

## The Incendiary Truth

By Cindy Dauer

Charlie Foster wasn't afraid of rats, but he didn't particularly care for them. To Charlie, rats were just a nuisance, something he had to deal with as part of his job. He was the head of Public Works for the City of Astoria.

Most of the time, the rat population in Astoria was under control. That is except for when a cruise ship steamed down the river and dumped a load of debris at the docks. Then the rat population would surge and ripple through the town.

Otherwise, it was pretty routine. Someone would call and complain about an increase in rodent activity, and in response Charlie would bate all the manholes and storm drain grates in a three block radius. That usually took care of the problem.

So Charlie immediately knew there was something strange about the call he received at 11:33pm on December 7, 2022. It was a Wednesday night in what was a mild winter, and he had stopped in his office after a late city council work session when the desk phone rang. He picked up the receiver.

"Public Works this is Charlie."

"Charlie, this is Mary Lovell," said a shaky voice on the line. Mary was part of a prominent family that had practically been Astoria royalty for the last century.

"You have to come quickly," Mary said. "It's the biggest rat I have even seen!"

"Where are you?" Charlie asked.

"The Lovell building," Mary replied. "Please hurry."

The line went dead. Charlie grabbed his coat, keys, and the flashlight on his desk and headed out with a strange feeling in his gut.

It was bone cold and dry. The moon was full, framing the silhouette of the historic city in soft blue light.

As Charlie pulled into a parking spot on the south side of Duane Street, he saw widow Lovell. She was standing on the rooftop balcony of the brewery which now occupied the former site of the Lovell Automotive Company. Mary looked ghostly in the moonlight. She pointed with a shaky, slender finger toward 14th Street.

Charlie threw a hand up in acknowledgement and grabbed his gear. He hardly hesitated, despite the strange nature of the situation. Somehow this all felt familiar, almost dejavu.

He only took a couple of steps toward the downtown when he saw it, the rat. It was indeed huge. More like the size of a small dog than a street rodent. It didn't flinch when Charlie shined his light on it. It was still. Charlie slowly took a few steps closer.

Suddenly, the rat darted toward the open man hole on the street and disappeared into the depths of the Astoria Underground. Charlie ran after it. Normally, he would have just replaced the manhole cover and come back in the morning to deal with it. But, he heard voices. As he moved closer, the voices grew louder. They were coming from the underground.

Charlie crouched down to shine his light into the dank tunnel. He couldn't see anything, but he could hear the voices. Who could be down there?

Carefully, Charlie climbed down the rickety ladder and dropped down among the flotsam of the Astoria Underground.

The air was heavy. A drop of water fell from the ceiling. Charlie shined his light around. For the moment, it was quiet and still. He was about to head back to the surface when he saw it, the rat! It sat on its hind legs, looking at Charlie unafraid. It scampered ahead. Charlie followed.

The rat moved quickly, scurrying across broken glass, bottle caps, and trash that littered the tunnel. Charlie had to hustle to keep up.

He could hear the voices. They were getting louder, he was getting closer. He was moving so quickly around twists and turns, he wasn't sure how far he had gone or where exactly he was now among the chair walls, Shanghai tunnels, and labyrinth of passages.

The rat kept its distance, but stayed in sight. It seemed to be leading him. It would look over its shoulder and stop to watch when Charlie slowed down to squeeze through a narrow part of the tunnel or cross over a utility line.

The voices grew louder still. Charlie had to see who it was, who was down there in the underground.

Charlie saw a marker. He was somewhere under Commercial Street near 12th and heading south. He wasn't sure how long he had been down there. It could have been hours.

The rat ran around a corner and out of sight. Charlie followed, but the rat was gone. Up ahead there was a small doorway. The voices were coming from behind the door. Charlie was so close now he could make out what they were saying. There was an argument. Someone had stolen something. Money.

Carefully, Charlie cracked open the little door. He pushed it open and crawled through into a large open room. An old furnace in the corner was aglow, and bathtub gin percolated in a still

nearby. Barrels and burlap sacks were piled up against the wall. There was a small table with a chair.

Charlie walked over to the table. It was covered with a thick layer of soot. He was alone, he thought. He looked around the room. Where was he?

Suddenly he saw something move. It was a shadow on the wall, but not his own. There were three shadows near him. One of a man tied to the chair, and two other men standing nearby.

Charlie heard the voices as if they were next to him. He watched and listened as the scene played out.

"Where's the money CJ?" the first man shouted.

"I told you, I didn't take it," CJ replied.

The second man hit CJ in the face.

"Come on, Henry. We'll leave him down here awhile and see if he changes his tune," the first man said.

"No, Fred. I want the money now," Henry replied. He hit CJ again. CJ groaned.

"Let's go check on the hall," said Fred, climbing up the stairs.

"Fine," said Henry, following his brother. "We'll be back, CJ, and you better have an answer for us then."

As the brothers left, CJ's shadow struggled to free himself from the ropes that bound him to the chair. In the clamor, he kicked a sack of grain toward the furnace, knocking over the still. In an instant, gin poured over the floor and the sack caught fire. Charlie watched the shadow flames spread quickly to the sacks and barrels that lined the wall. Charlie felt the heat on his face.

CJ's shadow escaped through the small door into the underground. It was only moments before the whole room was engulfed with shadow flames.

Suddenly, the lights went out, the furnace, the fire, everything. It was dark.

Charlie had only his flashlight. He shined it around the now empty room. There was the rat, near the little door. It seemed to drop something from its mouth and scampered through the passage. Charlie rushed over to pick it up. It was a book of matches. The cover read: Thiel Brothers Restaurant and Billiard Parlor.