

Cottonwood Winter (Pages 243-244)

Shopping at Weinstein's

Danny and Jase decide to do their Christmas shopping at Weinstein's department store. Having budgeted a hefty 75 cents per gift as they did the year before they assumed they were in good shape. But they hadn't counted on 1944 prices.

When we opened Weinstein's doors, we entered a Christmas fantasyland. The store was a showcase of tasteful decorations. Long swooping garlands of delicate pine cuttings hung from every ceiling-light fixture on the main floor. Huge wreaths of dark and yellow-green holly with long elegant red bows were attached, just above eye level, to each of the four sides of every column in the store. On each counter stood a small Christmas tree covered with tiny crystal ornaments and glowing with white lights. Multi-colored, grapefruit-size glass ornaments hung in clusters from sconces, lining the perimeter of the room and painting the walls with soft splashes of green and red light. Quiet orchestral renditions of familiar Christmas carols created a feeling of peace and joy within me. In the air, the sweet smells of cinnamon and caramel made my mouth water. The overall effect was one of class and comfort. This was truly a customer-friendly place for our Christmas shopping.

The store was just beginning to fill with shoppers. Stopping at the huge perfume counter near the entrance, we looked all around. Evidently we appeared as lost as we felt because, within seconds of our arrival, a tall man in a perfectly tailored, black woolen suit came to our rescue.

"May I help you find something, boys?"

"We're looking for Christmas presents for the people in our families. Each of us has four people to buy for -- our mothers and fathers plus one sister, one brother, one baby cousin -- and one aunt," I explained, hoping the man would understand. "I hope you understand," I added just to be sure he did.

"Well, that's quite a list. Shall we start in the men's department and take care of your fathers' gifts first?" the clerk asked rhetorically as he herded us gently in the right direction with a swoop of his arm.

The men's department was lined with rack after rack of men's suits, sport coats, and trousers. Throughout the department, box-like display islands were covered with fine sweaters, socks, and folded shirts. Mannequins, dressed in tweed jackets in various shades of brown with fawn wescots, white shirts, and paisley ties, stood guard on our left and on our right. It was all a bit daunting to us boys from the Forrest Street neighborhood.

"Did you have a particular type of gift in mind for your fathers?" the clerk inquired.

"We were thinking about a tie," Danny replied for both of us.

I hadn't really thought much about buying Dad a tie, but I didn't object.

The clerk took us to a counter where two older gentlemen were looking through a selection of striped ties hanging from a carousel next to the cash register. As we approached, the tall man in the long camel's hair overcoat shot a look of annoyance at us. Our perceptive clerk took notice and herded us over to a similar carousel on the adjoining counter.

"This is a grand selection of ties to consider, boys. These range in price from about two to five dollars. Is that the price range you had in mind?"

Danny looked at me and asked, "Your dad already has a tie. Doesn't he?"

Without waiting for my answer, Danny told the clerk, "Our fathers already have ties. Could you take us to the hankie department, please?"

**Excerpted from *Cottonwood Winter* by Gary Slaughter.
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