

Bad Christmas

The background is a hand-painted illustration of a Christmas tree. The tree is green with white, wavy lines representing snow or branches. It is decorated with several lit candles on brown bases and two gold ornaments. The background behind the tree is a mix of red and yellow, suggesting a sunset or a warm glow. The text is overlaid on the tree and background.

Chapter I

Personal Improvement Plan

A. A. A. Hartvisen

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Chapter I: Personal Improvement Plan

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BAD CHRISTMAS

CHAPTER I : PERSONAL IMPROVEMENT PLAN

Paullus Meagan looked at the electric sign on the side of the Third Freedom Bank as he drove past. It said it was 10 °. *Fahrenheit*, he thought. *Pretty cold*. But the weather man said it would get colder. Maybe -20 ° by Sunday. That was alright with Meagan. He continued across town toward the post office.

Meagan did not care about the weather. He planned to spend the weekend indoors with an electric furnace and a bottle of Peruvian white brandy. Maybe Father would come over and share it with him. It was a long time since Meagan got drunk with Father. Meagan had been too busy with his dumb job for any socialising.

Well, enough of that! he thought.

He had six thousand in the bank, just quit his job, and it was Christmas Eve. He pulled into the post office parking lot.

“Let it snow!” he shouted and killed the engine. “And if not, well, then let it get real damn’ cold!”

He got out of his car and went into the post office. It had snowed a little about the end of November, but then a warm spell melted it off. Since the Feast of St Nicholas, it had been getting steadily colder and colder, but no snow.

Meagan went through his box. There were several junk catalogs. He chucked them in the trash. There was his Hi Time Wine magazine. He rolled it up and tucked it under his arm. And there were two letters. One was a shut off notice from the power company.

He chucked that in the trash barrel as well. He had gone in and paid off his bill during lunch earlier in the week. He had not meant to let the bills get so far behind. But he was so busy at work that all he could do when he got home was watch television for a few minutes and then fall asleep and remain unconscious till the alarm went off and he had to go back in again.

If he had not skipped lunch Tuesday, he would have been without power for Christmas. *Well, no more of that!* The other letter was from his mother. He took it out to the car to read it.

Dear Paulus,

I got your letter and was very glad to hear from you. I appreciate your invitation for me to spend the Holidays with you, but Cæsar had already made plans with his kids and I could not disappoint them. Luckily, we’ll be passing through Jefferson on our way to see Helena and Jermaine. Cæsar has agreed to leave a day early so we can stop there and spend a day

with Bubby and Sissy. Cæsar and I would love to see you too, but Fredonia is just not on the way to anywhere! I hope you can come spend a weekend with Cæsar and me in Idalee some day soon!

Love,

Cæsar + Holly.

“Thanks, Ma,” said Meagan. “Next time maybe you can even spell my name right.”

He tore up the note and threw it out window. Cæsar Martine was Holly Meagan’s live-in boyfriend. Paullus’ mother was not officially divorced from Paullus’ father Montgomery, but she had not seen him for over eight years. And she always had something to say about Cæsar’s two perfect children, Helena and Jermaine, in every letter she sent or telephone call she ever made to Paullus.

Shortly after Holly went off to live with Cæsar in an expensive retirement community in Idalee, Paullus’ siblings Bubby and Sissy moved away as well, to Jefferson. It was further from Idalee than Freedonia, but it was on a major highway route between Idalee with Tatton. Tatton was where Martine’s two children dwelt.

There was always some compelling reason for Meagan’s mother to spend the holidays with Cæsar’s kids instead of with her own children. Evenso, she generally managed to get in a day or two with Sissy and Bubby on the way to Tatton. Holly Meagan telephoned Paullus regularly and sent him letters and birthday cards, but she had not seen him physically since eight years ago when she left his father.

Part of the reason that Sissy and Bubby left Freedonia almost immediately after Mother

was because Father had become so irascible and unstable. Paullus chose instead the less extreme solution of moving into his own place, a few blocks away from his father Montgomery.

Now he was glad he had not chosen to leave, because, after a year of Mother's departure, Montie had achieved a pleasant level of alcoholic functionality that had evaded him when Holly was around. Paullus was able to reestablish a strong relationship with his father, so long as he recognised Montie's limits and did not push them.

And Paullus needed his father's friendship. He was never close to Bubby or Sissy, and Mother had retreated so far into Caesar Martine's sanitary universe that she was no longer able to maintain any connexion with Paullus.

She can't even spell my name anymore, thought Paullus. Or the name of the town where she raised me in.

Montgomery Meagan named all the children as he wished, despite Holly's protests. He named the eldest two *Adolfo* and *Galatia*, and the youngest *Paullus*. Holly quickly came up with the nicknames *Bubby* and *Sissy* for the elder Meagan children and *Puppy* for Paullus.

Bubby and Sissy clung to their nicknames, even now, although in adulthood Bubby tended to shorten his moniker to just "Bub". But Paullus had always hated these nicknames, especially *Puppy*, and stuck to his given name. He later learned that Montie actually wanted to name him *Paullulus*, but he had been opposed strongly by not only Holly, in this case, but by Bubby and Sissy also. And so a compromise in *Paullus* was met instead.

Paullus was glad of it. He could be proud of *Paullus*. *Paullulus* would have been a bit much.

Paúllus was a diminutive of the Latin *páucus*, "small". It meant something like "really small". Montgomery told Paullus that that was why St Paul had chosen the name for himself.

It was a gesture of humility.

The diminutive-happy Romans also came up with the double diminutive *Paúllulus*, which might be translated as “really itty bitty; of no importance whatever!”. Montie never adequately explained to Paullus why he pickt such a name.

Paullus Meagan went home by a scenic route that followed along the path of the Black Burn, a small watercourse, currently frozen, that looped around the edge of town. The Black Burn was predominantly white at the moment, with patches of cyan or tan here and there. Meagan tried not to think of Mother. She was an annoyance about which he could do nothing. He thought of work instead.

Today was the first day of his freedom from Halcyon Laboratories. His resignation was his Christmas present to himself. Meagan had worked long hours for Halcyon, six or seven days a week, for almost two years. During that time he was able to pay off his house, buy a new used car, and sock away six thousand dollars. They did not give him time to blow his wage on vain frivolities.

It was hard work, and it was interesting work. But everything he did at Halcyon was overmanaged by two or three random bosses. Halcyon paid him for his excellent work. And although they greedily accepted his excellence, it was also a constant source of irritation for the management. His competence and his ability was perceived by his supervisors as an insult and an outrage.

And somehow, just about everyone in the facility was, in one way or another, his supervisor. Even the least them had the capacity to complain to someone who, in turn, would jump at an opportunity to chastise Paullus Meagan. But any complaints that Meagan made, although they only expressed legitimate professional concerns, were dismissed out of hand as

issues of personal prejudice.

Halcyon demanded Meagan's best, and they paid well for it. But the men in management were incapable of tolerating someone of a level of efficiency and competence greater than their own. Their campaign of harassment and oppression had reached its peak in an incident earlier today.

Meagan was subject to a joint "write-up" by two special co-supervisors. These were Labrune and Isenberg, who were in charge of a project Meagan had been given by a primary supervisor. The write-up took the form of a sort of contract which Meagan was asked to sign. An additional demerit would also be added to the large collection of demerits already in Meagan's personnel file.

The contract was entitled, *My Personal Improvement Plan*, and began as follows:

I, Paullus Meagan, promise to refrain from aggressive behavior when asked or questioned related to departmental issues, including but not limited to the following uncooperative modes and other deconstructive personal modes that my supervisors will identify in the future.

1. Interrupting others when speaking...

Uncooperative and other deconstructive personal mode #1 intended to curtail Meagan's free criticism of plans he considered defective or detrimental to his work. It was also meant to combat his unwillingness to listen to his supervisors repeat their doubtful plans again and again, as though his disagreement sprung only from not clearly understanding the proposal. Or perhaps they felt the best answer to his objections was simple repetition of a bad idea until he

was bored enough to agree.

Meagan responded to the write-up by carefully acting out, in his best vaudevillian form, all eight of the *uncooperative &c.* modes. Then he added three new ones for his supervisors to *identify*. Then, to Labrune's and Isenberg's astonishment, as well as the astonishment of the cleaning lady and two technicians passing by, Meagan tore his *Personal Improvement Plan* in two halves, licked their backsides, and stuck them to his special co-supervisors' respective foreheads.

"Fuck you guys—I quit!" he said, adding insult to injury.

Paullus Meagan left the post office and took a ride down Main Street to see how cold the electric bank sign said it really was.

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