

# ON THIS NIGHT

THAT night, we would always go into town, walk up and down the crowded streets, meet and greet friends. Sometimes, in the years just after we had left High School, we would wander round on that night, smoking and smiling, trying to appear older and better-looking, then after an hour's proud strutting, relax and be our age of funny hats, false noses and squeakers. Maybe some of our friends would drink too much on that night and make a nuisance of themselves to other folk—the older people that stood in memory talking of age-lost revelry; the busy ones that were frantically buying at the last moment; and the young marrieds of the town that stood in circumspect groups, aloof from boisterousness, grafting respectability to domesticity.

On that night, town was always different. Every other day and night we'd see the same faces—people from the same street, the kids, now youths and girls, that we had known at primary school, the neighbours, the older men that our parents knew, shop assistants, people that we'd seen in the streets of our town for years, friends of the family that had come in from the country. And the isolation and loneliness of all these people was broken. That was the night when there was an excuse to talk to everybody, smile at faces that for a whole year had averted their eyes if by accident they encountered ours. But there was no need for sideways glances on that night. All these people were in a crowd and were changed. They were no more alone and scurrying through life, antlike, arranging their money, their families, their passions, and their worries.

YOU'D meet a girl that every day had travelled on the same tram to work. She might be very beautiful with lustrous blue eyes, long eyelashes, full lips, dressed smartly and smiling happily, or, more likely she'd be rather usual-looking, not unattractive, but too brisk, hard-working and tired to be pretty. Suddenly a wave of people would break, and as it fell apart, you'd be face to face with her.

You'd say: "Hello."

"Hello," would come out of her with a jerk as someone pushed her.

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last 12 months, and there'll be more in the next. It's all very well for people to say we've turned the corner because of a victory or two; the war's not our only worry. We've got to pull our socks up and build ourselves some backbone."

## HORSE TRAINER

WE whoaed at a horse trainer, and he reined-in impatiently and said: "It'll take a long time to pull up again, but things certainly look brighter. It's certainly a different story from this time last year. But people shouldn't kid themselves that the war will soon be over."

A  
Short Story  
Written for  
"The Listener"  
by  
JOHN D. O'SHEA



Both of you would laugh and say "Isn't the crowd terrible?"  
"Yes, isn't it?"  
"It's the same this night every year."  
"Yes, I remember last year. The town was awfully full."

"Oh, well, it only comes once a year."  
With that there would be nothing more for either of you to say, so you'd smile again, wish each other the compliments of the season, and drift apart in the crowds.

ON that night, people would crush and swarm into all the cafes and restaurants in the main street. Waitresses would be racing between the tables, slithering like eels around chairs, taking orders as they passed their customers, juggling ice-creams, soda-drinks, strawberries and cream, winking at a lad here, looking shocked at some cheeky reveller there, but all the time busy and tired, and by midnight hot and covered in perspiration, a few hairs straying droopily over their faces. And we wondered whether they enjoyed this time of the year very much.

Then, at midnight, just off the main streets, cars would begin to arrive from all directions. That night was the night Christ was born, and people would be gathering for Midnight Mass to venerate and honour the memory of His birth. If we were still in town, we might see these good and devout people, some of them still slightly flushed by the night's festivities, a few of them still slightly drunk, their faces now solemn and restrained, filing into the church. And this gathering, this ceremony would give a tradition, a glory and a beauty to the night. Then, as for many centuries, people were worshipping at the temple of Christian life, the fountain-head shaping the destinies of their lives and the lives of their ancestors.

Night of crowds and noise, night of greeting and merriment, of celebration and friendliness, night of devotion and commemoration.

AND NOW, THIS NIGHT—this night of December 24, 1942.

It comes in our home towns when the twilight is long, and cool darkness lingers across the day, and the stars come late.

But here, this night comes to us after a day pallid with death—no apologies, no compensations, and we pray for dark,

overcast skies to shelter us from those bombers' moons. Celebration has no place here. Here, this night is a time for grim and sombre dedication of a birth that might kill any or all of us. For we have sensed a new world, and we have declared that this new world must be born in agony and death and sorrow. Wisdom, judgment, and diplomacy have their place afterwards in the shaping and fashioning, the blueprinting of the statesmen. But now, here, this night, there is fighting and killing, a dark abyss of destruction, to rid our lives of threatened desecration.

We are under cold African skies, watching the seas off Guadalcanal, in the steaming jungles of New Guinea, guarding lonely Pacific islands, waiting in pagan India, searching silent Atlantic waters, everywhere with Death as a companion.

Men of England  
Men of Australia  
Men of America  
Men of South Africa  
Men of Canada  
Men of New Zealand

Yes, and men of Germany, too; men of Russia; men of Italy, and men of France; men of every country that has called itself Christian. We look up. We look around. We hope. We pray. We are glad. We are mad. This is the night of December 24, 1942.



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