

## The Classroom

(A Short Story by T. U.-P.)

Lennox College's Lakeshore Campus is a living cresting palette of fall hues, with its bright red and subtle ochre shades of transient foliage. As the dire late-October wind grips and shakes the campus canopy's fall crown, crowds of bundled up college students with their backpacks and shoulder bags venture to their lectures and tutorials with a seasonal carpet of varying leaf margins lining their separate commutes. As a Tulip Tree outside the Anthropology Building sheds one of its last leaves, the wind catches the rectilinear blade and after a whirling dervish of pirouettes and cascades, deposes it gracefully at the clay-coloured main entrance of the pillared Romanesque building. Inside the large lecture auditorium, Evelyn looks at her watch and notices that her Colonial History class is almost over. Soon the slim figure of the male professor, standing on the stage at the foot of the stadium-style lecture hall, addresses the class of two hundred or so undergraduate students.

"Next week, I'll be collecting your third assignment of the midterm on Christopher Columbus and his impact in the Caribbean. Make sure you follow the style guidelines printed in the course syllabus. Thanks and see you in one week."

Packing up her binder after quickly jotting down a few notes on the assignment, Evelyn nudges her friend Miranda seated to her right with her elbow.

"Mira... Tonight is the 'ghost walk' through the campus tunnels, are you in?"

"You mean the Halloween asylum thing? The tour that starts below Anthro?"

"Yeah... I hear it's pretty spooky... Apparently people were like lobotomized and straight-jacketed at Lennox before it was a college. The tour is supposed to take us back to that time or something."

"I'm in! I'll meet you in the lobby at 7:50pm. Tour starts at 8 so don't miss the tour meet-up. We go into areas that need a staff access card."

"Great! See you tonight Mira!"

After exiting the auditorium through the stage doors, Miranda and Evelyn head their separate ways, one heading to the Waldron Library close-by and the other heading home by exiting through the campus' east gate.

After having a quick mac-and-cheese dinner, Evelyn dresses up in her witch hat with a broomstick umbrella to carry along with her on the subterranean tour. After locking the front door to her student apartment, she treks along the back streets into campus, passing homes with skeleton and zombie decorations along with pumpkins of many shapes and sizes. After crossing the Cantley Creek Bridge, Evelyn heads towards the Anthropology Building steps and enters into the already crowded lobby.

"Hey Ev! Love the outfit!" Miranda says after spotting her friend in the entrance-way.

“Looking sassy Mira!” Evelyn answers after recognizing her friend in a black cat outfit with whiskers painted on her round face.

“Already everyone... The tour is about to commence... My name is David Gluckstein and I’ll be your tour guide tonight...” A tall man wearing an ivy cap and a pair of taupe suspenders says to the young and exuberant crowd.

“Follow me in the elevator if you have mobility needs or I’ll meet you down below after you take the stairwell.”

After the two groups of students assemble together again in the basement level, the guide takes the lead and directs the chatty throng toward a special access doorway. He then gets out his fob, applies it toward the sensor and the door unlocks to the sound of a faint beep.

“We’re now entering the tunnels that were used by patients and staff when Lennox College was Lakelight Psychiatric Hospital some 50 or so years ago...”

“Holy smokes Mira! Check out the tunnel ceiling! It’s like so different down here from the ones we walk under to get to class. It’s made of old bricks from way back instead of the dull and boring ducts and plaster.” Evelyn whispers to her friend.

Soon the tour guide pauses by a utility room and uses his special fob to unlock it for full view.

“As you can see, many of the windows from the old hospital wards are now bricked in. If you were to exit right here onto the campus, we would be in the old workshop building which now is our Natural Sciences Building...”

After pointing out that patients did unpaid labour in the workshops which saved the hospital and the province substantial sums of money over the course of the institution’s history, the tour guide continues to lead the large serpentine crowd into a vast series of interconnected tunnels. After explaining that they did a one-kilometer circuit and ended up back below the Anthropology Building, the guide reaches the tour’s last stop, which is an old dead-bolted hospital door.

“This concludes tonight’s ghost walk... You will notice as you leave the Anthropology Building that all of the basement level windows have been bricked in. Although I can’t tell you what’s on the other side of this door since it’s off-limits to even staffers like myself, I can tell you that I believe through my own research that patients from the nearby wards were believed to have been sent to a unit in this building for ‘Special Observation’. You will also perhaps know if you have classes in Anthro, that we are now approximately below Auditorium 1, where the majority of undergrad social sciences and history courses are taught. Thank you all and happy Hallowe’en to everyone!”

After a raucous and spirited applause, Evelyn and Miranda exit out of the tunnel-scape below their familiar lecture hall and walk down ramp by the front steps to the Anthropology Building.

“Whoa! I got shivers or something when he talked about that ‘SOU’ place where patients were sent to be disciplined when they acted up. You think that’s the bricked in window right there?” Miranda says to her friend, pointing out a small brick rectangle which once must have harbored transparent glass and possibly even a wooden window-sill.

“Judging by our class today, that place he talked about might be below the projector screen. I can kind of tell that that’s just below our auditorium stage where Dr. Herrington gave his colonialism lecture today.”

“It’s creeping me out that we could have been above a hospital crypt or something each time we were attending our usual Wednesday afternoon lecture.”

After heading back over Cantley Creek, Evelyn gets a phone call from her friend Miranda.

“Hey Ev, it’s me again... I was talking to my friend Bianca on the phone. She says she went on a ghost walk last year and wants to explore the place below the stage floor in Anthro. Apparently, there’s a trap door or something. Can you come back and meet us here? We’re just outside the front entrance.”

“Mira... I’m kind of tired. Don’t you need college special access for that? I don’t know...”

“Come on! We’re going to see if we can lift part of the platform floor and peek in. It’s Hallowe’en Ev!”

“Alright... Fine... I’ll see you over there in a few minutes.”

After retracing her steps, Evelyn soon spots the distant darkened profile of her friend Miranda next to a tall and slender framed university colleague with the faint glow of a cigarette in her right hand.

“Hey... I’m Bianca. Nice to meet you Evelyn.” The tall fourth year student with a silver nose ring in her left nostril says curtly, blowing a small cloud of smoke out of the side of her mouth.

“Nice to meet you... Are you sure we’re allowed in the auditorium tonight?”

“I’ve been in here at night to study when the library is full. They usually leave it unlocked.” Miranda says to her friend to reassure her.

“Ok... I’m serious though. I’m too scared to do anything except take a quick peek. I got enough of a vibe of that place through the dead-bolted tunnel door at the end of the ghost walk.” Evelyn says apprehensively.

“I brought a flashlight if your cellphone light isn’t bright enough. The plan is to check if the trap door will pop open and then see what we can see.” Bianca says with a hint of adventurous assertion.

“Shall we head in? We’ll just pretend we’re studying in the building after hours if staff or security catches us inside.” Miranda tells them as she leads the way up the front steps.

Soon the duo of Miranda and Bianca, followed close behind by the reluctant Evelyn, head into the Anthropology Building lobby and through the double stage doors to the auditorium.

“It’s good news that the lights are still on.” Miranda says looking around the lecture hall and its vacant seats, arranged in a climbing array to accommodate a large class volume while allowing for ample stage visibility.

“You see that square on the stage platform... I’ve been itching to see if it opens up.” Bianca says heading toward the projector screen.

“Bee... You’re going to be the one who opens it up. Give me the flashlight and I’ll shine it down there if it opens.” Miranda tells her friend.

“Okay... Here goes nothing...” Bianca says as she tries to apply pressure on the edges of the platform square by using her long purple coloured fingernails to attempt the raising of the secret trap door.”

“Got it! Help me out Miranda! I think I can lift it up!”

Soon, Miranda and Bianca, with Evelyn peering just behind over their shoulders, open up the concealed floor door like a large square book resting on the ground level.

“Shine your light down there... It’s pitch black down below!”

Suddenly, Miranda shines the cylindrical yellow-coloured flashlight into the depths below, revealing a small step ladder leading into the hidden below-ground chamber of old.

“I can only see a ladder down there... We’re going to have to go down there to get a better look.” Bianca says poking her head down into the hole like an ostrich in the sand.

“I’ll stay up here just in case something happens and we need help.” Evelyn says with a hint of jittery anxiety.

“I’m going down there! It seems like the ladder leads down some ten to fifteen feet at the most.” Bianca says.

“Ev... You’ll be our watchman... If anyone comes into the auditorium while we’re down here, we want you to say the word ‘GHOST’... Got it?” Miranda says to her friend as Bianca begins to snake down the step ladder.

“Holy Toledo! You should see this place!” Bianca shouts out from below the classroom floor.

“What is it Bee?” Miranda asks as her head disappears through the trap door above.

“Shine the light over here! It looks like a gurney or something!”

“Ahhh!!! There’s cobwebs everywhere down here!”

Soon Evelyn pokes her head through the trap door entrance and sees her two schoolmates shining a light on a hospital gurney. Upon closer inspection with the flashlight, she also notices from afar that the moveable hospital bed is fashioned with leather restraints for the wrists and ankles. Where the head of the tethered patient would normally rest is an old Page-Russell electro-box with a voltage meter knob, electrical wires and a headset used for painful and intense shock treatments.

“Let’s get out of here now! This place is too scary! I don’t want to be locked away below this classroom to spend my days as a Lakelight inmate!” Miranda shouts from down below.

“This whole floor must be a series of adjacent cells from an old psych ward or something. Looks like they put people down here to keep them isolated from the others. Let’s get out of here before we get caught!” Bianca says, following the terrified Miranda up the step ladder.

Soon, the three students take one last look through the gap in the floor and close the trap door to the darkened ‘Special Observation Unit’. Leaving the Anthropology Building, Evelyn looks over her shoulders onto the same patch of lawn with the bricked in window and shudders at the traumas of patients past.

[The End]