

War Room

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

The Omniscogg Science Museum was a state-of-the-art interactive science playground, designed in the 1960s by renowned architect Earl Morrison from Morrison & Teckson Architects. The sculpted marvel was nestled within the central ravine in North Strathcombe, bordering a large and biodiverse wetland framed by a large wooded area with primarily Carolinian zone deciduous trees. Within the structure with its five levels and vast gallery spaces was a Space Hall, a Science Arcade, a Human Body exhibit floor, an area called The Living Earth for ecology and biology, an Innovation Hub for teenagers and a Kids Playground for children under 10 years old. When architect Earl Morrison was contracted by the Province of Omniscogg to design the museum for the nation's centennial year, one key goal was to create a beautiful and sustainable space that was educational, functional and of course engaging and fun. Since its opening in July of 1967, the museum soon became one of Strathcombe's most popular tourist destinations, drawing over two million visitors per fiscal year.

In the summer of 2005, a fundraising charity ball with some of the Strathcombe's elite was scheduled to take place on Level D, located at the lowest point of the ravine valley in the spacious Great Hall. The fundraiser was for the Bluebell Fund, a not-for-profit affiliated with the Province of Omniscogg which served under-privileged kids and their families, helping them access services and community spaces for learning and personal growth. On the guest list was the Premier of Omniscogg, the Mayor of Strathcombe and architect Earl Morrison who was a guest of honour after retiring two years prior following the opening of the National War Museum in the nation's capital. After the museum hours came to a close for the day, special event staff begin to prepare Level D for the nightly event. At roughly 7:30pm, guests and VIPs were beginning to arrive via the staff entrance and lower parking lot next to The Living Earth.

"Earl, don't be nervous! It's just a short speech. Then we'll just mingle and chat with folks for a couple of hours, then head home." Mrs. Morrison tells her husband.

"I can never get these bowties right... Can you help me honey?"

"We're running late... Here... You have to loop it there and then tie it neatly... Perfect! Good enough!"

After leaving their home, the Morrisons take the Strachan Valley Parkway north along the Strachan River and arrive at Gayleigh Boulevard. They then head down into the ravine valley to access the staff entrance to the museum. After getting clearance from security at the entrance gate, the couple heads to the Great Hall, passing through the Sports Hall and Communication Exhibit Hall.

"Mr. and Mrs. Morrison! We're so glad you could make it tonight! How long has it been since you've been to the OSM?" The Executive Director of the Bluebell Fund says warmly.

“It’s been at least ten years! The place looks like it’s still in good shape!” Earl answers optimistically.

“We just started raising money for an expansion of Level D. We want to make the Innovation Hub more interactive. It will have an area for teens to build their own contraptions and compete on their designs.”

“Sounds interesting! I’m guessing the Province will be funding the restoration of Level C, right? I hear there might be work to be done in the Space Hall.”

“Yes, of course! We’re revamping the Space Hall and restoring the old planetarium. It needs a new Z-Spark projector and work on the domed ceiling.”

After about an hour of chatting with some familiar guests, Earl is invited to the stage to make a short speech about the OSM and the Bluebell Fund.

“Thank you... Thank you very much... When I first designed the Omnislogg Science Museum back in the 60s for the centennial, I pondered how to create scenic connections to the different levels while accommodating for the steep drop in grade with the ravine valley floor. I pictured a functional space, not just for static science displays, but for interaction and play. If kids can enjoy themselves, they may be learning without even knowing it! The Science Arcade has changed a lot over the years, but it still encompasses the museum’s original philosophy on learning and engagement... We want to extend the science concepts of the classroom into a realm of play and leisure. Thank you for supporting the Bluebell Fund which is a key provincial charitable partner in keeping this museum running and in good condition... It also helps kids and families with financial barriers come through the entrance gate throughout the year and enjoy the same privileges found on the different levels of fun and science learning... Thank you...”

After a raucous applause, Earl Morrison steps down from the podium marked with the insignia of the Bluebell flower and joins his wife Donna again.

“Great speech Earl! It was short but succinct. I think they’re going to raise a lot of funds tonight.” Donna says to her husband.

“Honey, I’m going to head to the washroom now. I’ll see you in a couple of minutes. I think I can make it before the Mr. Smorsden gives his address over funding for the Changemaker Project.”

“I’ll come with you.” She replies.

After checking out the washroom queue on Level D, the Morrisons opt to go to Level C via the escalator which has less traffic. After going up the escalator, the couple head toward the Space Hall where public washrooms are located on opposite sides.

“I’ll meet you just out by the escalators back down, honey.” Donna says to her husband.

After using the washroom, Earl Morrison heads back to the escalators to wait for his wife. As he stands by the escalators, he notices the city's mayor heading up to Level C with his teenage son.

"Nice to see you Mr. Morrison! I think your building is still a real treasure. If there's anything I can do from the Mayor's office, give me a call."

"Thank you Mayor Fellmann! Most of the funding comes from the province these days but it would be nice to create a better trail system through the woods and ravine that border the OSM."

"Great idea! I'll bring it up with my forestry and parkspace councilor! Thanks again Mr. Morrison! Hope you enjoy the rest of the evening! The ball is just about to begin!"

About a minute later, Donna exits the washrooms and heads over to her husband still standing by the escalators. Suddenly, the power in the building cuts off and loud shouting starts up down below. Eyeing Level D apprehensively, Earl Morrison takes his arm around his wife's waist and signals her to stay quiet. A few seconds later, a loud series of bangs can be heard from some sort of automatic weapon followed by anxious sounds of screaming and calls of help.

"Donna... We need to move fast! I'll get the Mayor and his son from the washroom right away and we'll have to seek cover ASAP!" The architect whispers into his wife's ear.

"Is it a terrorist attack honey? We need to get help for the others!" Donna says quietly and anxiously.

"Come with us you two! I know a place we can go to. It's not far from here and they'll have trouble finding us!" Earl says leading the Mayor and his son out of the washrooms and toward the Space Hall.

"Where are we going to hide honey?" Donna says, worried the armed assailants will find them up the set of escalators.

"We're going to go to the War Room... I decided to add a secret hiding place to the central floorplan just in case a problem broke out in the museum and it was hard to call for help. Follow me this way..."

"A War Room? You never told me about this Honey... Let's go there right now!"

"Good idea Mrs. Morrison... We've got to hide soon because they're going to search other floors, I'm sure of it." The Mayor says still holding his frightened son's hand.

After reassuring the three others, Earl Morrison leads the group towards a wall to the left of the entry point to the Space Hall and reaches into a small cavity in the concrete.

“The key should still be here... Here it is!” Earl says amid more loud screams and commotion coming from the level below. Then, looking over his shoulder to make sure that none of the intruders can see, he inserts the key into a small well-dissimulated lock and turns it counter-clockwise. At this very moment, a small part of the concrete swivels opens to reveal the hidden crisis chamber.

“I don’t think anyone has ever used this until now... Come on in quickly so they don’t find us!”

After herding the three terrified ball attendees inside, Earl takes the special key from the lock and cautiously swivels the sliding door slab back into its locked position.

“We need to keep our voices down... I’ll turn on the light switch, they won’t notice us...” Earl says to the others.

After the light switch is turned on, the dim halogen ceiling light illuminates the War Room revealing a small transistor radio, a red-coloured phone that is plugged into a small outlet, a small fridge and a few other essential survival tools such as a first aid kit, some flashlights, a roll of grey duct tape and a Swiss Army knife. In the far right corner is a short metallic ladder with cobwebs on it that leads to a trap door in the ceiling.

Suddenly, motioning everyone to keep quiet by putting his finger over his lips, Earl Morrison tells the others to listen carefully. Through the closed concrete door to the War Room, muffled voices can be heard.

“Where is the Mayor anyways? We searched all of the Lower Level... He must be up here somewhere.” A gruff male voice says.

“There’s no one in the washroom either... Let’s go back down and report back to Commander Von Pappen.” A second voice says with a hint of authoritative irritation.

As the threatening voices start to dim in the distance, the Mayor breathes a sigh of relief and looks into his son’s eyes, trying to reassure him again. After hearing more shouting down below and another series of gunshots, Earl Morrison takes his muted cellular phone from his pocket and notices the service has been disrupted in the North Strathcombe area.

“Is anyone else finding service with their mobiles? It appears the terrorists may have compromised the wireless connection.”

“Not getting anything on mine either...” The Mayor says in a whispering tone.

“Let’s try to call for help on the landline, honey...” Donna says to her husband.

“Let’s hope the dial tone works... We’ve got a functional landline guys!” Earl says in a muffled voice, raising an arm in the air.

After dialing 9-1-1 to connect with a first responder call centre, Earl Morrison finally reaches a live agent on the other line.

“Hello... Police?”

“Can you provide us with your address?”

“We are in the Omniscogg Science Museum... There has been some sort of terrorist attack...”

“Ok... Do you need police, fire or ambulance?”

“I think we’ll need all of the above... Send for back-up as well... Terrorists are holding hostages on Level D, we found a way to hide and will be exiting the building cautiously...”

Suddenly, more screams can be heard just outside the War Room this time and Earl Morrison has to hang up the phone due to the risk of being heard by the assailants.

“I got as much info as I could to the first responders. We need to get out of the War Room ASAP.” Earl says in a low voice to the others.

“Where does the trap door go honey?”

“It leads back to Level B. From there, we should be able to find an emergency exit into the ravine.” He says as calmly as he can.

“My son and I will go up first and wait above.” The Mayor says grabbing the metal ladder with both hands.

“Good idea.” Earl says again motioning with his finger to stay quiet.

After watching the two heading up through the trap door, Donna grabs the ladder and heads up with a little help from her husband. Earl then grabs a few flashlights turns off the halogen lights and quietly heads up to Level B. After heading through the trap door and joining the others, Earl hands a flashlight to the Mayor and motions to the others to follow him through the darkened exhibit halls.

“There’s an emergency exit here. We have to be quick because they may have taken over the security desk down below and may see a signal once the door is opened.” Earl says pointing to a large window and exit, giving a nocturnal view of the forested ravine below.

“This is our chance! Let’s make a run for it together!” The Mayor says leading the group to the exit.

Immediately after, the group of four rush out into the muggy weather outdoors, following a walkway that snakes around to the front of the building. After slowing down a bit to wait for Donna, the group reaches a patch of trees bordered by some high security fences.

“We need to head right... We’ll get back to the main entrance by following the perimeter fence. It appears that the terrorists attacked from the other side of the ravine. I hope the emergency support arrives soon.” Earl says to the others as they all catch their breath.

“I can see some lights flashing off in the distance... Is that the police dad?” The Mayor’s son asks.

“Let’s heads over toward the lights... It must be the help we called for...” The Mayor says.

Soon after, heading along the perimeter fences, the escapees reach a hill with a line of coniferous trees at the top. They ascend the hill and are happy to reach the visitor parking area.

“Freeze! This is the police! Put your hands behind your head!” An armed police officer yells out toward the darkened hill at the edge of the parking lot.

“It’s ok... We called for help... I’m Mayor Fellmann... This is my son Henry and the other two are Mr. and Mrs. Morrison... We managed to escape through an upper level when terrorists raided the annual Bluebell Charity Ball.” The Mayor tells the officer, blinded by the flashing police lights.

After being herded into a cramped police caravan, the four survivors show their identification and quickly give statements on their nightly escape. Soon, police begin to plan a recovery mission with Earl Morrison, who quickly tells them the best and safest ways to try to free the hostages through the maze of exhibit halls and darkened corridors of the Omniscogg Science Museum.

[The End...]