

Second Place: 2007 Short Story Competition

Author – Sarah Evans

With her story

Orphan Christmas

Everyone has to wear one.” Tina glares at Carole. “It’s compulsory!”

“Sorry. I’d rather not.” Carole hears her own voice, weak and petulant. But she’s a grown adult, not a five year old, and she can’t see why she should let Tina bully her into sitting through this lingering meal wearing a hat that will make her feel stupid. She doesn’t believe in Christmas anyway.

“Everyone else is,” Tina says, “where’s your team spirit?” Carole notes with dismay. Tina is right: all of her new work mates are sitting there with foolish smiles beneath gold and tinsel hats. They’re not even the straightforward paper ones that come with cheap crackers. No, these are Tina’s special home made ones, festooned with ringlets of ribbons, and each with its caption. Tina’s says “I’m a Christmas star.”

“Go on! Be a sport!” Tina clumsily attempts to place *Christmas gnome* on Carole’s head herself.

“I said no!” The words emerge bad-tempered, rather than humorously bantering, and Carole senses everyone staring at her as she sweeps the hat to the floor, her face blooming red.

“OK. Suit yourself.” Tina gives up and turns pointedly to talk to Ben across the table, who looks ridiculous in a piled up green and pink concoction. “Don’t you look sweet in that though?” she tells him, and Carole winces as he smiles inanely back.

“Don’t you just adore Christmas?” Tina carries on.

Carole does not adore Christmas. Even when she was little it never lived up to all the build up. *Is this all there is to it?* she’d think guiltily when the glittering paper revealed toys that were less exciting than promised on TV. Later, all she can remember are the quarrels. They were always worse on Christmas day, as if the fact they ought to be enjoying themselves made it all the harder for her parents to endure each other’s company.

“What about you?” She startles as she realises Ben is addressing the words to her. Ben is the only one in the team who doesn’t make her feel odd. Not that she knows him well. They exchange a few words making tea at the kitchen point some mornings.

“Sorry?” She must look an idiot.

“Christmas,” he says, “what are your plans?”

As an adult she has dutifully alternated between her parents, putting up with the sniping insults they dream up. Even after years apart they can't let go the remembrance of Christmas past, are still trying to have the last word. This year will be different.

"Actually." Her voice is a bit too defiant. "I'm spending Christmas on my own. I'm looking forward to it."

On your own? Poor thing." Tina oozes exaggerated sympathy. "You could join us. We always have a terrific shindig. *An orphan Christmas*, we call it, all us Kiwis and Aussies stranded in London. We've invited all sorts of waifs and strays."

Carole can't imagine anything worse.

"No," she says, "I plan to go for a long walk. Guess it will be cheese sandwiches for Christmas dinner." The quip falls flat. She's hoping for a champagne day: cold and crisp and sparkling. She'll climb to the top of Box Hill and it will be just her alone with the view stretching out for miles.

"Cheese!" Tina's voice is thick with mockery, as she looks to Ben for his collusion.

"Actually," he says, "I'm on my own too. Big family do at New Year. Wouldn't survive the whole week there!"

Carole smiles gratefully at him. He has a pleasant face, and as far as she can tell is single. But she's careful to cut short any unwise speculation. It's better not to indulge in foolish hopes and have them dashed. He's just a colleague.

"Well *you* must come to my orphan Christmas!" Tina insists. "No seriously! There'll be loads of us. It'll be great fun. You should see the hats I'm making for that."

Carole feels unreasonably angry. Why can't Tina just leave Ben alone? She hopes he isn't going to accept out of politeness.

"Maybe," he says, smiling vaguely.

"You're as bad as each other." Tina dismisses them as hopeless cases.

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Finally the meal is over. Carole has the bloated floating feeling of too much food and wine. She just wants to get home and lie down.

"You all coming to the pub?" Tina asks. There's a great karaoke place near here." Carole can't think of anything she'd hate more.

She slips away down a side street, breathing deeply the sobering cold air, walking briskly towards the nearest tube station. Alone at last. No more work for ten days. Time to relax and do her own thing. She hears heavy footsteps closing in behind her.

“Hi, Carole!” She turns with relief to find it’s only Ben. Slightly out of breath he explains, “didn’t fancy the pub either. Mind if I walk with you?”

Irritation flickers at the intrusion, then it subsides. It isn’t far.

“She can be a bit dominating can’t she?” he says. “Tina. You’re right to stand up to her.”

She wishes he’d shown a bit more solidarity at the time.

“Guess I’m too much of a coward!” He grimaces.

They don’t say much as, reaching the main street, they have to keep dodging the crowds of shoppers coming at them from all angles.

“Mind you though,” he shouts above the mindless optimism of some Christmas song blaring from an open shop door, “she could have been right about one thing.”

Carole looks at him quizzically.

“Maybe we shouldn’t spend Christmas on our own.” Carole thinks of Tina’s invitation.

“I mean...” There is a lull in the crowd and they pull closer. “We could have our own orphan Christmas. Turkey for two.” Carole pictures the two of them pretending to do the Christmas thing. *No way!*

“That is...” His voice trails. “It goes well in sandwiches.”

Carole smiles, trying to hold back the bubbling up of expectation. “Maybe,” she says.

The End

'Sarah Evans' lives in Hertfordshire with her husband. She works in London, where she is part of a writing group. She has had stories published by Writers' Forum, Leaf and Happenstance and 'broadcast' on shortstoryradio.com.