

CHRISTMAS STORY

Awarded first prize and £100 in the Royal National Institute for the Blind's 2008 Short Story Competition.

Italians are a deluded people, thinks Army cook Sean Kavanagh. They believe they live in a warm, sunny country. Sean is walking through snow outside Rome's St. John Lateran in January 1945. Beside him St. Francis of Assisi raises snow-covered arms as if seeking divine intervention. Around the statue urchins discover that snow can be made into missiles. Most are too young to remember any such substance descending from the sky. All this, he considers, would have been appropriate last month – at Christmas. In January it is a nuisance.

Corporal Kavanagh and Private Smithson are responsible, under master-cook Sergeant Harrison, for feeding a hundred hungry soldiers in a transit camp outside the city. Rome is a 'cushy billet.' Far to the north the Allies are slugging it out with the Germans.

Here, in peaceful, undamaged Rome the main dangers to a soldier's life and limb are VD, jaundice, alcohol and the appalling Army rations. The rations might be improved — in quantity at least — were it not for Sergeant Harrison's private enterprise. A considerable amount of his comrades' food is diverted to the black market. This enables his mistress, Antonia, to maintain the standard of life to which she has become accustomed since the Allies arrived in Rome. Sean sighs, then smiles. This is his off-duty day and he will enjoy it.

In a crumbling Trastevere tenement Sophia is feeding her baby. The baby, Pietro, is three months old. Because Sophia is always hungry her milk does not satisfy Pietro. He expresses his dissatisfaction in the only way he knows. Sophia tries to pacify him in a way which does not cost money — rocking him. In a corner stands a magnificent baby-carriage. Carlo bought it for Sophia before he left to join the partisans who are harrying the Germans in the Po Valley. When Sophia goes to work this splendid perambulator restores her sense of dignity.

Sophia's friend Rosanna also has a baby and a fine pram. Her baby, Gina, is less fractious than Pietro. This is because Rosanna receives occasional remittances from her husband, Luigi. He, a motor mechanic, has been taken by the Germans to work for them.

This morning the girls meet at Santa Cecilia in Trastevere. It is the feast of Epiphany, a holy day when all faithful Catholics should attend Mass. Both extend their tongues to receive the sacred wafer from the priest. Both pray earnestly that the day's work will prove fruitful. Perambulators and babies have been brought within the safety of the main aisle. This is because there are people who might steal the prams. Such things fetch a good price in the flea-market after the babies have been tossed into the Tiber. Before leaving Sophia and Rosanna bring their babies to the Crib where plaster Mary

and Joseph stand admiring their infant son. Around them are shepherds, sheep and three Wise Men wearing golden crowns and offering splendid gifts. Bambino Jesus is fat, smiling and seemingly content with all this attention.

The girls leave together, pushing their prams through the maze of alleys where washing is strung from side to side like the white flags of surrender. Passing through Piazza di Santa Maria they cross the Ponte Sisto over the Tiber. When they reach Campo di Fiori they find the pavements crowded, the highway monopolised by Allied vehicles. There is no petrol for Italians. They begin their long walk to their workplace.

Corporal Sean Kavanagh finds warmth in the Alexander Club — a huge department store which has been requisitioned and transformed into a home from home for British Service personnel. Truth to tell, most have never enjoyed such luxury. Here the weary warriors will find bars, a restaurant, showers, reading rooms, writing rooms, games rooms and a cinema.

Corporal Kavanagh buys coffee and a plateful of cream cakes. He seats himself near one of the huge windows which overlook the street. He is disturbed by the sight of half-a-dozen Roman urchins who press their noses against the window. As he moves a cake from plate to mouth his movements are mirrored by urchin-eyes. He moves slightly so that his back is to the window. It is strictly forbidden to take food outside and feed it to the watchers.

The Alexander Club is well heated at all times. This contrasts with the rest of Rome where electric current is rationed to three or four days each week. Sean has never considered how this miracle of sectionalisation is achieved. Warmed inside and out he returns to the street and is pleased to observe that a thaw has begun. On a street corner he observes two men. One passes a parcel to the other. A cat's tail protrudes from the parcel. There are many stray cats in Rome — meat on the paw, so to speak.

Sean likes to visit the Roman Forum and the Palatine Hill. His knowledge of ancient Rome is largely derived from American films. He has vivid memories of Empress Claudette Colbert bathing in ass's milk, of Christians being thrown to the lions and, most of all, the chariot-race in 'Ben Hur'. He believes that this death-defying affair took place in the Circus Maximus the remains of which can be clearly seen from the Palatine Hill. The Forum ruins are being explored and photographed by, mostly, American soldiers and their Italian girl-friends. Americans have cameras and dollars. Few Brits have either.

Sean reaches the path which ascends the Palatine Hill. It passes through massive ruined arches and areas where umbrella-pines have sapped the foundations of the palaces where Caesars ruled and caroused. When he reaches the crest he sees two women with perambulators. Both wear coats with collars turned up against the chill. He passes them to reach the point where he can see the Circus Maximus far below. Beyond rise the towers and domes of the Eternal City. He appreciates the view,

wonders if he should sit here and eat the sandwich lunch he has brought in his haversack. He will wait a bit. Even the most splendid view grows wearisome. He turns and when passing the two women is surprised to see one smile, invitingly.

'Allo Johnny.' He realises that he is being made an offer. The smiling woman is quite young and so is the other. The smiler is the prettier. Yes? No? V.D.? He has condoms in his pocket. He has not used them since... He pauses. The woman smiles again.

'You lonely Johnny? Like a nice girl?'

How long since he'd...? The A.T.S. girl in Caserta. He smiles..

'Quanta costa?'

The price in Italian lire is equivalent to half a day's pay in English money.

'O.K. Let's go.' He takes her arm. She disengages herself.

'Not me. I sick, moon-sick you know. You go with Sophia, here.' Sophia and Rosanna always alternate. Fair shares.

Sophia says nothing. However.

'O.K.'

'Money first. You give it me.'

Sean passes her the notes which she tucks into her coat pocket.

Sophia leads Seam into the ruins. There is a place formed by two leaning arches which resembles a cave. It goes far back. Sean takes Sophia in his arms and begins to caress her. She is passive but when he tries to kiss her lips she turns her head away. He runs his hands over her body. She is very thin. Her breasts are almost flat. When he attempts to lift her skirt she breaks away. She goes toward a large slab of rock and kneels there with her back towards him. She reaches down, pulls her coat and dress up around her waist and waits. She has no under-garments.

Sean is shocked. He's never done it that way. Like a dog on a bitch. He is attracted, repelled. The girl is trembling. The air is chill.

Sophia hates face-to-face sex with a stranger. She hates their red faces, protruding eyes, gasps. Face-to-face is for her and Carlo when he returns. Sometimes the men get angry and make her obey. Will this one? Maybe he will demand his money back. She and Rosanna are prepared. One of them takes the money and remains outside. There is a long knife concealed in the pram hood. Only once have they had to threaten. The man ran off.

Sean moves towards the girl, unbuttoning his trousers. He sees the trembling, sees how thin are her buttocks. He remembers the hungry kids, the cat. Desire fades. Pity moves in. He pulls down her dress and coat.

'No,' he says., 'No. Get up.'

Sophia rises, stares at him. The man does not look angry. He looks kind. Perhaps...

'You no want? No lika me?'

He does not answer, moves out into the daylight. She follows, joins Rosanna. Her Pietro is howling. She picks him up, rocks him, sings softly. Rosanna reaches into the pram-cover for the handle of the knife. She cannot make out the man's mood. The quiet ones can be the most dangerous.

Sean gazes at Sophia and her child. He remembers the journey up from Naples. The ruined houses, women like this one clutching babies, the hungry eyes, outstretched hands. He and his mates threw them cigarettes. Cigarettes have become the Italian currency.

Pietro is quiet now. Sophia puts him back into the pram, covers him. He remains awake. Thin face, staring eyes.

Sean reaches into his haversack. Cigarettes are issued to soldiers in sealed tins of fifty. These are Wills' Gold Flake. He puts the tin into Pietro's pram. He looks at his wrist-watch. Ten minutes before noon. His father gave it him as a twenty-first birthday present. The case is 18 carat gold. He pulls it off and lays it beside the tin of cigarettes. The girls stare, speechless. Sophia begins to sob. Rosanna stammers.

'O grazie Signor, O grazie grazie. Grazie mille!'

He makes no reply, begins the descent to the Forum. Before reaching it he sits and takes the sandwiches from his haversack. They contain thickly cut corned beef garnished with 'O.K.' sauce. It is noon. The church bells begin to ring. It is the Angelus. From north to south, east to west, from Trastevere to St. Peters. Three strokes. Pause. Three strokes. Pause. Three strokes. Then there should be silence. But this is Italy. Some ringers have no watches, some are lazy, watches can be fast or slow. The bells combine in a joyful clamour, then die away. From somewhere near the Porta St. Sebastiana comes the last chime. The sun has banished the snow. There is a trace of warmth.