



Christmas in Paris 2002

Ronald K Fried

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It is Christmas of 2002. Joseph Steiner, a New York television executive, has just lost his job in the economic downturn that followed 9/11. America is about to invade Iraq, and the world is losing sympathy for its only superpower. As for Steiner, his run of good luck and privilege seems to be coming to an end.

Steiner and his wife Mary, a severe yet alluring former fashion editor who now publishes left-wing political books, are visiting Paris, a city Steiner knows well from his annual visits with his family and his time there as a student. The couple's son Michael has stayed behind in New York to protest the coming war.

Steiner and Mary are borrowing the apartment of journalist friends who are on assignment in the Middle East. Compared to the worldly careers of his absent hosts, Steiner's preoccupations with his own professional and personal woes feel small-minded. Additionally, everyone he meets seems to be leading a fuller life than Steiner.

Steiner sees old friends and revisits familiar locales, haunted by his own history, as well as the uncannily contemporary worldview of Honoré de Balzac, the genius whose work obsesses Steiner.

As he distractedly pursues the familiar rituals of an American in Paris, including quite a bit of shopping—thanks to Mary's unembarrassed interest in fashion—Steiner meets two outspoken American war correspondents and a nightmarishly articulate Parisian attorney who pick away at his increasingly frail sense of self. While Mary continues as her husband's most lovingly unforgiving critic, he contemplates the ways that he is being buffeted by history and economics.

It is not until encountering a young Russian crippled in the war in Chechnya, and a comic denouement at the hands of the American Customs Service that Steiner begins to make sense of his decidedly unsentimental Christmas in Paris.

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