***Chapter 12***

**A quarter of an hour after the opening Sardana of Casals’ oratorio echoed through the auditorium of the Academy (when, following a long train of solos the first of the choral interludes begins) Gilbert Fabre lifted his watch from off the table beside his easy chair and confirmed the time: 9:30 PM. What he didn’t realize was that it was incorrectly set 15 minutes before the acknowledged Eastern Standard Time, 9:45 PM.**

**It was the moment to put aside wallowing ; there was work to be done! He did however permit himself a few minutes to walk into the bathroom adjacent to the kitchen on the left. Gazing into the mirror, he slicked back his hair, adjusted his bow-tie, brushed his tuxedo; marching back into the living-room he straightened its sleeves . It was through such details that Fabre kept alive the fantasy that he was standing with the chorus on the bleachers in El Pessebre , even that he was the tenor narrator!**

**The record-player had been switched off. From far off in the night came the sounds of broken glass and the skidding of a car on the icy roads. Apart from the ticking of his watch and the monotonous rumblings of the furnace, no other sounds of any importance broke the silence on this bitterly cold Christmas Eve.**

**Gilbert Fabre picked up the telephone receiver to slip two stockings over it to muffle his voice. Then he examined a list of telephone numbers.**

**Fabre hesitated: at the top of the list he’d written down the telephone number of the police station closest to the Academy. It hadn’t really been necessary to write it down: given the frequency with which he had occasion to use it in his office in City Hall, he knew the number by heart. Below it were the numbers for the main office of the Philadelphia Orchestra, the major newspapers**

**( Bulletin, Inquirer and Daily News) and the two radio stations KYW and WFLN.**

**Then a sudden inspiration: as he bent over to dial the police station it occurred to him to see if it were possible to reach the Academy of Music Box Office. Under normal circumstances it would have closed an hour ago. Yet, given the exceptional nature of the Casals gala, and the violent political demonstrations that had disrupted it which he’d learned about from the television news, there was a real possibility that someone might still be there.**

**There was nothing to lose by trying. Gilbert consulted the phone book and wrote down the number. At 9:45(by his watch), he dialed.**

**Indeed the Box Office of the Academy had stayed open longer than was customary, either to refund tickets from physically shaken customers, or accommodate ticket holders who might decide to riskattending the second part of the concert.**

**The guichet had been closed at 9:30 so that its sole occupant, Mrs. Amanda Rice, could begin the business of counting the money in the till , checking it against receipts and storing everything away in its proper place. She was therefore startled to hear the telephone ring at 10 o’clock.**

**It was too late for calls. Mrs. Rice stared at the apparatus on the table to her left and briefly debated with herself if she ought to answer it. Officially the Box Office was closed. She was perfectly within her rights to ignore the call.**

**Yet: perhaps because the events earlier that evening had been so unsettling, or the holiday spirit, or the excitement of the gala, she felt inclined to give the public some leeway. And there was another possibility: it could be a special emergency call from management. Through the window she could see that the police patrols were still outside, roaming back and forth before the entrance; one couldn’t take chances. With considerable nervousness Amanda Rice lifted the receiver.**

**“Hello. Who is this?” Only silence at the other end returned her greeting.**

**“Hello. This is the Academy Box Office. Who is this, please?” she asked again**

**The voice had a sharp Hispanic edge, no doubt about it:**

**“Hello! Hello! Who I speaking to?” Amanda Rice shuddered. Did more trouble lay ahead?**

**“This is the Box Office of the Academy of Music. How can I help you? Could you speak a little louder please?”**

**Volume and pitch at the other end notably increased:**

**“You will please to listen! You will please to listen carefully! We have hidden a *bombe* on the stage! Mrs. Rice shrieked:**

**“Oh my God!”**

**“It is underneath the places where are standing the singers. Do you understand? In the back of the stage, underneath the singers!”**

**“Oh my God! My God! Why?” Tears streaked down the folds of her cheeks, her mouth hanging open with terror, loose in a shapeless face. Sharp spasms shot through arms and legs; she had to brace herself against her chair to keep from falling.**

**“Please to be quiet! Please to listen! It is a *big* , a powerful *bombe* ! It does great damage!”**

**“Help me! Help me!”**

***“Everyone must leave the auditorium! At once! The* bombe will explode at” - a pause for calculations - “Ten fifteen! Exactly!”**

**“No, sir! No…!” Mrs. Rice was pleading, though for what she herself did not know.**

**“Immediately! Do you hear? Immediately! *Viva la independenzia de Puerto Rico!!* ” Then as if expressing solidarity with oppressed peoples everywhere, the voice rose to a shouting mode: “ *¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!* Now go! Hurry!” Amanda Rice compulsively gripped the receiver in horror. The line went dead.**

**Mrs. Amanda Rice was a very nice woman. No one of her acquaintance, nor casual strangers, would dispute this assessment. In her mid-60’s, genteel and educated, what she knew of the world was limited by the wealth she was born into. Her recently demised husband, a stock-broker and financier, had so managed his trusts as to enable her to live in comfort out on Philadelphia’s northern Main Line for the rest of her days. Her job at the Box Office was essentially a volunteer service for the Orchestra to which she and her husband had devoted so much of their time and money over the years. As a token of appreciation she was paid a nominal sum.**

**Truth to tell, apart from the vacations she and her husband had spent in the Bahamas or on the Riviera, Amanda Rice had rarely travelled outside her tight social circle. She was perfectly content that it be so. Her constrained life among the Philadelphia elite gave her all the adventure she needed. Certainly she had never wanted to have anything to do with politics (unless, by “politics”, one meant the gossip of the rich and powerful oligarchy with whom she made the rounds of parties, social gatherings, church functions and volunteer activities.)**

**Attention: Mrs. Amanda Rice was not a person to be underestimated! Despite the intensity of her initial shock, the functioning of her basic instinct for survival remained unimpeded. Despite the urgency of the present crisis she remained very much in control.**

**Certainly this was no time to debate the alternatives. By pushing open the door to the Box Office and stepping into the lobby, she exposed money and tickets to whatever wayward thieves were highly unlikely to be roaming the corridors at that time of night. Her antique, tight-laced black dress fluttered across the lobby like the plumage of a disoriented bird (a moa, perhaps) as she raced hysterically, crying bitterly, stumbling on her high heels through the wreathing circular corridors leading to the backstage wings.**

**Gilbert Fabre lowered the receiver in its . Reclining back into his easy chair he allowed himself a lapse of pleasurable relief:**

**“Ten-thirty did I say?Over half an hour ” He chuckled (discretely) to himself “ That should give them enough time to clear the auditorium. “**

**He poured himself a glass of champagne and toasted to his success:**

**“ Goodbye concert! Nobody’s hurt. All in good fun.”**

**A few minutes later he decided to make a second phone call to the offices of the Philadelphia Orchestra. The phone rang a dozen times before he conceded that no-one was there to answer it. Once again he started to call the police ; again he decided against it. “I got through to the Box Office. That’s enough.”**

**Fabre put another record into his stereo system, a late Toscanini recording of Beethoven’s Eroica. He lit a cigarette and leaned back. Few satisfactions in life, he reflected, equal the knowledge that one has done one’s duty.**

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***El Pessebre* opens with a series of solos separated by orchestral interludes. Apart from a brief statement of a few bars for male voices, the chorus doesn’t enter in full for the first half hour. That would have been about 10 o’clock, the time of Fabre’s call to the Box Office.**

**Theodore Sokoloff, seated on the ground floor, fifth row in from the Orchestra Pit, turned to Wilfred Jensen and whispered: “Only a cellist could have written that passage.” Up in the rows of tenors, Patrick Clancy turned the pages of his score; he flashed a bright smile in the direction of his wife, standing among the altos over to the far right.**

**A contingent of half a dozen police out on Broad Street continued to pace back and forth before the doors of the Academy. They were not in a good mood. It didn’t sit well with them that they should be deprived of a Christmas Eve at home with their families, because of the remote possibility of the return of the *Huelga* .**

**Much to his surprise, conductor Anthony Curtis-Bok turned to the left side of the podium to confront the face of the Academy stage-manager. Unnoticed from the wings , Jack Wong had entered onto the stage from the left and gotten his attention by frantically tugging at his sleeve. Curtis-Bok realized at once that it had to be a serious emergency. He lowered his baton and stepped off the podium. The orchestra fell silent instantly – no amateurs here! The chorus continued to produce scraps of melody for awhile ; then it, too, quieted down.**

**Jack Wong mounted to the podium and addressed the audience through a hand-held microphone: “Ladies and gentlemen! The auditorium must be cleared in 15 minutes!”**

**There is such a thing as collective emotion; most of the time the phenomenon is negative. A glacial chill over-shadowed the auditorium. Still fresh in everyone’s mind was the stand-off with the political demonstrators earlier that evening. Bella Sokoloff gripped the right hand of her daughter, and muttered :” I *knew* something like this would happen. I *told* Theodore we shouldn’t go!” With a gesture of annoyance, Nadja pulled her hand free of her mother’s grasp.**

**Seated up in the large, commanding box to the left of the stage [[1]](#footnote-1), Mrs. Patricia Augusta-Holmes, 47 year old wife of Gordon Holmes, one of the wealthiest of the orchestra’s trustees, craned her neck forward to focus her precision opera glasses on Wong’s features:**

**“Please remain in your seats until escorted by the ushers. Then proceed peacefully to the exits. There is no cause for alarm.”**

**Wong turned around to face the orchestra and with extended index fingers and arms pointed out the two wings at the back of the stage. Orchestra and chorus proceeded to leave, some with, some without their instruments. Tensions ran high, but little apprehension that the situation might spin out of control. The audience at a classical music concert is nothing if not civilized(by a certain definition of civilization); not at all like what one finds at a rock concert. The evacuation proceeded in an atmosphere of calm.**

**But although human beings may err, fate never . One likes to think that the outcome could have been different. But could it? In fact it could not. This was the moment at which Mrs. Amanda Rice, standing in the wings along with several security guards, totally lost her presence of mind. Panic-stricken she ran onto the stage and screamed at the singers:**

**“*Don’t go that way! That’s where the man said he put the bomb!”***

**The panicked chorus surged forward hectically, like sheep scattered by lightning, towards the front of the stage and into a mad tangle with the fleeing members of the orchestra. Patrick Clancy, dropping the veneer of gentility that gave him what little manners he displayed, began unceremoniously knocking down anyone directly in front of him. Several reacted to his bullying by fighting back, increasing the overall chaos and turning the evacuation into a rout.**

**Singers, musicians, instruments, music stands and chairs were churned up in a growling, tumultuous swell that spilled over into the orchestra pit. Performers jumped or were pushed onto the terrified bodies of seated politicians and celebrities. The noise of splintering double-basses, imploding drums and other instruments generated a horrifying din, orchestrating an all-too-effective background accompaniment to the stampede.**

**As the first bodies began dropping from the stage into the orchestra pit, Hernando Guzman, pink-cheeked representative of the Puerto Rico people by free elections, sprang out of his seat. His tongue, seasoned by decades of facile oratory and too much rich banqueting, was unable to keep itself in check at this crucial juncture. Waving his arms, he screamed:**

***“Terroristas!!It is the Huelga!! Terroristas!!”***

**The audience went wild. A thrill of horror reverberated around the historic horseshoe shell of the Academy. Bodies flew off the narrow guard rails of the 5th floor Amphitheatre, to be dashed to pieces on the ground below, increasing by several orders of magnitude the panic of the fleeing crowds.**

**Pandemonium reigned throughout the building. The atmosphere of genteel celebration of a gay Christmas Eve tribute to the life and works of a great musician was shattered, exposing a naked heart of fear. Each participant jostled his neighbors ruthlessly for personal survival.**

**Several of the orchestra musicians, among them the Concertmaster, were trampled to death. Precious instruments were pulverized, hands and arms fashioned by decades of arduous training crippled beyond recall.**

**Sometime in the 60’s two elevators had been installed in the Academy of Music. They carry audiences from the lobby to all levels of the auditorium. One would be hard put to imagine anyone more foolish than those individuals who, having succeeding in forcing their way through the swinging doors into the narrow winding corridors, now stuffed their bodies into the elevators descending to the ground level. By the 3rd level the elevators were over-crowded to bursting; yet more people continued to pour into them. Predictably both elevators stalled, one of them between the 3rd and 2nd levels, the other between the 2nd level and the ground floor.**

**Reuben Mandelbaum was thrown to the ground of the orchestra pit and stunned when the podium flew off the stage. He suffered a heart attack in the ambulance en route to the Pennsylvania Hospital and died in the early morning hours. Patrick Clancy and his wife survived. His neck and legs were broken, and his recovery stretched over several long years. His old adversary, Gilbert Fabre, had gotten , in a manner of speaking, his revenge though we are never likely to know if Fabre deemed it either appropriate or adequate.**

**Unconscious bodies lay sprawled in the aisles. Philadelphia’s Academy of Music is unique among the world’s opera houses owing to the small amount of maneuverable space accorded to each seat, no more than 5 feet per person. This peculiarity operated against the frantic efforts to clear the auditorium. Bodies were piled one on top of another in the rows and aisles, as hundreds of persons raced over them, trampling and crushing those too weakened to rise up. Over the hour of the evacuation the death toll would rise to over 30, with more being reported from the many hospitals located in the downtown Philadelphia area.**

**Miraculously, the governor of Puerto Rico himself, Hernando Guzman, whose incautious exclamation had set the final spark to the tinder, was able to exit safely, shielded by a Pretorian guard of half a dozen security agents wielding blackjacks and cans of mace. Among their victims was Martita Casals. She was stunned by a blow from a club and had to be carried out. Apart from sprains and bruises that kept her off the cello for half a year she emerged unharmed.**

**Sylvia Greiner was not so lucky. With an injured back and her left arm broken in 3 places, she would never play professionally again. To her mind, Pablo Casals’ abuse of her had continued even after his death!**

**Panic short-circuits the brain; what one may do under its influence can have little relationship to morality, intelligence or courage. Patricia Augusta-Holmes, in her frenzy to escape the orchestral box, picked up and ran, but in the wrong direction. She toppled over the ledge and onto the ground below. She might have survived, despite serious injuries, had not her body then fallen victim to the pummeling rain of shoes. She died before anyone could get to her.**

**Among the survivors were those who, able to keep their wits about them, dropped to the floor and waited out the storm. No explosion had as of yet taken place, and it appeared to them that the dangers posed by a yet unrealized threat were not so great and the visible spectacle of hordes of concert-goers scrambling in a life-and-death avalanche towards the exits.**

**Theodore Sokoloff pushed his wife and daughter down to the floor, then signaled to William and Anne that they do the same. William seized Anne’s arm and tried to pull her to the ground. Swept up in the general madness she wrenched herself free and dashed into the vortex of bodies swirling about the aisles. Only too late did she realize that she was being carried away helplessly to a fate over which she had no control. When she cried out to William to rescue her it was already too late.**

**Before joining the general surge out of the building and onto Broad Street, the stage crews cut all the lights in the house. There would have been logical reasons for doing this if, in fact, a bomb was just about to go off. However , one of its consequences was that a blanket of darkness now covered the interior, further increasing the sinister atmosphere of terrors. To be able to hear, but not to see, the enveloping carnage added a further dimension of horror; now threats appeared to come from all directions.**

**The crowds that had succeeded in making their way down the stair s towards the front exits now encountered a new obstacle. Apprehensive that the HIPR might attempt a return, the police and staff had locked all but one of the entrance doors. The first wave of fleeing concert-goers thus found itself rammed up against the doors, causing many serious injuries.**

**When the doors were finally opened, a torrent of survivors 3000 strong poured out from the front doors of the Academy onto the ice-bound pavements of Broad Street. They collapsed in the snow drifts, slipped and fell on the ice, sustaining bruises, breaking bones and smashing glasses, adding considerable numbers to the casualty lists. There may even have been some more deaths (I don’t know. Like most others, I’m constrained to rely on the newspaper accounts.)**

**All through the night and into the next morning, ambulances and police cars carried the victims to the over-charged emergency rooms of local hospitals, some traveling as far as the Philadelphia General Hospital and University of Pennsylvania Hospital 3 miles away to the west, or the Temple University Hospital on Broad Street 3 miles to the north. Clearing the building and transporting the injured continued until amost until noon on Christmas Day.**

**By midnight rescue teams were able to reach and free the persons trapped in the elevator between the 3rd and 2nd levels. There was much damage but no-one had been killed. Those in the elevator between the 2nd level and the ground floor were not so lucky. When the survivors were finally liberated around 6 AM, it was discovered that 4 had died from crushing and suffocation.**

**The full account of deaths and injuries was recorded in the pages of the Bulletin and Inquirer on the day after Christmas. There had been 48 fatalities; the number of seriously injured surpassed a hundred. Anne Goldstein’s name appears midway through the list. William Jensen and the Sokoloffs were uninjured, as were Anthony Curtis-Bok, Aldo Falcone, Joachim Rodenbach, Martin Diamond and Julie, the wife of Patrick Clancy.**

**8 members of the Chorus were dead. Also 6 orchestra musicians and the soprano soloist of El Pessebre. After being kept under observation for a week at Philadelphia’s Jefferson Hospital, Martita Istomin Casals returned to San Juan, bearing the lone surviving violin of the 3 donated treasures.**

**In a mood of reckless triumphalism, the final bars of the Eroica symphony ringing in his ears, Gilbert Fabre switched off his stereo. For a while he walked methodically around the living-room , re-arranging furniture and cleaning up. Then he went to the kitchen and brewed himself a cup of thick black coffee.**

**Humming the theme of the 1st Movement of the Eroica, he made his way up the staircase to his private office on the second floor. There would be no sleep for him that night.**

**The business of composing press releases occupied him until 8 AM. He turned in at 10. Much later that afternoon he would be stepping into his car for the long drive out to Michigan to visit his brother, with whom he’d arranged to spend the rest of his Christmas vacation.**

**It was only in the early hours of the dawn that the bomb squads were able to enter the building. Starting with the stage, they meticulously examined every inch of the Academy for incendiary devices, not excepting the auditorium, basement, ballroom and even the interior of the world-famous chandelier.**

**Nothing was found.**

**The bomb threat had been a hoax.**

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1. **It may be seen in the Martin Scorsese film “ The Age of Innocence”** [↑](#footnote-ref-1)