



Christmas in No Man's Land

It was my first winter in London. I had just turned twenty-one and was living in a small room on the top floor of an old building near Paddington Station. My dream job at an advertising agency had not materialized and my funds, such as they were, had all but vanished. One day I walked past a restaurant not far from where I lived. There was a 'Help Wanted' sign on the door and I thought "Why not?"

Once I'd learned how to be a waiter, I found that I enjoyed it. I worked as many shifts as I could and was soon adding to my modest bank account instead of depleting it. The restaurant was popular with local businesspeople, so the lunch shift was always busy. One day I was helping a lady take off her overcoat and saw that her shoulders were covered with white flakes. When I tried to brush them away, I realized that her coat was dusted with snow. The façade of the restaurant was a plate glass window from floor to ceiling and when I turned, I could see flurries of snow dancing in the air and sticking to the roofs of cars parked on the street. My first snowfall. At home, in Uruguay, we never saw snow. We draped cotton wool on Christmas trees and sang carols about dashing through the snow, but I had never seen the real thing, not like this.

After lunch, the dining room was empty except for an elderly man sitting at a table by the side wall, facing the street, gazing at the snow, which was still falling. He was a regular customer who often came in at this time, and we always chatted a bit. I offered him some more coffee and he looked at me as though he was returning from a dream. "Snow falling like this always reminds me of that day," he said. "What day?" I asked. "If you can sit for a minute, I'll tell you." I had nothing else to do, so I did.

He then told me about Christmas Day on the Western Front in 1914, in the early days of the First World War. He was there, in the British trenches, which were sometimes barely thirty yards from the German position. It was bitterly cold, with muddy puddles and snow on the strip of no man's land that separated the two armies. On Christmas Eve, soldiers on both sides were singing Christmas carols. Suddenly a German voice called out: "Tomorrow, you no shoot, we no shoot."

The following morning, both sides emerged from their trenches and walked, warily, towards each other. They

exchanged cigarettes and souvenirs, shared swigs of schnapps, and enjoyed a surreal moment of fraternization. Someone produced a football, and an impromptu game started; not a proper game, just a kickabout involving a few dozen players. In the afternoon the men returned to their trenches, and the next day they took up their weapons and resumed fighting.

A British soldier wrote to his father and described what had happened, and his father sent the letter to a newspaper. When the story broke, many readers found it hard to believe and some dismissed it as a myth. Military authorities on both sides were furious. They thought the incident would adversely affect morale and took immediate steps to punish the participants and ensure that nothing like that ever happened again. It never did, but that was partly because the war got a lot nastier as it dragged on, and the naiveté of the soldiers involved in the Christmas truce was soon eroded by the escalating horrors of modern warfare.



Gradually, photographs taken on that Christmas Day by men on both sides started appearing in the press, sometimes with letters they had written to their families. They all confirmed that what had happened was no myth. It was a poignant expression of the essential humanity of those men, unsullied by the barbaric conditions they were forced to endure in the service of their countries.

The old man stopped speaking and sat gazing out at the street as the afternoon light faded. He sighed deeply, stood up, and shook my hand. We said nothing. Then he stepped out onto the pavement and walked away as the snow kept falling.