

The Steeple

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

Suddenly, a loud set of overlapping sirens infiltrate Ricky's morning slumber. Startled, he jolts upward from his supine sleeping position, noticing a hazy smoke somehow filling the neighbouring air of his drafty apartment. Pushing his comforter and sheets aside, his feet touch ground and he quickly rushes over to the balcony, using the sliding glass door to access his favorite homely perch. Soon, the cold February air gives him a quick chill, as he is wearing only a top and thin pair of boxer briefs. Holding onto the balcony bannister, he takes a quick and furtive look directly across from him and to the east where dozens of firefighters are struggling to control a beastly late-winter blaze that has already engulfed half or more of the entire block along Jubilee Street. Slightly apprehensive that the fires will somehow spread to his side of one of the major arteries in Quicktown, he heads back indoors to get his trusty camcorder and decides to briefly film and narrate the impending and fiery threat directly facing his balcony apartment.

"It's now 7:30am on February 19th and as you can see here, Jubilee St. is very much engulfed in flames..." Ricky says pointing his camcorder at an old family business down below that had first opened its doors some fifty year ago.

"When the sirens woke me up, there were about five fire trucks and as you can see now, most of the fire hall dispatchers in the entire Quicktown area are now here to fight the severe winter burn. This morning, I consider myself lucky, I suppose... Thank God I'm not one of those poor things living in a flat or owning a business on the other side of Jubilee."

Working into the afternoon, then into the evening and late into the night, a crew of over two hundred firefighters finally manage to calm the raging dragon's inferno in the early hours of the following morning. As the sun rises over Jubilee Street, the jets of water sent forth in abundance by the fifty or more fire hoses throughout the night, rapidly freeze up and glisten in the frosty morning air next to the ashes and charred remains of much of the historic city block.

The following Sunday in Boniface Church and Parish—located on an intersecting street some 75 or so meters away from the epicenter of the fire—a special service dedicated to the victims of the blaze takes place. In the back pews of the church's sanctuary, two police officers investigating a potential case of arson converse quietly as the sermon is about to begin.

"You know what bugs me the most about this six-alarm fire, Randall? It's that it's definitely gang-related. I'm fed up that it all could have started with meth being dealt in the area. Once that meth lab turned up in a suspicious neighbourhood basement for our drug unit two weeks ago, it's like that was fuel for the Jubilee fire. That's about when clashes started up between two local drug gangs vying to form a larger territory to call their own."

“You should have seen this meth lab Carson! Biggest chemical collective we’ve ever found in Quicktown. Plus all this weird machinery and electrical equipment that we’re still trying to figure out. These dealers are getting tech savvy or something!”

After a somber hymn, Boniface’s pastor heads to the pulpit and addresses his small loyal crowd of doleful congregants. After crediting the relief effort lead by Quicktown Fire and other first responders, the pastor, wearing his purple robe during the Lenten season mentions a homicide victim, killed a day before the fire broke out.

“One of our dear elders, Dr. Humphrey Burton, had his life cut short on Monday. Please pray with me as we remember his life and contributions to the worship ministry and to the heritage committee which he headed for over thirty years. A special service of remembrance for Humphrey and his dearest will be held in two weeks in our Fellowship Hall. Throughout the week, keep the Burtons and their closest in your heartfelt prayers.”

Right after these words, Randall nudges his partner and says: “I knew I came to the right place today. Let’s look up the print in the retired doctor’s case. I’ll bet you we’ll find drug offenses go with this homicide.”

“You’re right Randall. This church needs our help. If there’s a connection to the fire here, I’m not the least surprised. This elder had a presence in the community of faith which is minutes away from where the blaze started. Who knows? He might even live in the area. There’s an upper middle class residential area just north of here where affluent professionals like this doctor might have settled in with their families.”

“You know how I got the idea to come here today? On Tuesday, when we were dispatched to Jubilee early in the morning, I sat in our cruiser and could see Boniface’s steeple just south of here. The cross atop it looked so striking in the patchy blue sky. It’s like it was calling for help or something!”

“This fire and the drugs behind it are really going to affect this community. Let’s look up this elder and figure out more about his service in this area. We need a motive here in this case.”

On the Monday that Dr. Burton was killed, the special key to the upper chamber leading to the bell tower and steeple had gone missing. One of the doctor’s duties in his retirement was to inspect and monitor the integrity of the two-hundred-year-old church bell which tolled its familiar metallic melody without fail for the keen and expectant ears of the historic Baskerville neighborhood. Early on Tuesday morning, as smoke started to appear to the north of Boniface Church, an eerie and murderous presence ascends the special stairwell to the uppermost sections of the ancient place of worship. Using the key that Dr. Humphrey Burton always returned to its usual church office cabinet, the strange man unlocks the door and accesses the steeple and bell tower, to get an overhead view of the neighbourhood and the massive fire lashing out against the very heart of Jubilee Street down below. Soon, with keen eyes of malice, the man sees the

blaze engulf the city block, willing its wrath to spread further and to thwart the feeble watery aid of the many fire trucks and response personnel down below in the bitter cold February weather. As morning was about to turn to afternoon, the man retraces his ominous steps downward, and with incredible stealth, exits cautiously through the parish hall's back door.

[The End]