

## The Mortuary

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

The Trout City morgue was empty like a giant but vacant parking lot. Of the 300 or so cadaver receptacles, only one or two inert bodily vessels were stationed inside. The Whisky County registry had over five hundred missing person cases but by some anomaly, nothing ever turned up for the Trout City coroner, who spent time twiddling his thumbs in an eerily quiet basement office in the Vernon Square Building Complex. The most recent missing person report of a local barrister sat resting on Mr. Gunney's desk with a photograph of the 47 year-old vacationing down south. Crime rates seemed steady but homicides were abnormally low with clarification and proper evidence needed in nearly all the suspected cases of murderous abduction. Timothy Gunney found himself sipping another coffee while perusing the latest unsolved case. Strangely enough, the statement at the bottom of the crime file indicated what a family member had heard as hollering before the law clerk victim had disappeared. In a non-familiar tone of voice the words: *"You're in the Lord's arms now, sonny!"* were uttered loud enough for neighbours to hear. The coroner, whose job didn't come into play until adequate corpse evidence had arisen in the case, pondered the statement and decided to research places of worship in the grid near the 47 year old's abode.

The air was crisp and cold when Timothy Gunney walked south down Alderman St. starting at the foot of Wilkshaw Park. After passing a small row of houses on the west side, each containing nearly identical arborvitae trees in their small front yards, a tavern with church-like stain-glass windows in its front façade caught his eye. The insular drinking well sat like a small fortress on the northeast corner of Alderman and Bishop Avenue. Mr. Gunney gazed at the rectangular edifice with roof peaks like upside down ice cream cones and wondered why it looked so imposing at such a small size. The structure had three floors at most, but its foundation suggested the potential for hidden subterranean vastness. Curious about the previous function of the building by its stain-glass and ornate ionic pillars, he opted to do research at Trout City Archives in order to gain more background information on the lot nestled at the suspicious intersection.

Trout City Archives was a trolley ride to the northeast and Timothy arrived there in a jiffy. The circular structure had four floors and an information desk on each level. Upon arriving, he quickly acquired a membership pass and headed up to the second floor to peruse the city's 'West End Collection'. Upon searching throughout the online archive database, Timothy found an old postcard of the intersection of Alderman and Bishop Avenue. Upon closer inspection, he used a magnifying glass to view the signage at the front of the old edifice. The sign read: "Christ's Arms Parish". Looking for the date of the postcard, he flipped the old rendering of Trout City and noticed the year "1973". Pleased at his discovery, the coroner left the archives with a photocopy of the old parish in his briefcase.

After getting back home, Mr. Gunney had a late lunch and headed off to Alderman and Bishop to visit Sinner's Spite Tavern. Just as Timothy reached for the door knob on the main entrance to the tavern, he noticed the tall chimney half a kilometer to the west, belonging to the old asylum built on a green acreage nearby. At the sight of the familiar landmark, he found his bearings and dove into a pool of the unknown like a Philip Marlowe embarking on a fresh new case. Upon entering the eerie drinking hole, the door closed behind him and he felt the sensation of being sealed off from within. Directly stationed behind the bar to the left was a lone heavily tattooed bartender sporting a shaved head and grizzled beard shooting a glare to the slightly out-of-place newcomer. In the darkened back end were a few male customers milling about the pool tables consumed by a game of snooker in a dreary smoker's haze. Mr. Gunney, feeling like a fish swimming in air instead of water, decided to avoid the stares of the stern tavern regulars, and quickly descended down a stairwell to check out the basement where the customer toilets were located. At each new step down the old creaky stairwell, the timid coroner felt the imminent approach of a strange basement haunting. Upon reaching the stony floor of the lower level, he headed past the gents' restroom marked with an etched letter "x" and soon found a door that had a sign marked "No Trespassing". Compelled by a sense of fearful curiosity, he ignored the signage and opened the door, casting a last furtive look behind him before venturing in. Soon, gloomy darkness would surround him as he ventured down a tunnel with a loose dirt at his feet and musky cave-like walls. Turning around a bend in the tunnel, he noticed a latched door a few steps away where the words "No Trespassing... Seriously!" were written as a stern warning in scorching red lettering. Determined to stay on course in the mission to expose the old parish's secret, he opened the unlocked latch and descended down a flight of laddered steps.

After a long descent into what felt like a darkened Tartarus, he soon reached solid earthy ground once again and turned on his phone to cast a glint of light into the bewildering obscurity. Following the faint photons emanating from the palm of his hand, he walked apprehensively onward, feeling along the walls of a new tunnel-scape. After walking some 350 to 375 metres in the snaking interior below, Timothy Gunney noticed a change in grade and followed a ramp downward. Suddenly, a flash of light blinded his photosensitive eyes. As his pupils adjusted to the new ambient light rays, he noticed himself on the earthen ramp and beheld a cavernous expanse. The underground hall in front of him was vast like football field for burrowing humans and was equipped with strange electrical torches activated by movements within. Not a living soul was visible when the apprehensive coroner looked around at the far-reaching edges of the vast interior expanse. However, upon closer inspection, he noticed that he was in fact within a gigantic catacomb. Making an approach to one of the pod-shaped cavities, he observed what appeared to be a clear body bag containing a human cadaver within it. Shuddering, he backed up and was overwhelmed by the scale of the catacomb where over four hundred to four hundred and fifty cavities were carved in the walls of the clandestine mortuary.

Glancing over his left shoulder, Timothy beheld the source of additional gleaming light. There, like a cave fire pit built into a large rectangular cavity stood a giant furnace

marked with the words "My Crematorium". Terrified at the sight of the raging red and orange dragon's mouth, he was taken aback and stumbled backwards falling on his rear end. Looking up at the ceiling of the giant cave-dwelling burrow, he caught sight of a large overhead sign above the entrance ramp marked "My Sanctuary". After an intense feeling of mortified awe, Mr. Gunney got up and started running through another set of bleak tunnels with the hope of somehow resurfacing from the nightmarish underworld containing hard evidence of Trout City's vast missing persons' registry. After running for some twenty to thirty seconds down the tunnels opposite the ramp, he noticed a sign that reads "Street-level, Come Back Soon!" Timothy, eager to see the light of day again after feeling like a blind tunneling mole for the last hour, climbed a long set of ladder steps leading to a city sewer where he finally came upon a manhole and managed to lift it to poke his head out onto the street once again. After climbing out of the sewer system, Timothy noticed that he was now on the outskirts of the mental health facility and was struck by the sight of the same chimney landmark close-by. Looking up at the brick smoke stack towering above an old set of hospital buildings, he looked downward at the base and shuddered at the thought of the top-secret crematorium and mortuary far down below in its hidden dark abyss.

|The End|