VAULT OF TRUTH

 Trevor Daley was 33, still single, and was tentatively living in Washington, DC. He liked to go by the nickname “Trick,” because he didn’t care for his rather formal-sounding first name that his (now deceased) parents had saddled him with as an only child back in the hills of Pennsylvania. The nickname Trick came about in his early 20’s, when he had dropped out of college to start a career as a free-lance writer. His friends dubbed him a “one trick pony” because of his new obsession of making almost every waking hour a slavish devotion to just one cause --unearthing obscure news items and then writing them up, hopefully for sale. Trevor largely skipped the typical dating-bar-club scene of his peers. Friends casually started calling him ‘Trick’ and the name stuck. He rather liked its raffish sound, so he kept it, and afterwards he always signed his work ‘Trick Daley’. Trick fancied himself more of an investigative reporter than a hack writer, and so he enjoyed lofty Walter Mitty-style daydreams about breaking a big news scoop and becoming famous -- like Woodward and Bernstein at the Washington Post when they cracked the Watergate break-in story nine years ago, ultimately leading to President Nixon’s downfall. “Trick Daley Sinks Tricky Dick,” he imagined headlines trumpeting, with his photo underneath the banner beside Nixon’s.

 1981 had been an eventful news year so far. First, President Reagan had been shot in March by an assailant exiting a hotel right here in DC but had luckily recovered. In May at the Vatican, Pope John Paul 2 had also been shot by a fanatic and had likewise survived. The nation and the world in general seemed in a tense mood. Trick had recently sold some articles to the National Enquirer, but his funds were running low. He looked around his still partially-furnished apartment at 14th and G Street SE near the Potomac Ave. METRO station on this hot and humid August afternoon and wondered why his life seemed so stalled. He desperately needed a big break. But could he ever make that happen? And if so, how?

 Growing restless, Trick left his apartment and walked one block south to the METRO. After paying the 55-cent fare and boarding the Green Line train, he quickly went past the Eastern Market stop, then got off at Capitol South. His destination now was four blocks north: The Library of Congress. Trick had often gone there to research various topics in hopes of generating any useful ideas for money-making tabloid articles. The air was thick and sticky as he trudged down the sidewalks in tan shorts, white sneakers, and a light blue polo shirt, yet he barely noticed the usual parade of DC government office types – many with their briefcases and legal pads -- hurrying about in their tailored suits and striped ties or fashionable dresses and shoulder bags.

 After arriving at the always impressive LOC and climbing its classic marble steps, Trick showed his trusty I.D./Borrower’s card to personnel at the front entrance and entered the tri-leveled, brightly lit Great Hall. The reading desks were arranged in a vast circles resting under an enormous dome with its radiating, symmetric smaller arches. In the center of the room was a circular reference area where reference librarians helped patrons looking for both common and obscure materials. Trick went directly to a side area where the card catalogues were located near the ground level book stacks. He had recently seen a report on television that the traditional library card catalogues were all going to be replaced later this year by some kind of fancy new computers, according to Daniel J. Boorstin, the head Librarian of Congress. I wonder how that is going to transition smoothly then operate effectively? Trick thought.

 He found the “U” wooden card catalogue drawer containing entries beginning with the word “unsolved.” Trick was looking for anything on the topic of unsolved mysteries.

 He flipped through about 45 well-thumbed, manila-colored cards when he unexpectedly noticed a tiny folded piece of white typing paper jammed into the bottom of the drawer between two cards. The paper was about two inches long and a half inch wide, having been folded just once. Trick retrieved it.

 When he unfolded the cryptic note, it had these carefully printed words in blue ball-point pen ink written in minute letters on both sides:

 “Looking for the Truth? It is nearby if you dare to find it. Go to the Washington Monument. There is a steel key magnetically affixed under the floor of the tourist elevator by its entrance door.” Trick carefully turned the fragment over and continued reading. “Get it without being noticed and later unlock the small door hidden under the three foot square metal plate at the bottom of the elevator shaft. Enter the vault and find what you seek—but only if you really want to Know the Truth.”

 The note was unsigned and undated. It had to be some kind of practical joke or a hoax from some nut job, Trick figured. But what if it was legitimate? No harm in checking it out, he decided. Who knows? He put the note in his pocket, pushing the wooden card catalogue drawer back in with his other hand, and headed home for the day. TV, dinner, more TV, some reading, bed. He thought a lot about the mysterious note before sleep overtook him.

 The next morning, Trick rose at 8 a.m., showered, shaved, and dressed for another hot weather day. He finished a bowl of cereal with a sliced banana on top, washed down a multi-vitamin with a glass of cold apple juice, brushed his teeth, and headed out for the METRO. The city subway was routinely packed with its crowds of hectic morning commuters. Trick took the Green Line to Smithsonian Station, got off, and cut across the southwest corner of the expansive National Mall, and made his way to the towering and dramatic 500’ tall Washington Monument, which was circled with a patriotic ring of crisply flapping American flags.

 It was almost 10 a.m. on Tuesday, August 11, and the summer tourist hordes were already lined up, excitedly waiting for their free admission into the Monument. Trick patiently waited his turn in the sun’s fierce glare at the east entrance door, sweat already moistening his cotton Madras short-sleeved shirt. He had visualized a way to get the secret key – if one actually existed – by waiting until he was assured that he was the last to enter the elevator, which held 15-20 people at a time for the seventy-second ride to the small observation area at the top. Trick would bend down to check his sneaker shoes laces before the elevator doors closed, using stealth to rapidly reach out and under the elevator floor area and feel for the anticipated steel key.

 The uniformed National Park rangers corralled their estimate of 17 people who would be the next to fit comfortably inside the sole elevator which would take the eager tourists to the top. Trick made sure he was last on in his group by letting a family with twin babies politely slip in front of him at the last minute. As the elevator operator was explaining the ride and what would be seen inside the shaft (mostly various inscribed stones donated from the States, visible through the elevator viewing windows) before the door closed, Trick artfully squatted down to check his shoelaces. In an instant, his right arm and hand carefully reached out and under the elevator floor panel. For a few panicked seconds, he felt nothing but greasy, cold metal. But then his fingers found an object, so he pulled it off quickly and palmed it without detection.

 “Hey, young man there in the front! I’m closing the doors now and you’ll need to stand up,” the elevator operator warned.

 “Oh, sorry, everyone. I was just tightening my shoelaces,” Trick convincingly lied.

 The view from the top of the Washington Monument was spectacular as always and the horizon was hazy in the August heat and humidity. The assembled tourists ooh-ed and ahh-ed at seeing the White House and the Capitol Building from an eagle’s height. But Trick put his hand with the key in his shorts pocket and dropped the key there, anxious to go down and examine it in the privacy of any bathroom stall in the nearest Men’s Room.

 When the elevator returned to ground level and he spied the restrooms near the downstairs gift shop, Trick went in and closed the nearest bathroom stall door behind him. He noticed that the steel key had an unusual ‘tooth’ pattern, and that it was both slightly larger and heavier than an ordinary house or car key. It had no numbers or other markings either, he noted, after keen examination.

 Now, Trick had to figure out a way to go down and lift the metal plate at the ground area under the elevator as the elevator itself was ascended. He washed his hands in the bathroom sink, then remembered that he had to pee, so he did that task but skipped a second soap and water session. He had an idea.

 For the next two days, Trick scouted out the daily elevator and park ranger routine at the Monument from the innocent safety of its gift shop, which gave him a clear line-of-sight to both the manned elevator area and the tourist lines which were held behind a rope line just around the nearby corner. He had guessed correctly that there was a shift-change at noon for some staff lunch breaks, and he noted that the elevator zone was clear of any park rangers for about three minutes. He also timed the elevator, which went up then down in five-minute intervals. By walking casually close by the elevator shaft, Trick spied the three foot square metal plate on the shaft floor. He was relieved to see that it appeared not too thick, hence it would probably not be too heavy. He felt he could slide it to the side, unlock the door underneath, and enter whatever chamber lay beneath that, then slide the metal plate quickly back while closing the door behind him – hopefully all within three minutes. He felt a bit like one of his fictional heroes, James Bond! If he succeeded, all should be well. But if he failed, he would surely be arrested, and have a lot of explaining to do…

 On Friday, minutes before noon, Trick was in place to try his outrageous plan. He had earlier gotten in line with the other tourists so that he was near the front just around the corner from the elevator after about twenty people before him had walked toward and had entered the elevator, and now it was going up. He could see the upcoming park ranger shift-change. It was like watching a movie in slow-motion. Trick’s heart was pounding, and he was sweating from more than just the stuffy heat of the lobby. He checked his watch. About thirty seconds past noon, he got his chance. He said “Excuse me” to the three people in front of him in line. “I must have dropped my car keys somewhere,” he explained as he squeezed past and then out around the corner. (In reality, Trick didn't even own a car.)

 The elevator area was clear of personnel, as Trick had anticipated. He took the steel key from his pocket and slipped it in his white short-sleeve shirt pocket. Without hesitation, he went to the elevator and crouched down near the floor of the shaft. He carefully slid the metal plate aside as quietly as possible, pulled the key from his shirt pocket (God, I hope it fits! he prayed), and was relieved when he was able to open the small metal 2’x 2’ hatchway door. It was a very tight squeeze. He quickly shoved the key back into his shorts pocket. He slipped inside, having noticed a metal ladder in the dim chamber light below. As he descended, he used his hands to both slide the metal plate back on top of him while closing the little doorway. Finally, the plate made a soft thud on top of the door. He was inside! He had been extremely lucky so far. Now what? He realized also that he needed a viable ‘exit plan’ when he was all finished. I’ll figure out something later, Trick thought, distracted by his current challenge.

 Trick appeared to be in some kind of ordinary utility service room, maybe 20’ x 20’ x 8’, with the usual conduit pipes and wiring bundles along the walls and ceilings. He had failed to bring a flashlight, but the light from two bare bulbs gave him enough to look around. It certainly didn’t look like anything special. Trick immediately felt that he had been snookered. I’m a fool, he confessed. Maybe I should leave now, reverse my steps, and turn myself in to the authorities and accept any punishment. Who knows, maybe I can write up this whole stupid quest and simply sell it as a odd adventure story?

 Suddenly, Trick was surprised when he heard a sound like hissing air. A hidden panel in one of the walls revealed a steel door that was slowly opening. The two light bulbs in the chamber went out in an instant.

 “Don’t move,” a deep voice commanded.

 Trick froze where he stood.

 “How did you find this place, and how did you get in?” the voice asked suspiciously, with more than a shade of menace.

 “I found a note hidden in a card catalogue drawer at the LOC,” Trick confessed. “It told me how to find a key to unlock the door.” He felt nervous and panicky.

 “Come with me,” the voice ordered.

 Trick obeyed, and walked toward the voice as he saw a bank of fluorescent lights silhouetting a tall man.

 Within moments, he was in a windowless but modern-looking office room. There was an armed, military-uniformed security man about Trick’s age standing at a small desk in one corner of a 40’x 30’ rectangular room. The desk had a black telephone on it and two chairs flanking it. There was also a large, polished oval wooden table in the room’s center. At the table was a padded black leather executive-style chair. Beside the table was a four-drawer metal file cabinet. A single air-conditioning ceiling vent kept the room comfortably cool. The room appeared soundproof and was brightly lit. There was no other furniture, or artworks on the wall, or any other type of decoration. The walls were painted light grey. The floor was plain, smooth concrete. Trick noted another closed steel door at the far side of the room from where he was standing.

 The voice spoke again. It emanated from a man in his early 40’s, wearing a dark suit and tie with a white shirt. He looked very fit and had short-cut brown hair and was clean-shaven. His shoes were perfectly polished. He was not smiling.

 “I won’t introduce myself, but you must give me your wallet now with all of your identification. Next, empty your pockets onto the table. We must be sure that you have no writing materials. Finally, I want to see the note you claim you found, along with the key,” the man insisted.

 Trick complied, as the armed guard opened a desk drawer and removed a zippered plastic bag. He scooped up Trick’s pocket items and placed them into the plastic bag while the strange man carefully examined first Trick’s wallet, then the cryptic note and key.

 “Mr. Daley, it seems you found an unfortunate missive from one of our former employees. He unexpectedly suffered a nervous breakdown about eight months ago and left our employ. It was he who wrote the note and hid the key, which he apparently had copied. If you hadn’t found these two items, surely someone else would have, sooner or later, and acted as you did. So here we are,” the man declared.

 “What is all of this?” Trick asked, again surveying the room.

 “We officially call this the Special Collections Room,” the man answered. It has most top secret files ever compiled by the United States Government. It has existed since the end of World War Two, beginning in 1947 to be exact. We select few with access refer to this room as the Vault of Truth.”

 “Where does that other door lead to? Trick asked, indicating the far side of the room.

 “Well, seeing as you asked, it leads to an underground tunnel connected to the White House, which is about a half-mile away. Each newly elected President since Truman is secretly escorted here during their first week in office, so they can read those files,” the man gestured to the lone grey file cabinet. "They then return as necessary. Only six people other than the President know of the existence of these files. One guard and one 'Custodian' of the files together work an eight-hour shift, with three rotating shifts in a 24-hour period, seven days a week. And, by the way, you came in through the Vault’s emergency exit under the Washington Monument."

 “What exactly is in those files? Trick asked, his curiosity now aroused to its maximum.

 “Oh, they contain the definitive answers to all those endless conspiracy theories and rumors and the unsolved mysteries of U.S. history. Other advanced countries around the world have similar secret repositories. Like us, it helps the various leaderships shape and maintain crucial relationships and other on-going developments to ensure national and international security and avoid global panic and its related economic disruptions,” the man patiently explained.

 Trick was then stunned when the man gave him the smallest of smiles and asked, “Would you like a fast peek?” Meanwhile, the guard – unbeknownst to Trick -- very slowly and quietly opened another drawer at his desk.

 The man looked at his watch. “I can allow you only ten minutes. And remember, you must leave then the way you came and tell no one about either this place or what you have seen here. We have powerful ways of finding you and dealing with you if you dare violate this trust. So don’t ever test us.”

 Trick was escorted to the file cabinet.

 “Only the President can sit down at the table, so you’ll have to glance at some of the files while standing up,” the man clarified. The man went behind the file cabinet and spun a combination lock back and forth, then used a gold-colored key attached to a silver chain on his belt and completed the unlocking of the file cabinet at its front top corner.

 Trick raced against the clock, instinctively knowing that this was the journalistic scoop of the century, if not of all time! He vowed to himself that he would remember all he could and later write it up, then move overseas to a safe country with no U.S. extradition and get it published. Fame and fortune would be his, at last!

 Each file was in a plastic sheath, with an identifier tab. Trick could read through the plastic, which he did because precious seconds would be lost taking each one-page document summary -- which lay atop the more detailed file -- out of its casing. He frantically scanned eight files at random, two from each drawer. In the entire cabinet, there were probably 200 files, about 50 in each drawer.

 Trick was absolutely stunned at what he saw!

 NASA had discovered the ruins of an entire alien city on the dark side of the moon. JFK had been killed by a vast government conspiracy headed by…his brother. Secret experiments had proven that time travel was actually possible -- but only in going back to the past, and history could not be altered. Area 51 had indeed recovered a crashed 'flying saucer', with two deceased beings and one still alive inside. Multiple elections were rigged for decades both at home and abroad. Various foreign leaders were officially ordered assassinated. International monetary systems were being continually manipulated and controlled. Successful secret Russian experiments in teleportation and mind control had been revealed…

 Suddenly, Trick felt a sharp needle jab his left arm.

 “I’m sorry, Mr. Daley, but we have to protect National Security. I’m sure you agree, as a patriotic American. The hypodermic will put you to sleep in about thirty seconds, then a second injection will end your life painlessly and immediately. I’m afraid that you are an unfortunate case of ‘curiosity having killed the cat.’ Good bye and sweet dreams.”

 Trick looked pathetically and helplessly at the guard who had administered the injection. He tried to speak, but failed. Then everything spiraled down into darkness…

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 Without any details provided beforehand, a 'Black Ops' squad of highly trained professionals efficiently erased all traces that Trevor Daley ever existed. His body was incinerated and disposed of. All of his identity records were destroyed, as were his banking and credit card records. His apartment was quietly emptied out in the middle of the night.

 It was as if he had never been born...

 THE END by Jack Karolewski

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