

Tunnel-man

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

Mr. Chadwick Molerton spent his work day above ground, working in a small cubicle as a car insurance salesperson within the Upton Heights Legacy Building of downtown Folleyville. Simply referred to by his co-workers as 'Chadmo'—due to the presence of another Chad in the same workplace—our protagonist felt a keen sense of boredom with his workday, its coffee and lunch breaks and the usual seemingly predetermined and repetitive steps to and fro between his abode and his office building.

As a child, riding the underground subway system with his father, Chadwick's mind would often wander and imagine a subterranean world akin to a comic strip with secret tunnels harboring a metropolis' covert underworld. In his teenage years, he joined a group of ruffians who would occasionally play 'chicken' on the subway tracks. On one night out with the gang, while the others fled from an underground night-watchman patrolling the station, Chad remained on the tracks and drifted toward the unknown, with a strange curiosity guiding him blindly onward through the pitch-black tunnel. As an oncoming train approached, he fearlessly leaned against the wall avoiding the third rail as the metallic serpent zipped by. He then clambered out of the rail abyss and rushed out of a different station platform while avoiding getting stopped by commuters or transit authorities.

Unable to control his passions for subterranean life, Chadwick began digging a tunnel in his abode; a bungalow purchased after graduating from college with less possibilities above ground level for him than its immense potential down beneath. After his work shift, he would descend the steps into the basement, open a small latch hidden amid the wooden floorboards and would use a trowel, a larger shovel and a crowbar to dislodge stones and tunnel downward and laterally. It was in this first home of his own that Chadwick first encountered the top-secret 'Under-city'. A vast network of subterranean tunnels and secretive below-ground destinations, the 'Under-city' remained relatively unknown to average Folleyville residents. Tapping in to the 'Under-city', he would often leave the basement of his home to engage in what he would term 'sub-exploration'. Chadwick first began his journeys of 'Sub-exploration' through a home-made tunnel which eventually led to a part of the ancient Folleyville sewage system. A 'break-thru' came when he managed to find a special access point to an old city fort's foundations, which lead him to a vacant top-secret bunker where the 'old guard' were stationed during the famous Folleyville Battle of Vice Ridge. Chadwick by chance came upon an old military uniform and even a rusty and dated morse code transmitter among the decaying and cobwebbed military equipment within the hidden bunker.

Another favorite hangout in the 'Under-city' network was the secret tunnel-scape that was discovered when Chadwick first explored the sewage system to and from the East side of the city's water treatment facility. After venturing for at least an hour in an easterly direction, a three way fork could be found with one passage marked "Leviathan

Lookout". Waist deep in water at first, Chadwick proceeded onward, worried about encountering the underground society known as 'The Mole', which according to Folleyville 'Under-city' legend, had a largescale catacomb for stragglers caught beneath the city. As he walked toward the mysterious lookout, the waters retreated and he now found himself soaked only to the ankles. Finally Chadwick came upon a small metal ladder that took him into a chamber with a tunnel leading back below on the opposite side. The chamber had the domed shape of an egg split in two. On one side of the chamber, he noticed a mass of falling water seeming to crash down into a pool exterior to the chamber. On the other side, there was a clear view of a park setting with benches and trees, as well as a few picnickers and folks leisurely enjoying the mid-day shade below the canopy. One park user appeared to be looking in Chadwick's direction causing him to duck and try to hide his presence but he soon noticed that the chamber must have been opaque and invisible from its exterior. Looking around 'Leviathan Lookout' he found a piece of scrap paper which read: "You've now found Sanctuary Park from within Founder's Fountain. Give us a call sometime at the number below." And signed: "The Mole".

It wasn't long before Chadwick called the number and quickly became a member of the underground burrowers' society. Upon becoming a member, he was given a special gown to wear at gatherings and had to pledge a vow of secrecy. Soon, the tunnel from his basement was clearly marked with an underground address with the name 'Molerton' lettered on a subterranean mail box for the 'Under-city' postal agents and neighboring tunnel visitors to have for bearings and reference.

After his usual uneventful cubicle shift, Chadwick, who at this present point in the story is married with two young boys, was on the esteemed guest list for the Folleyville Fair's Social. The exclusive event, which advertised itself as a function for the town's elite, was really an above-ground reception (located in the middle of Folleyville's casino district) for elders and members of 'The Mole'. Top-level 'ground-temple security' assured the limited access and secrecy of the social function with guests having to change into their gowns upon entry and joining in worship within the cavernous reception area. After showing their secret tattoos to a burly duo at the main entrance, Chadwick, his wife Alina along with Todd and Thomas, rapidly put their mauve gowns on and join a mass of several hundred who are already chanting and reciting cultish hymns and underground harmonies.

*"We gather, because we matter!
Above ground and underground!
When the sun goes down below the horizon,
We salute thee, O earthly traveller!
Harumph! Harumph! Harumph!
The surface is akin to within!
Ground TEMPLE! Sub TEMPLE!"*

After pledging allegiance to the Lord of the Great Deep, the Molertons gathered with other worshippers within the Ground Temple's great ballroom where fancy food was catered and opportunities arose to discuss and socialize with other members who

had taken the 'Oath of the Under-city' in order to gain membership or eldership into 'The Mole'. Alina was happiest during these periods of fellowship where she could promote her sub-strata yoga classes and her active participation in the Folleyville deep-grotto knitting society. After almost three hours within the spacious Ground Temple, the Molertons left the secretive social gathering bidding adieu to their underground clique promising them to catch up in the 'Sub Temple' the following week. Before heading out into the streets of Folleyville, the Molertons remove their fitted robes and stroll about outdoors as though they were out on a family outing to check out the light attractions of the casino district.

The following Friday evening, it was time for the Molertons to gather at the 'Sub Temple'. Gatherings of such importance in the worship of 'the Great Deep' commenced with a long underground commute to 'Pillared Deep', which in the case of the Molerton family, could take upwards of just over an hour given the location of their home and burrowing tunnels at the West Annex of Folleyville. The four would begin their descent into the basement change-room where their worshipper robes were secretly stashed along with special torches that were lit when the passages up ahead grew too dark for human burrowers to see. Following Alina at the head, Chadmo and the two boys began their underground commute to 'Sub Temple' as was customary on most of their Friday evenings.

"Follow close Todd!" Alina shouts from the front of the pack. She then instructs her boys about the route and how they were all to turn right once they arrived at the neighboring Undersmith's abode. From there, they followed the tunnel that by-passed the secret exit to Folleyville's town hall and headed under a two kilometer nature corridor culminating at Helmut Grove cemetery. Once below the cemetery grounds—where numerous deceased members of 'The Mole' could be found in a top-secret crypt accessible from the surface through hidden hollow embankment—the tunnel widened and the Molertons recognized a familiar underground sign which read: "Sub Temple" along with the 'burrower's seal' to warn outsiders of the risks of intrusion. Upon reaching the main access point to the underground place of worship, the Molertons notice other families coming from their set of respective tunnels toward 'Mole's Bottleneck'. Chadwick and Alina—upon seeing another family of four—put their hands together at waist-level and bow their heads slightly as was customary to greet other fellow underground congregants. The other family, along with their two kids also reciprocate the respectful gesture.

After shuffling along in their long robes within the central widened tunnel, the Molertons finally reach the façade of the 'Sub Temple' along with a few other below-ground congregants. Gazing upward at two titan-sized pillars framing the cavernous entry to the place of cult worship, Chadwick notices the familiar imposing message etched in stone above the large doors that reads: "Prepare To Meet Thy God Below". After heading through 'Pillared Deep', Chadwick, Alina and the two boys pass two hulkingly burly guards stationed on each side of the entrance. Upon entry, a vaulted ceiling carved out of stone with demonic cave creatures in its dark corners greets the nightly worshippers like bats lining the upper walls of a gothic cave. Upon entry to 'Grotto Sanctuary', hordes of gowned members and adherents of 'The Mole' chant: "God of the deep... We praise your descent far down below the horizon..." As the

responsive words continue all around them, the Molertons find their usual stone pews at the far right of the massive worshipping expanse.

“Feels good to be back in these pews, doesn’t it honey?” Alina says to Chadwick as she bends down to sit on the stone bench.

“Every time we miss a service here, something seems to be missing during the week.” Chadwick replies.

Soon, the minister in a taupe-colored gown rises and says aloud: “Please rise for the singing of hymn 84 entitled “The Roots of Our Land”.

With all in attendance rising like a dark wave at its crest, the sound of an organ commences with singing accompaniment.

*“All our understudied city
Dearly blessed by those below
In exultant breaths so steady
Pours perpetual gifts to show”*

After four more stanzas of the hymn, the service continues with a sermon by Rev. Clifford Wormpole, followed by the passing of the copper offering plates collected by the Lower Sanct Eldership Committee as the final hymn is sung by the congregants and the Grounder’s Choir. After the service, the Molertons wait for the minister to recess and pass by their stony pews before gathering in Stonemass Hall for a time of underground fellowship.

“It’s good to see you again Caroline!” Alina says to a fellow worshipper.

“Nice to see you too dear! My gosh have your two boys ever grown!” Caroline says in a chipper voice.

“We have to be off soon for the boys to be tucked in by nine. Nice to see you Caroline!” Alina says as the Molertons head out of the fellowship hall and shuffle back through the same complex and prolonged network of tunnels leading back to their abode.

Following the light of Mr. Molerton’s extra torch, Alina and their two boys exit ‘Pillared Deep’ and eventually find their way back before losing the flickering incandescence.

“Home sweet home!” Alina says as the foursome reach their ‘Under-city’ address and ascend the familiar front steps to the basement of their Folleyville home.

After brushing their teeth and putting on their pyjamas, the two Molerton boys are tucked into bed and quickly are sound asleep. Mr. and Mrs. Molerton watch the nightly news together before heading off to bed at roughly half past ten.

The next morning, just after breakfast, a rare ring from the ‘Under-city’ phone line is heard in the Molerton residence.

“That’s strange! Must be an emergency if the burrower’s line is ringing us this morning.” Alina says to her husband.

“I’ll pick up. Just remain calm honey.” Chadwick says after heading into the study where the special phone is located.

“Hello?” Chadwick says after picking up the receiver.

“Is this Mr. Molerton?” A gruff male voice asks.

“This is he. What seems to be the problem?” Chadwick replies.

“Mr. Molerton, this is Todd from the Underground Neighborhood Association. Sorry to call you on a Saturday morning like this but we’ve just received word that the Zoning Bureau breached the ‘Under-city’ sometime late last night. We think it started with a noise complaint in the area. We trust you and your family will take the necessary precautions to maintain our pact of secrecy and allegiance to ‘The Mole’.” The same voice advises sternly.

“Absolutely Sir. I’ll make sure we seal off our basement and its access links to the ‘Under-city’ as soon as I can. Thank you for giving us notice.” Chadwick says before hanging up the ‘special phone’.

“Alina, the Zoning Bureau is back again. Can you get me a hammer and some nails? We need to seal everything off again!”

“Really honey? What a bummer! Ok dear. I’ll get the boys to grab some wood as well.”

Soon, Chadwick with a hammer and some nails, along with a few large planks of wood begins to block off the basement entry to the stairwell leading to the extensive tunnel network of the ‘Under-city’.

“I need some more planks of wood Thomas!” Chadwick hollers from the basement.

“Ok Dad!” His son Thomas answers after noisily running down the wooden steps to the basement to reach the wood pile situated in a small opening by the base of the stairwell.

“We better seal off everything in case the agents come knocking again like they did way back before you were born.” Chadwick says to his oldest.

“Here’s another piece of wood. What happens if they catch us Dad?”

“It all depends. We could end up losing our membership to ‘The Mole’ and we could even end up in court for Folleyville Township property violations. Quick, I need a wider plank for this small opening down here!”

“There’s someone down below honey! I can see a man in a black suit by our mailbox through our security camera.” Alina shouts from the kitchen upstairs.

“Stop hammering Dad!” Thomas says.

“Ok, let’s stay real quiet until the agent goes his separate ways.” Chadwick says to Thomas in a hushed voice.

Soon after, Chadwick and his oldest son ascend the steps from the basement to peer into the screen by the kitchen counter, showing a view to their ‘Under-city’ entrance.

Suddenly, the same agent begins to poke around and starts to investigate the Molerton mailbox. The man then looks upward toward the flight of stairs leading to the basement.

Suddenly a knocking sound can be heard from just below. “This is the Zoning Bureau! You are currently under investigation for your allegiance to ‘The Mole’.”

Still silently observing the man on the camera through the screen in the kitchen, the Molertons pretend to not hear the muffled shouting as though they are out of the house.

“What should we do honey?” Alina asks softly.

“Let’s wait until the man leaves and we’ll ask the Undercoats across the street to deliver us the notice. They’re part of the Underground Neighborhood Association as well and that’s all I really trust these days. I don’t want to risk getting caught down below.” Chadwick says quietly.

“Aren’t they also under investigation?” Alina asks.

“They may not be noticed after the alteration work they did to their stairwell. Now, through the push of a button, their stairs shift upward to hide the entry point to their basement. They even fixed their mailbox so that with the push of a second button, it can dissimulate itself into the tunnel wall.”

“Wish we’d made some upgrades sooner dear.” Alina says.

“Don’t worry, the man is leaving honey. I think he left us a note before heading off to ticket more under-dwellers.”

“Do you think we’ll end up in court?” Alina asks.

“I think we have a strong case here. You know why? Because an unknown informer is probably the one to blame here. I’ll get in touch with ‘The Mole’ so they can also investigate.”

Soon after, with the weekend passing by, the Molertons go back to their daily lives with the two boys heading off to school and Alina and Chadwick heading back to

the office like every Monday morning. 'The Mole' agrees to keep Chadwick, Alina and their two boys in the 'Underground Neighborhood Association' by renewing their secrecy vows and giving them a new sign to put on their above-ground veranda to advertise their secret allegiance amid fellow burrowing folk living in their Folleyville neighborhood. One month later, the Molertons remove the planks of wood in their basement in order to regain access to the 'Under-city' tunnels and to freely carry out their lives in the sub-strata community. Although the so-called 'informer' was never caught, 'The Mole' sends a team of their best lawyers to stave off the Zoning Bureau in court.

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