

The
Christmas
Cherub

Ronda Wells

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Dedicated to the real Christmas cherub,

Doug Hornberger

1966-2021

The pall of recent war and personal loss tried to cast a gloomy shroud, but the spirit of Christmas, 1946 at Amberson's Department Store remained undefeated. Throughout the store, employees hung fresh balsam garlands from the columns, festooned with huge scarlet red and glittering gold bows, an annual store tradition since 1872.

Each department decorated a tree for the Best Tree Contest. Several of us sang in the employee choir and our "alleluias" greeted customers on the first floor. Finally, the "Big Guy" Santa Claus arrived with great fanfare to reign over Christmas Land. We looked forward to all the joy Santa would bring to eager-eyed children who lined up in droves, their parents in tow.

I remember it like it was yesterday.

It was the year the cherub first winked....

Chapter 1

November 21, 1946

Indianapolis

My career as an artist had reached its zenith, but my love life had plummeted into a pit.

Amberson's Department Store had just appointed me to my dream job—head of the Art Department. My fiancé, though, was still listed as M.I.A. eighteen months after his B-17 bomber went down over Eastern Europe. My hopes for his return grew dimmer with each passing day.

Late to work, I scurried along the sidewalk. A knot of women huddled in the chilly air, waiting for the store to open. An usher spotted me and unlocked one revolving door just long enough I could push my way through into the grand first floor of Amberson's Department Store.

"Thanks, Carl."

He tipped his hat. "Welcome, Miss Goodwin."

I wanted to stop for my usual routine of absorbing the luscious sights and heartwarming smells of the store at Christmas, but glanced at my Timex. Oh boy. 8:54.

Opening bell would ring in one minute. The final warning before ushers opened the doors to customers promptly at nine. No time to linger.



The heels of my oxfords made fast taps across the venerable black and white tiles as I hurried through the grand scent cloud of the First Floor. Perfumes—flowered musk. Ladies' Accessories—new leather winter gloves. Bookstore—crisp new books and stationery. Bakery—fresh gingerbread.

Amberson's had always been the most charming at Christmastime. My chest swelled with pride, almost to the point of bursting. I felt special to be part of the famous department store's heritage, like I'd somehow come home after a long journey.

Echoes of "Good morning, Miss Goodwin," followed as I bustled past. Metal floor stands next to the escalators held my chic new signs advertising, "*That Amberson's Appeal.*" Runners rushed about and worked double-time to prepare for the deluge of shoppers.

Thank goodness our customers' post-war enthusiasm had kept the store as busy as ever.

I darted into the elevator lobby, my precious art portfolio clutched in my gloved hands. "Margaret, hold the elevator please," I cried out.

Margaret O'Shaughnessy, one of the elevator girls, held the door open. "Top 'o the mornin' to you, Miss Goodwin. Eleventh floor as usual?"

I nodded and paced into the car. What if Mr. Jason didn't like my Christmas catalogue design? It could mean the end of my brief career as the first woman to head Amberson's Art Department. "Thank you for waiting."

"Anything for you, Miss Goodwin." She sat on her little stool.

I leaned back against the luxurious oak paneling and polished brass railing as we rode up. When the floor dipped and the bell rang for my stop, my already-nervous stomach lurched. The outer doors slid open.

Margaret opened the inside accordion door. "G'day."

"Thank you. Send up a little prayer for me. Today is going to be a big one."

Margaret winked and crossed herself. "You got it, Miss Goodwin."

I zigzagged fast through the Eleventh-Floor departments to the corridor beyond. The long hallway led to the Art Department in the South Building. The North Building was Amberson's original store. When business boomed, and a chance to buy the land came up, the family had built a matching building to the south and joined the two structures.

At age eighty-five, Mr. Jason's father, Jason Senior, still owned the store. His eldest son, Mr. Jason Junior, next in line, ran the day-to-day operations. In secret, I hoped Jason Senior would put his younger son, Mr. Andrew, in charge. My boss tended toward cold indifference as opposed to Andrews's warmer yet efficient management style.

Our department door stood open, so I zoomed right in. And stopped. With high ceilings and extra-tall windows on two sides, we had the best natural light in the store.

At the back of the spacious room, one of the other artists, Georgia Young, wrestled with a fresh Christmas tree. The tree looked to be the victor.

“Christmas tree by your desk or over in the corner?” She pulled a few pine needles from her hair.

I bit my lower lip and studied both potential tree spots. “My desk. It will look perfect here. People can see it from the hall and vote for our tree.”

Georgia, who preferred to be called Georgie, was our eager beaver. A dynamo packed in four foot, eleven inches, her soft, kind face came from years of practice because she almost always wore a smile. I helped her drag the balsam, which easily towered three feet over her, to the front of the room beside my desk.

My brand-new nameplate gleamed from the desktop.

Clara Goodwin, Head Artist, Art Department

My chest filled with delight at the same time my stomach ballooned with dread. Given the stubbornness of Martin Chambers, the other artist, I’d struggled in my first month as Head. As usual, he hunched over his drafting desk in a perfect hook-nosed Ichabod Crane profile. He puffed away on his new Peterson Shamrock pipe, a gift from his mother, and continued to draw.

Smoke curled in a lazy stream above his head like a question mark.

I spoke up. “Martin, please. You know the rules. No smoking. Too many flammables.”

He didn’t look at me, but at least tamped down his pipe to put it out.

“Did you search for the other decorations?” I reminded him, trying my best to sound polite, but still in charge.

“No time.” Business is a man’s world, he implied with a quick smirk of condescension, and returned to drawing. His other meaning? Setting up the department’s Christmas tree was “women’s work” and therefore beneath him.

“I’ll go check the storage attic,” Georgie said. “You can finish the Christmas flyer.”

“It’s done.” I swallowed my dismay at being revealed as a fraud. She must’ve peeked at the early galleys on my desk and seen how awful they were.

“Oh, sorry. I—I didn’t know.” She flushed. “You want to help me look for decorations?”

I shook my head. “I have a meeting with Mr. Jason in five.”

“Best of luck then.” Bright and chipper as a robin, nothing got Georgie down.

While I carry silent grief tied to my back like a ship’s anchor.

I refused to think about that and focused on my meeting. I picked a fresh drawing pencil from the cup on my desk.

My New Year's resolution would be "stop chewing on pencils." They weren't cheap. But when I got nervous, a Number 6 Blackwing was the exact amount of needed crunch. Painted wood pencils offered little flavor. Unless the metallic flatness of graphite counted when I chomped too hard and snapped the pencil in half.

I straightened my skirt, checked the seams of my nylons, and smoothed my hair. Head of the Art Department. A goal achieved. It was my mother's favorite new opening line with her friends and strangers alike.

"You know, my daughter is the new head of the art department at Amberson's," she would say, her voice hushed and eyebrows raised above the wide-eyed stare that announced all her Very Important News.

How she equated my accomplishment with the attack on Pearl Harbor, I would never know. But then again, she was my mother.

I looked around at our studio. It would appear total chaos to anyone who didn't understand the mess necessary to create something fabulous. Our desks might all line up in a neat row, but any sensible order ended there. Discarded drafts overflowed trash bins. Tin cans served as containers for a variety of brushes, pens, and pencils.

Above our desks, unfinished drawings, idea sketches, photographs, and ads from other magazines and newspapers covered our inspiration tack boards.

I inhaled my favorite exotic aroma—linseed oil, India ink, and paints.

We had stacked our finished signs and banners on a table to one side, ready to go out to the correct department. This close to Christmas, we painted most of our artwork in bright scarlet, deep pine green, and luscious shades of gold and silver.

I loathed leaving the safety of my magical realm for the starchy arena of business administration. It was part of my new job, though. Gathering my moxie along with my portfolio, I headed for Mr. Amberson's office in the North Building.

I had to face the consequences of running the Art Department.

Which included the knowledge that my first Christmas catalog design was, in a single word—dreadful.