bedroom, staring at the square of sky projected on the ceiling in blurred, enlarged detail by the imperfect lens of the windowpane. He heard the key turn in the lock of the front door. His wife put down some bundles heavily, closed the door with a lipping click of metal against metal, and walked into the bedroom. Cornish smiled, showing his broken teeth and torn lips from which blood still oozed.

She began to laugh, gulping and grunting in some kind of bizarre hilarity. "Your mouth!" she laughed in whoops of glee. "Oh, I can't help this. God, this is horrible. Why am I

laughing like this?” Each sentence was punctuated by another gasp as the laughter began to turn painful. “It’s just like a Laurel and Hardy movie...I...”

She sat down on the floor and looked up at him piteously. He smiled again and blew a bubble of blood at her.

“No, please, no more,” she pleaded as the convulsions began again. She got on her hands and knees like a sailor trying to hold onto a pitching deck. Cornish could feel the floor twirling. They were in a ship, pitching and grabbing forward through a darkening winter storm. Cornish looked at her with the eye of a spectator at a silly movie, put his fingers into the side of his mouth, and made a gibbering putty mask of joyous greed.

“No more, please, I’m sorry. Oh God,” she sobbed, “I swear I’ll never do it again. I’m sorry. Oh Jesus, please stop it. It’s not funny anymore. I’m really crying.” She fell forward at his feet and then, her face wet and her eyes crisp and glossy and red, came up on the bed and kissed his hand. “I wished you were dead,” she whispered. “I wished that you were dead.” In a while, it began to snow—thick, moist snow.

For a while after that they were happy, but then the arguments began again. This time, Cornish called up a girl he had known when he was in college. After several months, Philippa told him she was leaving. She did not seem surprised when he told her that was fine with him. It took only a short time to divide up the furniture and find her an apartment. The night before she left, he took her in his arms, kissed her body everywhere, and that was the end of it.

For a long time after that he lived in a strange dream that he was someone else, someone else using his name and body. Very slowly, he grew used to the idea and forgot that it was a dream. Ever since childhood, Cornish had had a dream

which repeated itself over and over again through various incarnations. Invariably, he was lost in an infinitely complicated transportation system, trying to reach a destination whose name he did not know. Sometimes it was a rattling old elevated train speeding at night through decrepit slums. Cornish would get on and off at dark stations, asking directions and getting no answers, continuing through the dreary course with less and less confidence of ever finding the way, until at last he would wake up with a foul mucous of despair choking his throat.

Once, the train was a silver streamliner smoothly glistening toward a tropical city whose imminence was announced by great groves of orange trees. The train stopped and Cornish got off with other passengers to pick the golden oranges and was left alone beside the track when the streamliner without warning moved rapidly off.

In the several years following his divorce there was a time when it seemed he had almost reached his destination, but for the most part he was still traveling unknown roads at night, suffocated by an overwhelming sense of his own ignorance and stupidity. Everywhere he looked there seemed to be road maps of the soul, but they were like hieroglyphics to him, diagrams and pictures in which he could recognize a bird or a man or a house but make no other sense. The symbols were plain enough, but the meaning escaped him; yet there was the insistent compulsion to continue examining them, as though just below the surface of his life there was something terribly important he was trying to remember.

At the end of a partly cloudy year, he met a young girl who was carrying a palm frond.

“Do you belong to anyone?” he asked.

“I belong to the leaf,” Lolly answered.

He had a small house in the hills, surrounded by ever-green forests and cascades of bright blue flowers that formed dense mats of color. From his bedroom window he could see all the way across the valley to the other hill, where a white farmhouse perched out of a notch in the dark green trees. At night, there was always a lantern hanging on the farmhouse porch, one small light burning like a votive candle.

In Franklin Cornish's house there were two fireplaces, one in the living room and one in the bedroom, and when Lolly came to live with him they seemed to spend most of their time lounging before these fires. On a night in the middle of the winter they lay naked in the firelight and looked into each other's eyes, drawing closer and closer until Cornish found himself enveloped in the astonishing detail of this one feature of her face, as if he were examining her through a microscope. In the center of her pupil, surrounded by a thousand-fold lace work of color upon color, there was the reflection of his own eye, looking back at him. The vision quivered and collapsed and he stepped across the last element of space. For a long period that seemed to have nothing to do with time, he felt a yellow glowing warmth fondling a part of him whose existence he had never before suspected, much less discovered. It, too, was yellow, glowing, warm.

As winter rushed on to spring, they returned over and over again to the golden experience. It expanded out into space until it filled their entire world, which felt scrubbed and clean and polished, like the mirror of an enormous telescope burnished into a perfect, shining bowl which reflected a perfect, shining heaven. In the morning, the sun was hot, the air liquid. The forest trembled. They got into the car and drove slowly down the hill. At the bottom, Cornish turned

the car in a perfect circle and drove back up again, parking beneath a drooping willow that hung over the roadway.

In bounding slow motion they walked up the hillside, passing from darkness into light, from darkness into light, and each time the light became brighter until at last they were standing before an open meadow covered with a thick frosting of tiny buttercups. Behind them was the forest; between the forest and the meadow, a road; between the road and the meadow, a line of ancient cypresses stretching left and right as far as they could see.

No longer even breathing, Cornish and his girl crossed the line of cypresses and continued on into the meadow toward a great old tree whose remarkably developed limbs dripping in midnight green formed a shadowed enclosure. In this natural room, on a floor of velvet moss, spotlighted by a cone of sunlight that dropped through the great branches, they stripped off their clothes and melted into a blaze of unspeakably grandiose delight.

This was absolute center, the meeting place of eternal question and eternal answer, pulsing over and again:

“Why?” The agonized question.

“Why not?” The most obvious answer.

It was a grand thing to watch, a neon waterfall juke-box Alpha and Omega.

When he was rich and famous and respected, a young man would ask him quite seriously and with a fetching naïveté, “What is the meaning of life?”

“The squarest thing you can think of,” he would answer.

Now as the brilliance faded and his identity began to return, he thought, “I guess I’d better get a job.” It was time to leave. Why? Why not.

On the way out, they re-traced the path of bruised and

dying flowers they had crushed on the way in. At the edge of the road, they dressed quickly. The sky was filled with roiling gray clouds through which crackles of lightning flickered. By the time they reached the little house on the lower hillside, it was raining, steel nails of water that spattered on the oiled surface of the road and joined a stream rushing down to the world below bearing torn flowers, broken branches, and many tumbling pine cones. All night long the storm continued as Cornish and his girl slept in each other's arms, surrounded by shadows and firelight.

On the first day of spring, they returned to the city. A late snow, unusually thick and vigorous for this time of the year, was falling when they arrived. In the morning, the city was white and fresh, and Cornish, waking early to begin the job ahead of him, walked to his new studio through streets of snow as yet almost entirely unmarked by the traffic that would soon grind it into a dirty soup of grit and slush.

That summer there was something wrong with the sun in the city. The hotter it got the less satisfaction Cornish found in its light, which never reached the full gold he had seen in the hills.

In some similar way, the activities that has promised to be so pleasurable now turned ugly and tedious, filling him with a constant disgust at the results of his work. Flipping back and forth between his memory and the ridiculous representations he was being paid to do, Cornish wore himself out trying to force his creations to move and glow, to raise themselves out of the indifferent mud of their clumsy beginnings.

He found that he had surrounded himself with people who knew less about the job than he did. His anger grew beyond his ability to control it, until it seemed as if his entire

system was ready to scream out loud in rage at the insufferable paradox of life, at the simple-minded idiocy of everything he was doing. The world, he began to believe, was a perpetual-motion machine run on a combination of wish and pain, eating him alive as he tore pieces out of himself and fed the voracious maw.

In the middle of the summer, it all collapsed. He knew that he was approaching the end of something and searched hysterically through the books in his bedroom for any kind of clue, for anything at all to convince himself that this was not the way it had to be. Then, huddled in a corner of one room, he surrendered at last to the inevitable finale he had constructed, and let his brain fall apart around him.

The room, he saw, was a three-dimensional collage he had manufactured out of the materials in his mind, a lining, so to speak to the inside of his head, with an entrance at the door and an exit in the bathroom. Into the door came experiences from the outside, whatever the outside might be. Into the sewer, through the toilet, they went after he was finished with them. Later, converted by mysterious means into palatable new stimuli, they knocked at the door and entered this moronic machine all over again. And all he was, was the intersection of these foolish events repeated over and over again in miraculously complicated ballets that served to mark off time and space in an endlessly boring infinity of cosmic self-glorification.

His girl walked into the bedroom and smiled. To him it seemed a smile of accusation, a signal of complicity in a gigantic agreement among their several selves never to let this illusion of a planet teeming with life falter.

“What am I supposed to do?” He asked her.

“You can do anything you want,” she answered. “You know that.”

“How long does this last?”

“Why are you being so silly? It lasts as long as you want it to last.”

“I can do anything I want?” he repeated in a child’s voice. “Can I die?”

Her face turned angry and he was filled with a terrible shame. With an entire world of possibilities in front of him, he had picked the one that would jeopardize everything he had put together over so many years of groping and stumbling.

“What is this dying business?” she said. “I don’t want to hear anything more about dying.”

One more time back through the cycle, he thought, and then I’ll do it. Just one more time.

Slowly, over the next several hours, the vision faded, but the maniacal sense of shame continued, enhanced by a dreadful foreboding that before long something terrible would happen, a punishment scaled to the measure of the sins he now knew he yearned to commit. At the summer’s end, he was fired from his job, and as the leaves on the trees everywhere rushed into violent color, he saw that he was afflicted with a disease that was leading him inevitably and rapidly toward death. The name of the disease was life.

The city turned cold, and Cornish and Lolly walked around in it like tiny insects in a giant freezer whose walls were carved into frosty representation of buildings and streets. The clock of human activity quickened in response to the growing cold. There were harvest holidays of Thanksgiving which seemed more like ritual magic to convince the people that there was something worth giving thanks for and someone worth giving thanks to. The temperature continued to drop and Christmas decorations began to appear like

prayers in shop windows everywhere. Delivery men came to the door with food, laundry, cleaning, and other necessities, and each one had with him some piece of junk for sale—silver paper and plastic berry corsages, miniature vinyl airline bags filled with inedible candy, simulated leather manicure kits with instruments that tarnished within hours and broke within days.

Then the Christmas trees were on the streets. Cornish's neighbors placed holly and ivy wreaths upon their apartment doors. They put up trees that were doomed at the end to be thrown out like garbage or burned. This was the ultimate crime, Franklin Cornish thought—to burn these lovely trees; to cut them down, decorate them with gaudy trash, and then sacrifice them.

"That's what's going to happen to me," he told Lolly, who looked at him with love and endless sympathy. "I'm going to be sacrificed to strange gods. The weather is going to get colder and colder and then I'm going to be burned alive just like those trees."

"Don't worry, darling," she said. "Everything's going to turn out all right. You'll see." In order to help out with the financial problem, she was saving the plastic wrappers in which the bread came and was planning to make them into aprons she had designed, then sell them to her friends.

"That's the answer to the plastic society," she said as she carefully opened a bag into a full sheet, folded it meticulously, and put it away in a cupboard with the others she had collected. "Take their plastic and sell it back to them! Whole families can live on the junk these people throw away."

Some days she actually had Cornish convinced that they would be able to survive on her bread-wrapper apron idea, but when she revealed the next step of the plan he pleaded with her to call the whole thing off. He could not bear the

thought of her going around to the neighbors begging for bread wrappers. Nothing more was said about the matter, but Cornish watched the growing pile of gaily colored plastic sheets and suspected the worst.

The following day, he received an eviction notice in the mail. "Nothing to worry about," he told himself. "No judge would allow a person to be evicted from his apartment at Christmas time. It would destroy the whole effect of the holiday for the rest of society."

The day before Christmas, however, the situation reached the depths of desperation with the arrival of a process server with a Seventy-Two-Hour Notice of Eviction.

Cornish called his heavy guns up to the front and pulled the lanyard. Nothing happened. "I'm sorry," said the reform politician whose literature he had designed free for years. He had been able in the past to handle this sort of crisis easily enough for Cornish, but not this time. "There isn't anything I can do about it. Maybe the best thing to do would be to pay the rent."

"But I don't have any money," Cornish said. "Can't you go into court and tell the judge something that will give me a chance to breathe?"

"That's a good idea," the politician answered. "What do you think we should tell him?"

"Tell him that no right-thinking person would evict a person on Christmas day."

"But they aren't going to do it on Christmas day. This doesn't take effect until the day after Christmas. Besides, you're not a Christian. Maybe there's something else you could think of?"

"This is ridiculous. It's totally unreasonable for anyone—Christian or not—to be thrown out of his home dur-

ing the Christmas season. You have to tell that to the judge. Don't you know any judges who'll give you the benefit of the doubt? You know, as a favor?"

There was an icy silence at the other end of the phone. "I don't make deals like that," said the politician. And he hung up.

On Christmas day, Cornish and his girl walked through the streets under a covering of clouds that belonged in an Arctic cemetery. The temperature had reached zero in the early hours of the morning, and a pane of glass had fallen out of their bedroom window when Cornish tried to slam it shut against the deadly outside air. There was now a piece of cardboard taped into the hole, giving the bare room something of the look of a picture taken in a sub-standard slum dwelling. The only thing missing was a mattress on the floor. The Christmas tree sellers were desperate. "Any tree you want, one dollar," one of them called. Each day the prices had fallen, but Cornish had so far resisted. They stopped to look at the trees, which leaned in taut bundles against a blue van.

"Please, Frank, can't we have a tree?"

"Never," said Cornish, "No trees of any kind. I refuse to cooperate with destructive superstition." Lolly turned angrily away from him.

"That's really dumb," she said. "It's just a tradition. A charming tradition, I might add, and one that I have always enjoyed celebrating. Sometimes your puritan neurosis gets a little boring, you know."

"Give the little lady a break," said the Christmas tree seller. "I tell you what. A nice couple like you should have a tree and I am not going to stand in your way. pick any tree

you want. Fifty cents. My cost, not a penny profit. What more could a person do for you?"

"You could give it to us free," said Cornish.

"What am I, Santa Claus?"

Cornish began to walk away.

"Wait a minute," said the man. "A final offer. Twenty-five cents. That way we go 50-50. I'm going to have to burn them up anyway. For a young couple like you just starting out in life I don't mind being a sport."

"Please honey," Lolly pleaded. "It really means a lot to me."

"All right," Cornish surrendered, "but want to stipulate in advance that this is being done against my will and only because he would have to burn it anyway."

"Merry Christmas," said the Christmas tree man as Cornish handed over a quarter and picked up the smallest tree he could find. "And a Happy New Year," said the girl. "That's right," said the man with a great smile of victory. "That's absolutely right. Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year." As they walked away, Cornish was filled with a remarkably poignant sense of having lost some kind of very important contest.

They remembered the problem of decorations when they returned to the apartment. Not far from the building there was a street clustered with antique shops and they walked down to it in the hope that one of them might have something cheap and pretty and old that might serve to decorate the tree.

The shops were relaxed and empty. In several the owners sat around talking to each other and the customers over cups of coffee. This was the last day of their big season. Each owner had by now either made or not made that one sale that made the difference between continuing in the business

another year or closing up shop, putting some of his goods into storage, some into his apartment, and getting a job.

In the window of the store that specialized in odd things from rural shops of the Twenties, a collection of worn-out Christmas decorations gleamed out of black velvet display cases. There were scratched silvered glass bells, sapphire crystal globes, miniature porcelain baskets of fruit, tinsel stars, and winged angels made of marvelously folded and pasted ruffles of lace paper. They ranged in price from 35 cents to a dollar. When Cornish and Lolly finished making their selection, amid much counting of money and calculation of change to make sure they had enough, the owner gave them a present.

“Pick out any one of them that you want. One of the dollar ones. I want you to have it. This is your first Christmas, isn’t it?” They took a Santa Claus in a sleigh drawn by reindeer made of pale, delicate bisque.

From the antique dealer they learned that downtown in the commercial used-goods district there was a store that stocked salvaged tree lights and other decorations. For a few more dollars, they bought not only several strings of match-sized lights, but also some metallic glass globes in gold, blue, and red. When they were finished, Cornish was satisfied that if they were to have to have a tree, at least it wasn’t going to look as if it belonged in a bowling alley. And when the tree was finally trimmed and lighted, standing on a mahogany table in the corner of the great front window, he had to admit that it really made a fine show. After dinner they turned out the room lights and sat gazing at the trembling tree for a long time.

Late at night, Cornish was awakened by a brilliant glow blazing through the bed-room door. Without disturbing

Lolly, he managed to get out of bed and into the living room, where he half-expected to find a fire. The tree did seem almost to be on fire, so fiercely burning were the lights which cast a thicket of golden shadows on the wall. It was a living thing, growing vigorously and defiantly out of the corner, a definite presence that raised in Cornish a thrill of recognition, as if he had walked into a forgotten corner of his mind and found something for which he had been always searching. Here it was, still small, but getting bigger every year, the beginning of a cosmos. The lights were the stars; the globes were the planets; the tinsel was rain and snow; and the tree was simply The Tree magical, meaningful, ultimately powerful and everlasting, no matter how many times it might be burned. There was fire in the room, Franklin Cornish saw in a terrible moment of primitive insight—electrical fire, nuclear fire. The world was made of fire and one day, he now knew, he would wake like this in the presence of a roaring universe.

For a moment, he stood in horror before the burning tree and felt the taste of knowledge choking in his throat. He was a savage starting out on an endless road through the dark, and he was afraid. "Peace on earth, good will to men," he wished, whispering the words aloud, and then, with a cringe of amused embarrassment at his ability to work himself into these megalomaniacal states, he added, "Sure, that's what I wish for, peace on earth, good will to men, and a new color television for Franklin Cornish."

The next morning, Cornish woke with the wet laundry gone from his brain. He called the landlord himself and got a two-week extension of the eviction order, re-designed Lolly's bread-wrapper apron, sold the idea to a friend in the novelty business for five hundred dollars and got himself a

full-time job illustrating a department store catalog. As the New Year began, he waited confidently for the color television set to arrive, completely sure that next year was going to be a lot easier.