

The Christmas Party

Big night ahead: first the Christmas Party, then the bombing.

The young man lit a cigarette and logged into the dark web for final instructions.

“Are you still strong brother?” the voice on the screen mechanical, certain, cold.

“Yes.”

“This is your chance for glory. We all believe in you. Certain you can do this. All of us so proud of you.”

“I feel proud to have been chosen. Grateful to make a difference. What are my instructions? Where is the bomb?”

“Patience brother. First, have you created your alibi?”

“Yes. I got myself invited to a Christmas Party. The enemy will be there. I’ll make myself known to them before leaving to deliver the bomb.”

“Good. Now, here is the plan. On the street outside your flat is a black Ford Mondeo parked behind a white van. The bomb is in the boot of the Mondeo and is timed to go off at exactly 22:00 hours. The Mondeo is not locked. The keys are in the glove box.

Your target is the Town Hall. The enemy is going to some godless concert there. The concert ends at 21:45 and that means many of the enemy will be standing around the front steps afterwards. You are to park the Mondeo right outside the steps there at 21:55 precisely. Act as though you have come to give someone a lift home and make your way across the street to the alleyway next to a Greggs coffee shop. A comrade will be waiting for you there. The bomb is timed to go off at 22:00. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Good. We are all proud of you and confident you will deliver what needs to be done. The comrade will take you to a place of safety. All your brothers will be there. There will be a feast. A celebration.”

“I will make you proud.”

“And we of you. Go now to your party. Remember all you have to do is park the Mondeo beside the town hall steps at 21:55. Got it?”

“Yes.”

The young man lit another cigarette, logged off from his computer, gazed briefly at the photograph of him with his parents standing on a brilliantly white Spanish Beach, all three of them smiling. He raised himself from his chair, stubbed out his cigarette, put on the new black suit he'd bought for this special evening, and made his way downstairs from his one-bedroom flat onto the dark street and entered the Mondeo.

The party was taking place at a large country house an easy fifteen-minute drive from the Town Hall. At its entrance an array of lights and inside sounds of talk, chatter, light music. He had arrived on schedule at exactly 20:00 hours. There would be plenty of time to make himself known and fend off stupid conversations about the weather, the ever rising costs of Christmas, presents bought for children.

Plenty of time to get noticed, not enough time to risk thoughts getting exposed.

He entered a room crammed pack with people and noise. At the far end of the room between the bar and spiral staircase stood a Christmas tree tall as the ceiling, on its branches a riot of decoration and flashing multi coloured lights, at its tip an angel pointing to heaven.

A silver haired woman in a blue gown that touched the carpet moved across the room towards him.

“Oh, you must be the young man my son invited to our little get together.”

“Yes. I appreciated the invitation.”

“So glad you could come. Such a cold night too with ice on the roads and a chance of snow. Still it is Christmas and that is how it’s supposed to be. How lovely it would be to have a white Christmas this year. Makes everything so much more festive don’t you think?”

It seemed to the young man the woman would talk forever. It amazed him how people such as this could talk so much about nothing and think themselves interesting. He wanted to discuss the great changes about to come, the struggle against injustice, the need for a grand reckoning and the end of corruption. But he did not do so. Now was not the time. The only way to get through this night successful was to stay focused, get noticed, say nothing.

“But really I must go mingle and leave you with your friends. I hope you stay to enjoy the recital.”

“Recital?”

“Oh, didn’t Rupert tell you? My daughter is back from Uni where she is studying the piano. She has promised us a treat.”

And at that the woman left. The young man wandered aimlessly around the room. He had no friends here, this Charles the woman referred to was merely someone he barely knew at the University and the invitation to a party made to everyone in their study group.

He placed himself next to the Christmas tree beside a grand piano and listened to talk of ski trips, football games, expensive gifts. He made an effort to be recognised but made no attempt at conversation.

He looked at his watch: 21:15. He could escape this place in fifteen minutes. That would leave enough time to get back to the car and drive to the Town Hall. He looked forward to meeting his real friends and the celebration of a great deed done.

Then the sound of spoon to glass and the clear voice of the silver haired woman, one hand holding a glass of champagne, the other pointing to the top of the staircase.

“And now, everyone, my lovely daughter Cynthia is here to entertain us on the piano.”

A slim blond perfectly shaped young woman some nineteen years of age appeared at the top of the stairs. The room became silent as all eyes turned upwards to watch this exquisite creature from another world move slowly downstairs towards the waiting grand piano.

First she played a medley of Christmas tunes to set the mood. The usual suspects: ‘We wish you a merry Christmas, Silent Night, Oh Little Town of Bethlehem’. Many in that crowd began singing. Our young man did not. He placed himself opposite a clearly quite drunk Rupert to make sure he was noticed and checked his watch. It was 21:30. Perhaps he would listen to one more of these silly tunes before leaving.

The silver haired reappeared next to her daughter.

“Now Cynthia dear that was lovely but show everyone what you can really do. Play us something special, something that show us how daddy and mummy’s money has been put to good use.”

Cynthia smiled.

“Well I have been working on a piece by Chopin, but it’s not really suited for this occasion.

“Whatever darling. Just play something that dazzles us.”

“Very well. Chopin Piano Sonata number 2.”

Cynthia settled herself and shook her head as if to remove from all memory of Christmas, rubbed her pretty white fingers together, and began to play.

Dum dum tee dum/ dum dum tee dum. The first notes of the funeral march made the room silent repeated in various chords.

The young man had heard this tune at the funeral of the Queen and was about to leave the room as Cynthia progressed into the series of melodic transpositions, delicate trills and melancholic melodies rising and falling. Everyone in that room, young, old, male, female, drunk and sober mesmerised lost in time and place and at one with Chopin and the beautiful girl seated before them.

It took the young man some time to realise the music had ended. It was as though he had been taken away to some other place and been returned transformed into someone unrecognisable. It took the loud applause that followed to shake him back into himself and remind him about what it was he now must do.

He made his excuses to leave and rushed outside to return to his car. The contrast between just moments ago being inside that house full of life, of being a part of something transcendental seemed to him too much to absorb as he drove the cold car down the gravel driveway.

He turned on the radio to help him gain focus and was surprised to hear the commentator announce the start of the 'Ten O Clock News.'

A loud bang, flash of light, the shattering of glass and everyone at the Christmas Party rushed out of the house to see what had happened.

The outline of a vehicle covered in flames lay in front of the gate leading out to the main road. Amongst the shards of metal scattered across the gravel driveway were strips of black clothing.