

The Office Christmas Party

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I was never a fan of the office Christmas party, but as I cowered in a decidedly-rank cubicle of a pub toilet, feet braced against the door as three of my colleagues did their best to break it down, I couldn't help thinking this had to be the worst one ever.

It had all started so normally, with the false joviality and bonhomie of people being forced to socialise with others they'd clearly rather never see once the working day was done. I mean, half the people there would usually cross the road to avoid having to speak to the other half if they saw them on the street. Yet, here they were, having to make small talk while clutching plastic glasses of cheap sparkling wine while we waited for the signal to move on to the restaurant. As usual, there was the core group, mostly made up of secretaries and personal assistants, who were full of the festive spirit, and probably quite a lot of the alcoholic kind too. They were the ones who organised the Christmas night out, meaning it was their type of evening, while the rest of us, those who didn't really want to be there, floated around the edges, trying to avoid getting drawn into an apparently never-ending conversation with Mike, the office bore. If you did happen to get caught, the best tactic was to try to pass him onto someone else as soon as possible, since it seemed he was more interested in talking than talking to anyone in particular. This meant if you could draw someone else in, you could then make your excuses and leave, and he'd barely bat an eye-lid.

Just as someone tried to dump Mike on me, the cry went up from the organising committee telling us it was time to head off to the restaurant. The plan was to go for that most traditional of Christmas meals, a curry, before heading off for some drinks in whatever pub would let us in on what was known as Black Friday, or even Black-Eye Friday, because of all the trouble caused by overly-drunk office workers out with their colleagues on the last Friday before Christmas.

Even as we headed out into a night chilled by a biting wind and horizontal rain, I could see a few of my fellow workers were already stumbling and bumping into each other; others were bedecked with strings of tinsel around their necks and cheap Santa hands on their heads. Two of the PAs, both of whom I knew had partners at home, had their arms round each other in a manner that suggested it wouldn't be long before they'd be all over each other.

Looking back, I remember thinking to myself at that precise moment, that, given previous Christmas nights out, it was all following the same old routine. As I snorted derisively at how wrong I'd been, the door under my feet me shook and shuddered as the people outside continued to throw themselves against it. I wasn't too sure exactly who they were, but my best guess was a couple of the rugby players from the accounts department because the door was already starting to splinter and it wouldn't be too long before they get through.

Everything seemed normal in the restaurant too. The food was ordered, a choice between having one of the usual curries off the menu or the special turkey curry which had been added just for Christmas. Predictably, almost everyone chose that, despite the fact that it sounded disgusting. I went for a chicken tikka masala, which caused Mike, the bore, to start rambling on, to no one in particular, about how this wasn't actually a traditional dish from India, as you might at first think, but rather it was invented in Britain, most probably in a restaurant in Glasgow, in the 1950s. This would have been quite an interesting story, if he hadn't told it at exactly the same point of the Christmas night out for at least the last eight years in succession. Looking across the table, I caught Mark's eye. He nodded towards Mike and held up nine fingers forcing us both to stifle a laugh. You see, the reason I know that Mike has done this for the last eight years, well nine now, even though I'd only worked for the company for five, was because Mark had started keeping a count, and had told me about it on the first Christmas night out I'd been forced to go on. Mark was one of the good guys, and with a bit of luck, once we moved on for drinks he and I could find a table in the corner and amuse ourselves by watching the others make complete fools of themselves.

By the time the food arrived, we were all pretty well-oiled and the conversation had grown loud and boisterous. As I tucked into my tikka masala, I heard Mike launch into his story again, just in case someone hadn't heard him the first time. Sam, one of the PAs who was sitting to my left, poked at his turkey curry. He spiked one of the lumps of meat onto his fork and sniffed it, 'It doesn't really look like turkey, does it?' He gingerly nibbled a bit. 'Doesn't taste like it either.' He took another nibble. 'I mean it doesn't taste bad, it just doesn't taste like turkey.' He took a larger bite. 'Tastes more like pork or something like that. I thought turkey was meant to be white meat ...'

On hearing this, Mike immediately switched seamlessly from talking about the origins of tikka masala to talking about the difference between brown leg meat and white breast meat on turkeys, and which he preferred to eat. To give him credit, it was a new story, but that didn't necessarily make it interesting. Everyone turned to the food in front of them and did their level best to ignore him.

Soon enough the food was finished and we were heading back out into the night to find somewhere for drinks. Giving everyone the once

over, I noticed that almost all of them seemed a lot more drunk than they should have been given how much alcohol they'd consumed: tripping over their own feet and hanging onto each other for support; even those who usually kept themselves pretty sober seemed heavily intoxicated. In fact, it seemed that Mike, Mark, me and the girl Sam was currently clinging to were the only ones who weren't having trouble walking. We must have come across as a bit of a drunken rabble because we were turned away from the first five bars we tried.

Eventually, we found somewhere and trooped in out of the wind and rain. Inside, it was a real dive, but rather than head back out into the night to try to find somewhere else, we decided to stay put and make the most of it. While Mark commandeered a table where we could watch the rest of the bar, I got the drinks in and joined him there after a couple of minutes. We clinked out glasses.

'Cheers!' I clinked my glass against Mark's, being careful not to spill too much as I did so.

'Here's to another easily forgettable night with some of the most banal people on the planet!' Mark's opinion of our colleagues was about as high as mine. 'Although ...' He glanced around the room, '... they seem to be a lot more worse for wear than usual which might make it memorable after all. I mean, look at that,' he pointed to the far corner, 'Sam's already passed out, and it looks like Janet's about to do the same over there.'

No sooner were the words out of Mark's mouth than Janet fell forward, her head hitting the table with an audible crack, but even that didn't wake her.

'Yeah, but some of them are up to their usual tricks.' I nodded towards the bar, where Mike had two of the temps cornered and was telling, if I wasn't mistaken, the tikka masala story for the third time that night as they swayed gently back and forth in front of him. 'That's got to be new a new record!'

'You'd have thought so, but it's not even close.' Mark sipped his pint. 'He's still four short of his personal best.'

'Should we go and rescue them?'

'Nahhh, wouldn't want to cramp anyone's style.' Mark tipped his head towards the far end of the bar where three lads barely out of puberty were trying to pluck up the courage to mount their own rescue mission in the hope of securing the girls undying gratitude – or at least a quick snog under the mistletoe before the end of the night.

By the end of the fifth pint, Mark and I had long since given up on all that was going on around us and had set out to put the world to rights. I think this is why we didn't notice what was going on until it was too late. A sudden scream brought us back into the room.

'What the fuck ...' Mark was staring across the room to where Sam was now clearly wide awake because he'd lunged at the girl sitting next to him and was all over her. The attention was obviously

unwanted, but no one seemed to be doing anything about it. I cast my eyes around the room and that was when I noticed how many people were slumped over tables beside half empty glasses or on the benches that ran along two sides of the room. Mike was still rambling on to the people around the table where he was sitting, ignorant to the fact that they'd clearly been passed out for some time. The bar staff didn't really seem to mind and were having their own conversation out the back, but the girl's scream brought them running through, one of them grabbing a bat from behind the bar. He pointed this at Sam, 'Oi! You! No means no around here!'

Sam ignored him and carried on pawing at the girl, and trying to kiss her despite her protests. The barman shouted again, but this only seemed to rouse the rest of our co-workers from their collective stupors: that was when I realised we were in big trouble.

As the barman vaulted the bar and started towards Sam, there was a cacophony of scraping and clattering of wood against concrete as the others clambered unsteadily to their feet. Almost immediately, it became apparent there was something not quite right about them. They no longer seemed drunk, but rather they appeared stiff and uncoordinated; yet with each passing second their movements became more fluid. As one, they rounded on the barman, taking him by surprise and pulling him to the ground. He tried to fight back, but there was little he could do against so many and within seconds he'd been ripped limb from limb, sending his head skittering across the floor. This attracted the attention of Maree, the slightly plump secretary of the managing director, and she chased after it.

Meanwhile, in the corner, Sam was still all over the girl, but it was now clear he wasn't trying to kiss her; instead he had his teeth bared and was trying to bite her. That was when I noticed his eyes: rather than being clear and blue, they were now dark and dull, and they stayed still and lifeless despite his frenzied attack. I looked round at those attacking the barman and saw they were the same.

'What the hell's going on?' I stammered to Mark, half under my breath.

He ran his hands through his hair, 'I don't know, they can't be that drunk, can they? Maybe someone spiked something ...'

I ran this scenario through my head, but there wasn't any drug I could think of that would make people act like this.

'Whatever's happening, I think we need to get the hell out of here,' I whispered across the table.

I glanced around the room. Our table was tucked out of the way and while we couldn't make it to the main door without being seen, it seemed like we could slip into the corridor leading to the toilets and, more importantly the rear fire exit, without attracting too much attention. As quietly as possible, we got to our feet and with Mark behind me, we crept along the wall towards what we hoped would be

our way out. We'd got no more than a few feet before the sound of breaking glass echoed round the bar. I turned and froze. In his inebriated state, Mark had bumped a table covered with empty glasses and bottles, sending several spilling onto the floor where they shattered into a million pieces. We looked at each other for a moment and he mouthed 'Sorry'.

There was something slightly comical about it, and being quite drunk, I almost laughed, but then a roar brought my attention back to the rest of the room. I turned my head and was greeted by bizarre: most of our colleagues, dressed in their Christmas finery, complete with tinsel and Santa hats, stood over the bloodied and broken body of the barman, while Sam had finally looked up from where he'd been chewing through the face of the girl he'd pounced on. Further along the same wall there was another, smaller knot of people with blood dripping from their hands and faces. All of them were now staring at us with dark, soul-less eyes.

I felt Mark's hand pushing me forward as he hissed one word into my ear: 'Run!'

At the same time, the others surged towards us and we made it to the door way just ahead of the fastest of our colleagues. We sprinted along it as quickly as possible and, as we rounded the corner, seeing the exit ahead of us for the first time, it seemed like we're pulling away from those who were pursuing us. We reached the door and, without even slowing, crashed into it, expecting to burst into the night – that didn't happen; instead, we crumpled against it. Confused, we looked down and saw a heavy metal chain looped tightly through the handles and secured with a heavy-duty padlock.

'Shit!' I glanced down the corridor where our colleagues were just turning the corner, 'What now?'

'In here!' I looked round and found Mark pointing the door to the men's toilet. We pushed it open and leapt inside before throwing ourselves against it in case they tried to follow us in. For a moment, it seemed like we had got away, but then we felt the first of our colleagues hammering on the door. Within moments, there were so many of them trying to get in that we knew we'll never be able to keep them out.

I turn desperately to Mark, 'What now?'

'The cubicles. The doors have locks on them.'

It didn't seem like a great idea, but it was better than staying where we were. 'Okay. On the count of three. One. Two. Three!'

We leapt to our feet and dashed across the grubby, tiled floor. The door crashed open behind us as we slide into the cubicles; me into the right hand one, Mark into the left. There was just enough time to get the door shut and the latch flipped before our colleagues reached it and started trying to break it down. I wedged my feet against the door,

just in case the lock didn't hold, but it seemed pointless as the door looked too flimsy to hold out for long.

I called out to Mark, 'What the hell's going on?'

'I don't know ...' He sounded as scared as I was.

For some reason, I had a flash back to the restaurant and what Sam had said about his food; about how the meat didn't look like turkey. That's when something occurred to me. 'Mark, what did you eat?'

'What?'

'At the restaurant, What did you eat?'

'What the hell d'you want to know that for?'

'Just tell me.'

'I was going to go for the turkey curry, but I remembered how bad it was last year so I went for a prawn makhani instead.'

'Who else didn't have the Christmas special?'

'Only you, Mike and that girl Sam was chewing on in the bar. Everyone else had the turkey curry. Why?'

'I don't think it was made from turkey.'

'What d'you mean?'

'Well, Sam said it tasted more like pork.'

'So it was pig not poultry,' there was a confused tone in Mark's voice. 'Why would *that* make them act crazy?'

'I don't think it was pig; just something that tasted like it.' I tried to think of what it might have been, but I couldn't come up with any possible answers. 'Whatever it was, I think it must have been tainted or infected or something ...'

I heard the sound of splintering wood and glanced up to see the top hinge had separated from the door, and I knew it won't be long before they'd break through.

Mark called through from the next cubicle again, 'How the hell are we going to get out of here?'

I looked round for a window or some other way of getting out, but find nothing. 'I don't know.'

'Shit!' There was a brief pause before he carried on. 'Knew I should have stayed at home!'

There didn't seem to be any way we're getting out in one piece, but I felt I needed to say something to lighten the mood. 'Look on the bright side, we won't ever have to listen to Mike's chicken tikka story again.'

'What d'you mean?'

There was another crack from the door as a second hinge gave way. Now the door was only held in place by the remaining hinge, the latch and my feet.

'The last I saw of him he was being eaten by the managing director, two of the interns and that work experience girl everyone kept flirting with.'

'Well, at least there's a plus side then!' Mark shouted back as I heard his door give way.

At almost the same moment, the final hinge gave out on mine and I knew it'll only be seconds before the creatures that had once been my colleagues finally got hold of me and tore me to pieces, just like they had to done to the barmen, 'Yeah, happy *bloody* Christmas!'