



The Birthday Party

By

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The Birthday Party

For Mum,
Happy Birthday,
Thank you for Everything

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Prologue

BBC News, 17th June 2024, 6.00pm

"Hello, good evening. Tragedy has struck after a fire ripped through Abbey Lodge, where the owners of Whitmore Industries were hosting their annual staff celebration. Unfortunately most of those in attendance sadly lost their lives in the blaze, while some others are still unaccounted for. A great proportion of the building was also destroyed.

"Firefighters attending the catastrophe say that it was one of the worst fires that they had ever seen, and calls have been made for increased regulation for surveys on Grade II Listed buildings so that we never experience such a large death toll from a fire, such as this, again.

"Whitmore Industries is the largest manufacturing conglomerate in the country, and they make a large percentage of the automotive parts and aerospace components for the British Government and Army. A spokesperson for the company says, 'We are truly saddened by the loss of Henry Whitmore and all other staff who were harmed in the fire. Never in our wildest dreams could we have expected or prepared for the hole that this would form in the company. In their memory we would like to start up a Foundation to help support the lives of people whom are less fortunate, and have been affected by fires. We would also like to say thank you to the firefighters who did their utmost to help and reduce the damage. That will be all for now.'

"Police say that the cause of the fire is currently unknown and they are treating it as suspicious until more information comes to light.

"In other news, a man has gone missing from the town of Battle. Police request anyone, who may have seen or have information regarding James Henley, to come forward and assist with the ongoing investigation."

Abbey Lodge

Not much remains of it now. The glowing embers of the past catch on the breeze and travel slowly over the burnt ground. A mix of ash and charcoal cover the soil which makes even the slightest footsteps an incredibly noisy and torrid affair. Smoke still billows from the lodge, creating a really dark haze that spreads out across the land.

What a difference a day makes.

This time yesterday, the fun and frivolity was about to start. Everyone would have been readying for the party; bringing in the cakes; preparing the many cocktails and drinks; and even laying the final decorations to this beautiful 18th century manor house. Now anything that remains is crumbling or has already turned to dust. It really is quite amazing how much history and story can be wiped out in one fell swoop. All caused by an unattended candle, or so we suspect.

The Whitmore Family

16th June 2024, 10.30am

Tabitha watched over the proceedings with a feeling of slight glee. For once it looked like everything might go, just smoothly. No ludicrous games where the staff are bound to be embarrassed or shown up for the Whitmore's entertainment. And definitely no unwelcome guests. Father always seemed to attract unwanted attention from the press, she thought.

There were also other people who felt they deserved part of his fortune, which was to be expected, but she hated the effect it had on her family. He adored the attention and drama it caused, so usually made a big show of how privileged they should feel, especially after one of these intruders rudely interrupts planned events. The feeling sickened her. How could he be so reckless and careless when he has an entire family to care for and protect. He should know how savage the press can be. If one tiny thing slips up, the repercussions would be catastrophic, which is why she will have to step in and lend a guiding hand.

Last year had almost marked the end of it for her. At the annual celebration, things had got too close for comfort and her children ended up at the centre of it all. A crazed individual, called Mary, from the nearby town claimed that she sparked the business deal that made Whitmore his first paycheck, and hence thought that she was deserving of a portion of their annual revenue. The main problem with this form of blackmail is that you can't just give in to them, as many nutters pop out of the wood work and start arguing their own case about how they deserve a share. With a company the size of her father's, everyone would soon hear about it too.

Anyhow, she got too close for comfort and managed to sneak her way into the property by disguising herself as one of the catering staff. You have to give it to her, she went about it in a very clever way. After doing some research Mary discovered that Tabitha's son had a deadly nut allergy, and so her family always put a great deal of effort into keeping any nuts away from the party. Now, as one of the supposed caterer's, Mary was able to put peanuts into the dessert so that she had enough time to corner and blackmail Tabitha's father. Fortunately everything was okay and they were able to get someone to Tabitha's son whilst Henry kept Mary quiet.

But still, the mess up had shaken her and her son and almost cost them his life.

After that whole debacle, security measures had been upped, and every member of staff had to be interviewed personally before being allowed to work on this most prestigious of jobs. Still, Tabitha couldn't let her father keep soaking up the limelight whilst leaving them in the firing line.

She'd had an idea, that would have to be played very close to the chest.

Woe betide something untoward happened to Henry Whitmore and he became unable to run the company anymore.

Now of course this is purely hypothetical, but if he lost the ability to work, then she would become the sole owner of the biggest manufacturing conglomerate in the country. That would entail a lot of work and added pressures. However she would also receive a considerable amount of money and complete security for her own family - and after all, blood is thicker than water, so it left some thinking to be done.

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The final nail in the coffin came yesterday evening, when the Whitmore family had a little dinner before inviting the company around for the Anniversary Party. All had been going smoothly - too smoothly.

“So how many guests are we expecting tomorrow Dad?”, asked Tabitha. After last year's fiasco, she really hoped that less people were being invited, but of course she didn't voice this fear quite so directly.

“Well, there's most of our London staff, so that's about 50 people. Then of course we also have some of my team and ...”

“Will Uncle Chris be here?”, Tabitha's son interjects excitedly. He always loved to play and talk to Chris, she thinks. Unfortunately he's always struggled to relate to people his own age so would always find the funny uncle or grandparent to hang out with, at any of these events. Thank God Chris was such a nice guy and always seemed to enjoy hanging out with her kids. She wasn't sure if he had children of his own, but she hoped that he did, as he deserved his own family - especially after he'd put so many years of help and advice into her father's company.

“No, unfortunately not. To be honest, I haven't worked with him much this year. After last summer we've sort of parted ways,” Henry replied gruffly, not able to look his grandson in the face.

“That's a shame,” Tabitha replies. “I'll be around and we can go off and explore the woods if you would like?”

“Thanks Mum,” his hair flopped in front of his face, and he spoke in a mumbled tone, the way he usually does when disappointed by something.

“Let's play a game of tiddlywinks!” suggests Henry, keen to ease the already palpable tension.

It was after this that Tabitha saw her father head into his study. At first she thought nothing of it, but still decided to creep after him. After making sure that no one was watching her, she traipsed slowly down the hall. Why would he need to go into his study this evening, surely there's no work to be done? Unless there's something more sinister happening.

When she got to the door of his study, she crouched to make sure he wouldn't spot her, and then listened intently. She was about to leave, thinking that he was just talking to himself, and then he exclaimed loudly.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN *I SHOULD HAVE BEEN NICER ON HIM* ?! How was I to know that he'd take it all so personally!”

At this point, her father became really quite hushed and she had to strain to hear anything else he was saying. There were some muffled words *life*, *shock* and *sad* but Tabitha didn't really know how that related to the rest of what he was saying.

She realised that he must be on the phone to someone, although she wasn't too certain who yet. Had it really come to this, she thought, snooping outside her father's study prying on his conversations.

“Look, he was there to help me and think of all the things I hadn't. My family was left in danger, and more than that, she risked showing up the security and rigour of my company,” Henry was practically hissing down the line at this point. “Imagine if that had reached the press! We'd have become a laughing stock. Ellington is already matching our production levels and has just signed off on the new deal, that we should have clinched.”

Tabitha couldn't believe what she was hearing - was her father referring to Chris?
“I did what I had to do. I kept the company safe and together. I had to find a reason to fire him as I was constantly worried about what may next go wrong. What if he was the reason the competition

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was slowly creeping up on us? Surely you understand. Anyway, I best be going back to the dinner, keep up impressions and all the usual jargon.”

He ended the phone call abruptly and she hardly had time to stand up and start down the corridor. That and also the fact that she was frozen with shock. She classed Chris as family, he'd been around since she was about 10, and as far as she was aware, he'd always be around. He was a pivotal part of the business and she always hoped that her children learnt loyalty from him - as she'd never met a nicer more trusting individual.

Christ he was even the godfather of her son. If this is how her father treated family, then she was horrified for what that meant if the press ever pried into her life.

The rest of the evening went pretty standardly, all things considered. Still, Tabitha found it incredibly challenging to focus without her mind wandering to what her father said. Chris deserved way more respect than he received and it clearly goes far to show where his priorities lie.

She must get the self preservation trait from Henry, her mother definitely didn't have a strong back bone, and was always being pushed around by executives from the company. Isn't it quite incredible, she thought, the very trait that she got from her father, that he used to keep the company afloat for so many decades, was the very trait that would lead to the crumbling of his little world, and her rising anew.

As Tabitha stood proud on the balcony, surveying the land that would soon be hers, and the celebration that was due to commence, she knew precisely what to do. A part of her felt surprisingly proud of Henry. Say what you want about him, but his business acumen was unparalleled and he'd done a marvellous job keeping everything together. The problem is that at some point it will go to your head and you'll mess up, and that was now for him.

The next 24 hours will be ones to remember for a very long time.

The Watcher

Fire is an exquisite thing, it both creates life and destroys it. It was at the beginning of our known universe and the lack of it is what will trigger the end of our existence and death to most species. This beautiful being, that as much as we try to, cannot be tamed, is filled with the most incredible spectrum of colours. Deep intense reds and oranges right through to sharp bright blues, which burn the strongest out of all the fires.

The pure amount of destruction is also something I find quite fascinating - it erases whatever it touches and renders all of these items in the exact same state. Dust, if you must put a description on it.

After reading that, I'm sure it would be fair to think that I am a bit of a pyromaniac, although I personally disagree. Pyromania feels like a bad description of it. I'm not sent into complete and utter mania when I see fire. Nor do I act rash or impulsive when I'm around it.

I do, however, appreciate it's remarkable nature or the interesting atmosphere it gives to a room, be it for a nice candlelit dinner or a simple campsite.

Fires, and more specifically hearths, have been around in civilisation for millennia, so much so that the Greeks deemed it important enough to give it its own Goddess, Hestia. So there is a beauty in them that has always been noted, and I have merely noticed that.

Anyway, I digress. My point is that fire is an incredible and beautiful discovery and hence I think it to be a very fitting way for the Whitmore's to meet their demise. After all, they strive for

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perfection and want everything to be the most efficient and complete version possible, so why not present that as my perfect solution to the problem that they have presented me with.

I also am a bit of a perfectionist myself so I also want everything to go according to plan. That means that the family need to be well and truly eradicated, with no chance of returning. I need to destroy everything that goes along with them. Fire is the cleanest way to do this, and quite perfectly leaves no trace of who or how it was started. I didn't come this far to be caught at the last hurdle.

Let me be a bit more precise, my father, Chris Henley, worked as an adviser to Whitmore Industries and I thought he had always been appreciated greatly by Henry, but I must have been mistaken. The aftermath of Mary's unpleasant visit rocked Henry in a way that my father had never seen. He explained to me that he had received a telephone call the very next day, where Henry said, in no uncertain terms, that he was disappointed with my father, that he hadn't prepared for this and that he also wondered how many other eventualities had also been disregarded.

Dad was quite shocked by this reaction, particularly because he wasn't even asked about the party or any security features of it. He had previously helped Henry design a security system for Abbey Lodge and also helped ensure that all of their premises were safe from any cyber attacks – but this was completely different. Dad had always warned me of things like this – “Don't trust people in power son, always keep your wits about you and double check everything. The power changes you. The money too.” In spite of that, he stayed loyal to Henry and was there at his every beck and call.

I wish I could explain why Henry blamed my dad, and why all of Henry's rage seemed to be directed at dad, even after the many many years that they worked together. I also wish I could say that it stopped there, but Henry seemed to then see red, and instead, begun to blame my father for anything and everything that went wrong within the business.

Regrettably my dad couldn't live with himself after all of this torment and he retired soon after. His work was all that he had, other than me, and he didn't survive for much longer. I was devastated when he passed away and was completely lost with what to do with myself.

Henry didn't even have the decency to attend dad's funeral to pay his respects, which somehow hurt even more, yet I expected nothing less.

It may not be the best way to go about it, but I want to make Henry pay for the pain he caused me. Although it won't bring my dad back, or fill the hole he has left, it will teach the family a lesson and go as a sign to the rest of their company. As they say, some men just want to watch the world burn. I wouldn't go that far, but I definitely want to watch Whitmore Industries burn in flames.

And that brings us up to present. I'm now comfortably sitting in my car with a 5 litre can of petrol and a couple of smaller glass bottles to make some Molotov cocktails. Given the dry, European weather we've had lately, the wooden parts of the lodge should be like tinder, so it'll barely take a spark to catch the whole building ablaze. My plan is fairly simple: whilst everyone is out in the marquee celebrating and enjoying the party, I'll sneak round the back of the lodge.

If there's one positive to my dad working with Henry for so long, is that I know all of the locks and alarm systems inside out, and have been able to study the blueprints of this mansion very well. In fact, I probably know the hidden stair cases better than the Whitmore's.

Once the fire is roaring away in the centre of the building, I'll make a sharp exit and head on out of there. The last thing I want is to suffer the same fate as them.

Although now I think of it, watching the terror unfold on Henry's face as he realises what he started would be quite a treat.

THE END

The Cleaner

Good evening all. How are you doing? I mean that most sincerely, as so far this tale has been nothing but danger, debauchery and betrayal. Further than that, it even includes a large amount of death. Every person at Abbey Lodge sadly perished. The fire ripped through every wing and raised the building to the ground in a matter of minutes. I've never seen a more destructive feat of nature - such a shame for all those involved.

Actually that's not completely true. One man survived. James Henley managed to escape the blaze, as he was already safely in his car when the flames caught hold. You may have noticed though, that he is now missing, and that is correct. He decided to uproot his life, and take his inheritance and elope to France. After spending a large part of his life stuck in rural England, he wanted to get out and properly explore the world. And what a way to do it too. Go missing, leave your job and any so called 'friends' and travel!

You may be wondering if he's running from the police as well. You may be correct. You may not. I'll leave you hanging for a little bit longer on that.

Anyway my goal is to clear up all misconceptions and misunderstandings about what actually happened on the 16th of June in Abbey Lodge.

Why did Tabitha want to harm her father and what fully pushed her to doing it?

What didn't work about her plan - or least why would it have failed?

Also who would have won that game of tiddlywinks after dinner?

Did James succeed in setting fire to this gorgeous Georgian manor house and eradicating all key members of the business?

And if it didn't, how did the fire actually start?

Let's go through this bit by bit and analyse each person in our little story. For a start we should give a worthy mention to the staff in the lodge, who had worked there for generations and always kept it looking spic and span. They also always accommodated these parties and made effort to look after any drunk or incapacitated guests.

Countless times they were there for Tabitha to help with break ups or family dramas. This all being said, they have absolutely no reason for ill will towards the Whitmore's. Although they may have slipped up here and there, they have always tried their best.

As far as Tabitha is concerned, I feel that the cause for her ill feelings was fairly clear, but I will be doubly explicit just in case anyone is struggling to follow along perfectly. The main source of her unease was the strong feelings of a mother's love and her protective instinct over her children.

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She feared that one day her father would slip up and it would backfire most horrendously on them. Or worse still, she had a slight concern that if someone tried to make a bold move against Whitmore Industries, and decided to use the children as pawns in their sick game, like Mary did, Henry may struggle to do the right thing.

He had done an incredible job of keeping it out of the press, but Henry had been suffering with his heart for the past year and had to take an array of medications everyday, for all manner of things. Some were to decrease his chances of having a myocardial infarction, some were blood thinners, and a few others were to deal with an irregular heart beat. The doctor on Harley Street had said that it was vital he took these meds regularly and on schedule, else he was at a very high risk of a heart attack or something more sinister. Even missing 2 days worth of pills could be detrimental to his health.

But that was all that she needed, in order to implement her plan. Tabitha swapped out a week's worth of her father's tablets for sugar coated placebos. Past this main problem, he lived an incredibly healthy life and tried to avoid the most insalubrious things, even alcohol.

Tabitha knew this and hedged her bets, hoping that, whilst the lack of medication would surely cause a small heart attack, it wouldn't be enough to cause a stroke or harm him any further than needed. He may be a risk to her children, but he was still her dad, and she loved him. She just felt a need to act for her own sake.

And who knows what the results of this meddling would have actually been. Although one thing I can say, is that Henry had been under a great deal of pressure for the best part of his working career and so I can imagine the doctor was trying to explain the issues lightly. Chances are that without an entire week's prescription, Henry would have met his maker by the end of the week.

Surprisingly, Tabitha and her son survived the blaze. By quite a stroke of luck they weren't in the house when the fire started. As Chris wasn't there, her son was much more bored, so they both went to explore and play in the wooded grounds near the lodge. Quite poetic really, those that cared enough about Chris and him not being there, were saved by the very thing that caused all of the friction. By the time she heard the flames roaring and see the smoke billowing atop the trees, it was all far too late.

About the tiddlywinks game, if the fire hadn't been started and everything went to plan, it would have been quite a mean game. Tiddlywinks had become a bit of a family tradition as Joseph Fincher was the grandfather of one of Henry's closest school friends so he learnt the game from the best source around. Admittedly the rules have changed slightly since when Fincher invented the game, and there definitely wasn't as many English Tiddlywink Associations around at the time, but it was still fun to play at the end of a long day.

Henry's nephew, Dave Taylor, was actually the favourite to win in the next major competition, the George Thorpe Cup. He enjoyed these parties muchly and usually could be found teaching the young ones the game and trying to drum up some new interest. Admittedly I don't fully see the excitement but each to his own.

Now the actual cause of the fire was not The Watcher, otherwise known as James Henley, nor was it an unattended candle or even an open fireplace. It was in fact merely bad luck, wrong place wrong time, if you excuse the phrase, and if you bare with me for the time being, I shall explain some background science.

Many things in our world are flammable and one of those is confectioners sugar, more commonly known as icing sugar. This is because it contains an increased amount of reduced carbon

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and as it is a very dusty compound, there is an incredibly high surface area to volume ratio, which allows it to ignite much easier than solid sugar crystals.

A flash fire caused by this is known as a dust explosion. And there you have it, our ignition for the fire at Abbey Lodge.

Let us take a few steps back and run through the exact specifics, for those of you who may not be following. What has occurred here, is one most unfortunate and unlucky turns of events known to man. To celebrate the birthday of Whitmore Industries, Henry had requested the head chef to make a staggeringly large cake, complete with 40 candles. As he was a very simple man, he only wanted a Victoria Sponge cake but a cake that simple needs to be done well and usually coated with a thorough dusting of icing sugar.

As I said before, the staff mean everyone no harm and act with the best intentions, however the fire was started when they carried the cake through the house and out towards the marquee. For reasons that I do not understand and cannot quite comprehend, they decided to light the candles before leaving the kitchen. This means that as the cake went through the lodge, a wind that whipped through an open window caught the icing sugar and sparked a dust explosion. As James had already worked out, the building was incredibly dry and the curtains also caught light very quickly. From there it was a slippery slope as the fire travelled into the main dining room.

With the sheer volume of alcohol around, the fire spread quite easily, to the dismay of all those around. The tablecloth caught light quicker than a match and then set light to most of the rugs. As fire rolled down the corridors and passageways of this old wooden house, all party guests ran in panic, desperately searching for a fire extinguisher, but none could be found. And by the time one finally was, the blaze was too strong to be easily outed. If Henry had lived to tell the tale, maybe he would also blame the lack of fire extinguishers on Chris as well.

So after all that, Henry caused his own death, but not in a way that anybody expected. Fortunately James made it out okay as he was just making his way around the back of the building when he heard some commotion coming from the front. Sense prevailed and thankfully he stopped just before breaking in. If he had have, that would have most certainly marked the end of things for him. Instead he was quite chuffed. His wishes had all come true, in the exact manner he wanted, without him actually having to get his hands dirty.

All he needed to do now was ditch the bottles of petrol and he'd be safely on his way.
C'est la vie.

And that wraps up this perilous tale. I think it important to note the key moral – respect everyone, and do your best for everybody you meet. You never know what your actions can cause.
Oh, and always watch your back.