

## A Christmas Tale



It was the night before, before..... well that time, he couldn't bring himself to say it.

That word.

Well anyway it was time to go to work, to pay off some of his student debt and to buy that car. He had seen the silver Audi TT a month ago and it was still for sale. Another night at the call centre and he would have an even bigger bonus, and then ...his train of thought was disturbed by a luminous sign pasted onto the side of a church.

*Are you in danger...*

It was a sign half covered over with a Cardiff City FC flag. He carried on walking along Newport road. It was his birthday. Twenty today! He shrugged though, he had not spoken to any of his immediate family since the summer after that argument about, about her, well whatever. He had almost forgotten about the day being busy with his course work and now the evening job.

It was like a hangover, a bad dream...all that stuff, the separation from his family and her. He walked slowly towards the office through the middle of Cardiff. The weather was so cold. He pulled his slim padded jacket closer to him to fend off the intense chill. Christmas Eve! He wrinkled his brow and set his face like flint. He tried to avoid the influence of the partying around him by almost stooping into the northerly wind to ignore it all. The partying was like an attack on his ears as shops, restaurants and clubs were alive, full of shouting, noisy people. He scowled at the bright lights of the stores' displays, they were all so annoyingly perfectly cheery, so many false so called happy scenes of mock frosted revelry. The restaurants exuded wafts of hot cooking, wine, beer and perfume in a heady brew and every now and then, as he passed by, he would frown as a door opened to let out a deluge of office party commotion onto the streets. He stepped around one dis-gorging party all as if to make a point and pulled his jacket closer to his throat whilst holding his leather bag closer to his chest.

As he walked along Queen street, he noticed the adverts, the cool guys, well booted and suited. The girls, sleek and sensual, especially the Chanel one, but that was all unreal. He passed a pub called the Kings Arms and something caught his attention as he looked in briefly. The warmth called him in. He noticed his old... well once he called him a friend, Fred. Fred was slightly related by so many family links and generations that it might have been that this man was a nephew of sorts, yet roughly the same age. He paused to watch him holding court. There was a time when Fred was funny, he was once infectious, but now, he felt that hard skin which covered him, which distanced him, which meant that laughter was ridiculous, was non-sensical, was not part of him anymore. He turned from the pub's wafting smell of garlic, pesto, hot chips and sausages, more waves of laughter that rippled and fell out of the pub into the winter chill and disappeared into the cold air. He walked on only to bump into a girl who almost toppled out of the doorway into his path. He looked up feeling the snarl on his face.

"Oh sorry I er..." He recognised the voice. It was Belle. Even now she was so...No he had

pressing things to do. He turned and pulled his scarf around him. "Oh don't go, please come in. I er. We could talk."

He now had his back to her and paused in his steps. Snow fell around him.

"Talk? H'mnn. We did that once." He had barely turned to speak to her.

"Oh but its Christmas Eve look and Fred would so love to see you."

"I doubt it."

A labrador came bounding out of the pub and nosed at the girl's legs. It had luminous strapping. He hadn't realised that Belle's eyesight had got that bad. He began to walk away, now in the soft baby snow. He could tell Belle couldn't see him really as she kept talking as if he were still there. He heard a few phrases over the din of the next restaurant.

"Why not come in, remember we had so much fun, so much happiness and then you took that..." He quickened his pace, he knew that last word even if he couldn't hear it. 'Job' She couldn't square him working and spending time at the call centre. And that had been the beginning of the end of their relationship, that as well as her sight meant somehow she wasn't the same and certainly not like the girls in the sleek Chanel ads.

Anyway, he had done well, got promoted and was the only student as a part time manager. He saw the bright logo of the call centre calling him in, almost drawing him in its neat pattern, right in the middle of the reception doors. He stood there and gazed at it and then remembered the bonus he had received for doing so well, the cash and those golden vouchers to spend Christmas in luxury at the Celtic Manor Resort. He recalled his first task that night and that was to deal with Rob. Rob was one of his team and was always late, always a family drama, always an excuse for not meeting the target. He entered the office and prepared himself.

True to form Rob was late, coming to his desk in a jumbled mess of coat, enormous scarf and the latest stories of his youngest being ill at the Heath Hospital. He dropped some papers on his desk disrupting the tinselled computer monitor.

"Over here Rob please." He tapped away at his iMac checking on the latest sales figures. The gangly tall man in his early thirties sat down nervously.

"Ok Rob so I've talked to HR and after my concerns about your focus and time keeping, you will be on notice of capability, also as we are short staffed tomorrow you'll have to do the afternoon shift..."

"But that's Chrism..."

"No argument Rob I can put this convo in the record if you like?"

Rob lowered his head, shaking it and left the office, realising that the meeting was over.

He felt like a coffee and knowing there was a Starbucks just beyond the call centre and Marks & Spencer, next to a church, he grabbed his coat, wallet and slipped out of the office.

He took a quick sip of the Macchiato on the way back when a man in his late fifties stepped into his path.

"Oh excuse me sir..." An Irish voice.

"If you don't mind I wondered if you'd like to contribute to the homeless feeding station that's run here every night. It's our rota this month and..."

"Get away loser" The Irishman was startled by the abrupt reply.

"I'm sure you don't mean that we have so many desperate refugees from Syria..."

He grabbed the Irishman's coat lapels and brought him close.

"They can graft like me and not be a burden to the state or you, so just leave it and them, they may as well curl up and die. Ship 'em all back and build a wall like Trump's." He stomped off seeing a polystyrene food box half full of lukewarm shepherd's pie and kicked it hard up in the

air. He watched it land satisfyingly right on the church window back-lit nativity. The food slapped against the window and slid slowly down, splitting the gathered image of the family in half.

Feeling annoyed by all this, he looked at his reflection in the lift mirror on the way back up to the office. 'You had to make tough decisions to make progress' he heard himself say. As he left the lift he faced a scene of five or six office staff all moved to tears. Most of them ignored him but one, the tall one called Sharon called out "It's Robbie, the hospital called..."

He looked at Robbie's workstation, a coffee had spilled across the desk and his long scarf was left swinging on the seat. He felt cold and went to his office and placed his hot coffee by the large iMac and touched the trackpad. Instead of the normal corporate screensaver coming on, the screen startled him, forcing him to sit back abruptly.

It was a hand written letter, scanned and emailed to his account. Such things were normal in his business, but not one written from the Battle of the Somme in 1916. He knew instantly that this had nothing to do with his normal business. The letter was in some software format which meant it kept opening the pages as you would turn them. What was even more crazy was that as soon as he reached reading the end of one page, it turned itself. The thing that really hit him was that it was a letter from his great-grandfather written to his wife. It was as if nothing else in the world mattered as he read, almost drinking in the story from the Western Front. The letter had clearly been written to be sent only in the event of the soldier's death. It basically thanked his wife for all she had been to him. The sentence that stood and hit him hard was this.... "you were the best decision I ever made and I am so grateful for you and my lovely family. I wouldn't swap these memories for any other pleasure or thing, despite this wretched hell hole that I know am trapped in and most likely will never leave alive... for tomorrow we go for it."

On the side of his large apple computer monitor an advert popped up in the corner just where his twitter account was open. The advert was for a brand new Audi TT. He closed it down immediately. The advert popped up again and despite clicking on the 'x' button many times it wouldn't go away. The letter meanwhile, closed into an old envelope image and began to burn on the screen.

A notification popped up in the centre of the screen.

"Would you like to read your letter?" it read.

The sub screen below was like that of a chat box from a company's help page.

He typed in the box below.

"What do you mean my letter and who are you?"

the chat line replied...

"We have already written your letter to your family in the event of your death..."

He typed back.

"Who are you, some stupid joker,?" He looked closely at his coffee wondering if it were a dodgy one.

The screen popped up another line...

"Click here for your letter"

It was a PDF document with his name as the title.

He hesitated, hovered the cursor over the icon and then jumped as the printer boomed into life.

A typed letter was disgorged and fell onto the office floor. He clicked and read.

Devastated he walked away, stopping only to pick up the hard copy letter of what he had just read, in shock.

Like a dazed man he stumbled out of the office, not knowing where to go. He walked over to the

main road and across to the River Taff, cold and black and flowing fast.

'That letter!' It had left him empty, cold and shocked. His phone buzzed in his pocket. Initially he clumsily accessed the camera which was on selfie mode. The screen lit up his face from below in a ghostly pallor which made him take in a sharp breath, he almost didn't recognise himself and closed it down. A notification had caused the alert and it was an Instagram image of his family, Mum, Dad and three brothers when they were all under ten. He was amazed as to how it had popped up, not recognising the sender at all. He had never seen the photo before and then... another notification, this time FaceBook. He tapped the notifications button which had 20 unread items, each one a different photo of his family, all he had never seen before. He got half way through opening them, when another notification lashed across his screen, this time from Twitter. There were another twenty notifications, all images of his family, individual pictures this time and all from the same unknown sender. He clicked on the sender. There was no thumbnail or image, just the number of people following, which was six the same as his family and only one that the sender followed, which was him!

Linked-In flashed up, asking him to connect with 'People You May Know'. He clicked almost resignedly. And as he predicted, all the suggestions to connect with were his family. He had no time to think about this before TripAdvisor popped up asking him if he enjoyed his recent trip to Croyde Bay near Barnstaple, Devon. He couldn't believe this, he would never go there in December only....only on holiday with his family when he was a young boy. The date of the visit showed up, ten years ago last August the 18th.

What'sapp crashed across the phone's screen. Twenty chats were unread. He didn't need to open them to find out ..but he did. He couldn't understand the first one at first and then he remembered it was an apology he had written to his parents when he had stolen some money from them when he was just eight.

A text popped up from his father. It read

"Son, just come back..."

It was sent five months ago.

His Google Calendar now got in on the act and reminded him of the appointment he had the next day with "Christmas Day".

Facebook wasn't finished with him as a 'messenger' alert popped up. It was a live one and from someone he knew, Belle, it said...

"Oh I'm so devastated, Fred has just been knocked over by a bus, he's gone....he's dead".

He fell to his feet into a freezing, muddy puddle and shouted out....."OK, OK I hear you, I've had enough, no more, no more...." and threw the phone a long, long way into the fast running blackness of the River Taff.

"It's OK, I know."

He heard a voice, slightly recognisable above his own shouting and wailing and now sobbing.

"Come on Son, let me help yers..." It was that Irish voice again.

He looked up, eyes a mess, freezing cold as the man wrapped a foil sheet around him.

"How can I help?"

He just blubbered and then got the words out "my friend Fred, he's dead. Can we go to the Kings Arms?"

The Irishman guided him all the way there. "In here?" asked the Irishman who he noticed was wearing a light blue jacket with some white words printed on the back, he caught the word 'Street...' something.

Looking in he saw Belle, in tears, with friends gathered around, but with something around her feet. A strange shape. She looked up, a mess of mascara and wet hair clinging on to....a paw.

He knelt down at her feet confused.

"Oh thanks for coming, it's Fred some drunk kicked him onto the street and the bus knocked him over. My poor dog". He gathered her weeping frame into his shoulder and breathed a massive inward sigh of relief. 'The guide dog' of course it was also called Fred' he remembered and then looked up to his distant relative, but close-by real friend.

Fred.

"My friend how good to see you, sad about this Fred, but great to see you. I'm with er...."

He noticed how Fred hesitated nervously.

"With er your family tomorrow as your sister and I are er..."

"Can I come?" He asked in a small, croaking voice.

"Can you come?" Fred boomed. "To your own family. To your own friend ....of course!" Fred laughed out so loud that Belle stood to her feet and through her tears smiled and nodded in agreement.

He realised that he had been away from the office for a while, so he checked his watch and said he would see them tomorrow. He walked, then jogged, then ran to the office. It was late now and the staff had all but gone. He slumped into his seat, looked at his screen, stared out of focus and fell asleep.

Waking with a painful neck cramp, he slowly stretched, squinted into the morning light and yawned. Some of the early morning staff were coming in all wearing disastrously bright and lurid jumpers. He could hardly think straight and had blurry memories of a dog, a puddle and...

"Merry Christmas boss" called out Sharon.

He looked stunned and didn't respond but just stared at her.

"Had a heavy night, gone deaf boss or what?"

He looked at the dreadful Christmas tree jumper she was wearing which had some very prominent tassels and then realised....

"It's Christmas day isn't it?"

"Sharp today guv, Santa get you a box of frogs or what?" the girls laughed at him, but that was silenced as he ran up to Sharon and kissed her full on the lips and continued to apply this to the other three.

"You are all.....magnificent!" he exclaimed. "Now as soon as Robbie comes in you tell him to get in my office straight away." He rushed back to his office, turned the large iMac screen in between him and the door view. In his wake were four astounded women.

At ten past nine Robbie arrived all in a jumble, then opened his office door and stood, face drawn.

"You're late."

"I er, well we were at the Heath Hospital again all last n..."

"Sit down. I've had enough Robbie,"

"Yes but we..."

"I've had enough, Robbie, of me..."

Robbie's face froze like a mannikin.

..... "and so Robbie take all the Christmas holiday off until after new year. Now then off you go."

Robbie stood gawping.

"Oh er one more thing" Robbie stopped at the door waiting for the conditions.

"Take this and hope it makes things little a bit cheerier." He reached down to his locked draw

and handed the golden envelope over.

Robbie left the office and turned back having seen its contents.

“Go Robbie, Go!”

And with that Robbie went.

The student locked up his office, sent the other staff home, knowing that their targets had been easily surpassed and that any more Christmas sales were entirely superfluous. He paused for a moment, in the stillness of the office, and then like a vacuum he was pulled away, running out of the building as though driven by a force of great energy. He almost tumbled out of the main doors and ran to his car looking back to the place where he'd kicked the polystyrene food container and made a mental note to go back there next week. He jogged over to his car and noticed that sign again by the church. This time the football flag had blown off to reveal the full question...

*Are you in danger of becoming a good man?*

He drove out, his mind racing almost as quickly as he left the car park. He set off to his parents house in Penarth and found a place to park in the busy car lined Westbourne Road. He looked up at the Edwardian facade and suddenly that fixed, mask-like rigidity that was his face, suddenly fell, and he stood there like a six year old boy, knowing he had to return, to come back.

“Don't wait too long son else someone will decorate you!”

It was the neighbour, Miss Lily, a mid wife who had always talked sense whenever he'd got into trouble, she had, as always, a sparkle in her eye and moved her head towards his parent's house.

“Go on then laddie!”

He smiled, nodded and went up to the door. The lion faced knocker on the front was decorated with the usual holly but also a caption which read...

*To keep Christmas well...*

*Do not keep but give away*

He promised himself that he would become known, in time, for just this.

The door wasn't closed so he pushed it open to reveal a loud peal of laughter from the lounge. It was of course his distant nephew Fred. He walked in, the kitchen on the left was empty, the table top with two empty champagne bottles and two upturned corks. He looked around the hallway noting the crib on his right. The baby has been knocked over by a small party popper. He picked up the popper and put the baby straight. Laughter rang out again from the lounge ahead. He peaked in like a six year old through the inch of door that was ajar. Fred was indeed holding court again, playing what he knew was a truly cringing party game encouraging lots of slightly 'do-we-have-to' family members into participating. He heard Fred in his final appeal for participants.

“So I need just one more to make up the teams...”

And that was it. He pushed the door open and walked right in.

THE END