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# "A Spark" With Critical Introduction "Ore and Lore: Mining, Literature, and Loss"

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## A Spark

With Critical Introduction: "Ore and Lore: Coal Mining, Literature, and Loss"

In spring of 2015, I read Appalachian poet Jane Hicks' poem "A Poet's Work." The poem is a stark, sardonic look at the rougher side of rural Appalachia. The main focus of the poem is the strip-mining of Southwest Virginia and the effect it has on the people there, especially in the case of three-year old Jeremy Davidson, to whom the poem is dedicated. According to an article by Noah Adams, in 2004, a boulder weighing 1000 pounds was dislodged by a bulldozer above the Davidson home. The boulder thundered through the wall of their mobile home, crushing Jeremy in his bed (Adams).

This poem was the inspiration for "A Spark" which follows the Hicks family through a transitional period in coal-era Appalachia. The fact that the characters in "A Spark" share Jane Hicks' surname was not a conscious homage to the poet. The surname Hicks was chosen for its regional relevancy, though the poem was deeply affecting. Two lines in the poem struck me the hardest, both part of a stanza-long plea to the reader to "revile the judgment of life's worth in coal country" and "how the law measure's a baby's life"(Hicks). Never before this poem had I given a moment's thought to coal country, the communities that have settled there, or the individuals that make up that community. Of course, I knew certain things about coal mining, growing up in the Appalachian region. Mostly that it is a dangerous job. I suppose I even knew that coal communities existed, though I didn't know to what extent and how limiting these communities could be. Here was a web of unexplored territory that felt important to unravel and explore.

I knew upon finishing the poem that Seamus Heaney, who provides the epigraph to Hicks' poem, was onto something when he said "The aim of the poet and the poetry is finally to be of service, to ply the effort of the individual work in to the larger work of the community as a whole" (Heaney). I saw no reason why this sentiment could not be extended to writers of prose as well, and I chose to set my work in Southwest Virginia, in a made-up town called Pioneer Gap, which is in name a fusion of the current, quaint town of Big Stone Gap and the original name of the beautiful sleepy town.

It was in this town that I interviewed Mr. Freddy Elkins, curator of the Harry W. Meador Coal Museum, who provided me with insight that only a former miner could bestow. Mr. Elkins worked in the mines for thirty years "without any time lost to injury," which he recognizes as no small feat according to a local newspaper article (Brown and Lohmann). For many years, he worked as General Foreman, which inspired me to give one of the main characters of my mining tale a new, prestigious job. Mr. Elkins went into exquisite detail about the little things. He showed us his hard hat, which was covered in stickers. He told us that the light from the headlamps reflected off the stickers and made fellow miners easier to see. He showed us how the headlamps, called carbide lamps, worked along with the other equipment. He let us take the belt that held all the equipment a miner had to keep on his waist with one hand to see how heavy it was. I nearly dropped it.

After he gave us a thorough and colorful history of coal mining in the region, we were free to explore the museum, which was stocked with all manner of trinkets, equipment, and pamphlets that hinted at what life was like for these communities of miners. There were pictures and news articles. One news article outlined the death of several coal miners due to an explosion that was believed to be started by smoking near or in the mines, even though there are strict rules

against such careless behavior. A separate incident in 1992 killed eight miners. Though the specific cause of the explosion remains a mystery, there were cigarette butts and lighters found lying about where the explosion had taken place, reported Roger Simon in a news article for the Baltimore Sun (Simon).

Human recklessness was not the only danger of working in the mines. Explosions and minor mining accidents are somewhat common, well-documented, and certainly reached the ears of even those who do not have any interest or knowledge of coal mining. Recent studies show there are long-lasting effects from coal mining and production. Mining safety regulations and air quality control have exponentially increased in recent years, but still, a 2012 study performed by Michael S. Hendryx proclaims that “pollution from coal combustion...causes about 24,000 premature deaths among Americans every year” (M. S. Hendryx). Specifically, “high levels of coal production [are] associated...with higher rates of cardiopulmonary disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, hypertension, lung disease, and kidney disease.” Hendryx points out that coal miners are not the only ones who suffer, as “contaminants from mining activities are conveyed to the air, water, and soil” and so affect the entirety of the mining community. The mental health of coal mining communities is yet another concern. In a 2012 study it was found that “the highest prevalence rates for [major depressive episodes] and [serious psychological distress] occurred in the economically distressed Central Appalachian coal mining region” (Keefe and Curtin).

The stresses of living in coal country are abundant. Even the environment suffers. Hendryx explains that “coal is the dirtiest fossil fuel, releasing more carbon dioxide, sulfur dioxide, nitrous oxide, mercury, lead, and other toxic elements and compounds per unit of energy than any other source.” The air quality in Appalachia suffers dearly for it (M. S. Hendryx).

Groundwater in mining areas, especially surface mining areas are more prone to containing “sulfate, hardness, calcium, and [higher] specific conductance” (McAuley and Kozar). Too-high levels of these factors cause an imbalance in the flora and fauna in nearby lakes and rivers. In 2008, a fly ash impoundment pond failed, causing 5.4 million cubic yards of toxic sludge to be released, causing a “massive fish kill” (M. S. Hendryx). Surface mining also causes deforestation, which can vastly change the ecosystem of an area (Zipper, et al). In less than a period of twenty years, “surface mining in Appalachia permanently buried 724 stream miles through mountain-top removal” (M. S. Hendryx). These relatively new studies of the negative effects of coal mining on health and environment certainly color the modern view of coal mining. However, miners and their families often felt warmly toward their communities, contrary to what one might expect (Shifflett).

In fact, when speaking to Freddy Elkins, I was surprised at the fact that he had not one negative thing to say about the coal industry. He spoke of the communities especially fondly. Instrument-playing members of the coal communities would form bands together, and they would play publicly for their fellow neighbors on Saturday nights. Some coal communities had baseball teams. They lived together, played together, and worked together.

“A Spark” follows the Hicks family through this era where coal towns no longer exist, beyond what some might call the ‘good old days’ and closer to the modernization of the coal industry. However, in the early 1920s, community towns all but disappeared (Stromberg). Without this sense of community, any tragedy that befell a miner or his family might be seen in a very different light than when he was supported by this community that held shared experiences. From the outside, it would appear more and more to a miner that perhaps the risks were no longer worth it, and perhaps the incentives for remaining a coal miner would begin to appear

scarce. Miners were paid little, and many did not have transportation, which could become a problem once the coal communities disappeared and miners lived further from their workplace (Stromberg, Shifflett).

Coy Hicks, being in the space between the generation of community towns and modernization, is aware of these changes. David C. Duke points out that in much of the creative literature on coal mining, “the most able characters are the ones who want to leave.” Duke feels this representation is a failure on the part of the writers for “focus[ing] on the importance of self-improvement rather than the improvement of working conditions.” However, this fault doesn’t fall on those fictional characters that leave the mines or on the authors themselves. The unions were responsible for fighting for better working conditions, and if the aforementioned aftereffects of working in the mines is any indicator, they ultimately failed. Aside from the environmental effects that coal mining inflicts on the land, the long-lasting health problems that many miners suffer is reason enough to agree with the novelists Duke mentions that believe that “coal mining should not be a lifetime job” (Duke).

Coy does leave the mines, not because he is more able than his coworkers (or son, who chooses to continue on as a miner), but for precisely the opposite reason. He is less able—less able to deal with the growing sense of alienation and the sneaking feeling that the company does not care for its workers as it once did. A rather cold study performed by Michael Hendryx and Melissa M. Ahern in 2009 discovered that “the human cost of the Appalachian coal mining economy outweighs its economic benefits.” In other words, those whose lives were lost as a result of the various dangers of coal mining between 1979 and 2005 (the target timeframe of the study), would have provided a more lucrative benefit to the communities in which they lived that

was greater than the economic benefit of the coal industry. If coal companies had their employees' best interests at heart, how could this surprising conclusion be the case?

The rhyme and reason for the content of the work is easy to talk about. The style in which it is written is more difficult. I have always been keen on observation. I collected and stored away tidbits of scenes, people, and stories I witnessed or heard in my youth like a magpie. My childhood was especially affecting. In *Writers and Miners*, Duke puts forth the criticism that “most [novelists] wrote about [coal mining] from a decidedly middle-class perspective.” My goal was to represent Appalachian people, not romanticise them. Growing up in poverty around an eccentric and sometimes dangerous cast of characters has provided me with a perspective of this sort of lifestyle that cannot be falsified, though it can be hard to capture. John Steinbeck once said that “maybe the hardest thing in writing is simply to tell the truth about things as we see them” (Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters*) I certainly find that to be the case.

I have also been heavily inspired by John Steinbeck's realism and regionalism. Though the landscape and flavor of Salinas, California differs from the Appalachian south, the idea that man and environment are intricately linked is universal. In his journal, he has written, “The trees and the muscled mountains are the world—but not the world apart from man--the world and man--the one inseparable unit man and his environment. Why they should ever have been understood as being separate I do not know.” Steinbeck has an eye for detail that is exquisite and that makes his worlds palpable. My own goal in writing is to make the seemingly inconsequential tangible so that purposefully significant events hold their weight against them. The death of a loved one is significant, but the added detail of Maureen Hicks inhaling the old cotton of her deceased daughter's stuffed toy aspires to show a piece of the mundane that can

make the profound so heartbreaking. Details also add richness to any tale, especially if those details are common to the average person. Such details provide a sense of unity between reader, author, and characters.

Another influence with a similar eye to detail is Ron Rash, who has been compared to Faulkner, Steinbeck, and McCarthy, the third of which is also an influence, especially on the way I try to capture realistic, Southern dialogue. Ron Rash's works are almost exclusively set in the Appalachian region and are riddled with fine details that make his works feel like home to me, having grown up in East Tennessee. His work relies heavily on the Gothic, which is my usual comfort zone as well, though a style more based in realism was better suited for "A Spark." Charles Crow points out that "realism and the Gothic seem opposed...but they responded to the same issues and often were created by the same authors." He also describes the Gothic as "realism's shadow or dark twin (Crow)." I find that I agree with Crow. The elements that draw me to the Gothic in literature (reading and writing) are not the supernatural ones, but the stark realistic ones that usually accompany them that foil the uncanny so well. Ron Rash manages this beautifully.

Although perhaps these influences make sense within the realm of the material I have presented in "A Spark", another influence is less obvious, but has surely permeated the way I write. I have been reading Stephen King since I was eight years old, and though some may consider his work to be on a different (lower) level than some of the names I have mentioned, he is still a master of subtlety and of working the reader's emotions.

Though all authors have taken inspiration from one source or another, it seems that good writers know how to write distinctly in that they have a style that is familiar to the reader from work to work. Perhaps every writer sees the world through a different lens, but it seems that what



matters when telling a story is whether what is being focused on through the lens is interesting, and how it is being conveyed. Philip K. Dick's lens is kaleidoscopic, Annie Dillard's is usually rosy, and Stephen King's lens is a macabre zoetrope. We find inspiration when images in our views overlap with another's. My goal in writing "A Spark" was not only to hone my own lens, but to aim it pointedly at Southwest Virginia in order to understand the intricacies of Appalachian coal mining life and how loss affects those in a community that has lost its previous fortitude.

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## A Spark

Maureen Hicks sat at the kitchen table, shaking her head and clucking her tongue as she balanced the family ledger. The numbers were dwindling steadily. *We'll have to do something soon*, she thought, *can't nobody live on this*.

Her eyes strayed to a white business envelope that was neatly stacked on top of a pile of bills and receipts. She bounced a pencil in her hand, knocking it against her ring finger for several minutes before finally picking up the envelope. She opened it with a letter opener and shook a stiff, rectangular piece of paper out. She read the words several times, and allowed her eyes to follow the curvature of the numbers on the middle line, around and around.

Maureen's once-full lips screwed into a grimace before she tore the paper in half, quartered it, and then ripped those pieces into as many as she could with her blunt fingernails. They fell to the tabletop, seeming to writhe there. Maureen had the thought that she'd better burn them—just in case. She collected them, placed them in an empty Wilkins coffee can, and dropped a lit match into the can. She watched the white and blue shreds furl and smoke, and then she threw four thousand dollars' worth of ashes into the garbage, coffee can and all.

Not too long after, Maureen heard the side door open and turned to see her husband, Coy, standing in its frame. He shook off his boots and set them outside on the stoop. He gave her a smile, but it was tired and weak. She smiled back and noticed that her cheeks felt tight with the effort. Coy's hair was still damp from the mine showers, and he had on a set of clean clothes, but he'd missed a small smudge of coal dust just under his chin that gave him away. She stood and removed the mark with a wet cloth. Coy kissed her and said "Maureen, Maureen. Prettiest girl I ever done seen," by way of greeting.

"Coy, Coy, my fav-o-rite boy," she countered.

“Man,” he corrected. Maureen winked at him.

“Where’s Todd at?” she asked, looking toward the door.

“He went out with some of the boys.”

Maureen shook her head. “So he ain’t coming to dinner again. Well, I’m glad he’s making friends. He ain’t old enough to drink. He knows that, don’t he?” Coy’s mouth pulled at the side. “I don’t reckon that’ll stop him. We’ll try talking to him, see how it goes.” He began unbuttoning his shirt and headed toward the bathroom door.

“Where you going now?”

“To take another shower. I feel nasty, like it’s in my lungs. We’ll set Todd straight when we can get a hold of him.” Maureen cupped her face in her hands once the bathroom door shut. She had nightmares about finding Todd lifeless in a crumbling house. There was always an empty liquor bottle rolling around endlessly on the floor in these dreams. *God, I can’t lose both my babies*, she thought, and decided to go over to his place in the morning to beg him to come home.

\* \* \*

The autumn leaves decorated the mountainside of Pioneer Gap like a patchwork quilt in hues of gold and orange and red. A heavy blue mist encircled the pine peaks and the sun was just behind them, not quite ready to rise. Todd Hicks took this scene in upside down, his capped head lying on the bottom step of his porch. There was a pounding in his temple from the gin or the concrete; he wasn’t sure. He lay there in misery, still in his filthy work clothes, until the sun peeked over the mountain top, and then he reluctantly pulled himself up by the porch post. A shower and some coffee, Todd thought, might make him feel like a human being again, but before he’d even made his way into the house he heard gravel crunching from the road. He didn’t

have to turn to see who it was—he knew—but he turned anyway and watched the old ‘45 Chevy station wagon make its way down the driveway and clunk to a stop next to the porch.

When Maureen got out, they looked at one another for a long while. Todd wondered if he should invite her inside or not. He was hesitant to call his place a shack, though Maureen wasn’t at all shy about calling it one.

“You gonna let me in, or what?”

“What.” Todd grinned.

“Smart aleck.”

She passed him and held the front door open for him. As he brushed by her, she said “You stink.”

“Well, I ain’t showered yet.”

“No, you smell like gin,” she said, her mouth disappearing into a taut line.

“And how would you know what gin smells like?”

“Can’t get nothing past your mama, boy. You oughta know that by now.”

Todd rubbed his scruffy face with one filthy hand. “Lord ain’t that the truth. What did you come down here for?” He wanted to get to the point. And to that cup of coffee.

“You know why. Come home, Todd.”

Todd supposed he ought to have known that, too, but he had been hoping she’d finally given up. He had moved out four months ago, and she’d been on him hard to come back for the first couple. He had begun to think he had finally persuaded her to leave him alone, and to let him live his life in sweet solitude. It was better that way, he thought.

His temple throbbed with newly revived fervor. “Mama, I ain’t really up to this conversation right now. I gotta be back down in the hole in a couple of hours. You know, I’m a grown man. It was time for me to move out anyways.”

Maureen’s face began to redden. “You may be nineteen, Todd Howell Hicks, but you ain’t grown. You know how lonely is it at the house without Lucy and now you gone too? Coy’s gone most of the day, and I just sit around, thinking, and that’s the last thing I wanna do.” Her upper lip curled in hurt and disgust. “And I ain’t willing to soak myself in gin,” she added, though she felt a little ashamed after she said it, and her anger began to dissipate. *This isn’t the way to get him back home*, a little voice in the back of her head whispered.

She sighed in resignation. “You go on and shower. I’ll make you some eggs. Just think about it will you?”

“I’ll think about it,” he agreed, and skulked off to the bathroom.

Maureen opened the refrigerator. There was a half stick of butter, two bottles of RC cola, and a bottle of mayonnaise, but no eggs. *Should have figured*, she thought. She made him buttered toast instead. She believed she had been able to scrape the worst of the mold off.

\* \* \*

Later that evening, when Coy came home, Maureen lamented to Coy about Todd for what felt like the thousandth time.

“He don’t listen to me,” she said. “Why don’t you go and try to talk some sense in him?”

“Well, I hate to say it, but he is an adult in the eyes of the law. I can’t make him move back in.”

“I ain’t asking you to make him. I’m asking you to talk to him. To convince him.”

“Maybe bribe him?” Coy laughed, and Maureen smiled in spite of herself.

“I don’t think that’ll work. Gotta have money to bribe somebody.”

“And we sure don’t have that. Especially since you burned that check. Would have been nice to line our pockets with something other than spare change.” Coy’s face drew. Maureen pursed her lips and pointed her petite chin up.

“I don’t want their blood money.”

Coy looked blankly at her. “It ain’t about what you want. It’s about what we need,” he said, but he went ahead and held his hand up in resignation, not wanting to get her started. What was four thousand anyway? He had gotten pretty good at not letting things to get to him anymore. He didn’t see the good in it, because as he saw it, the devil was always just around the corner waiting to watch the bad luck befall them. Coy wasn’t about to give him the satisfaction.

\* \* \*

On Saturday, Todd walked four miles out to the little churchside graveyard to visit his sister, as he did every Saturday since her death almost five months ago. He was the only person in the cemetery that morning, and he liked that. He tended to get embarrassed if there were other people there, because sometimes he talked to her, and sometimes he wept.

Todd knelt down over the diminutive gravestone. There were seven years difference between the etchings marking the dates at the bottom. He brushed a few red and orange leaves that were covering her birthday. She had been born on St. Patrick’s Day, 1950. He threw the wilting bouquet of daisies lying below the date aside. He thought to himself that he’d bring some fake flowers next time he came, so they’d last through the fall and winter months, even though he thought that bringing stuff to dead people was kind of a dumb thing to do. Maureen had been furious when he had once said so, saying that Lucy’d be tickled pink to see them flowers as she looked down upon the world from heaven. Todd thought that was horseshit, too. Lucy wasn’t in



heaven, she was rotting underneath his feet. He wondered if she was still recognizable at all. The thought turned his stomach. He turned to leave the cemetery, heading not for home, but for August Vetrov's place. Vetrov didn't speak much English, and Todd only knew his name because it was printed on his mining belt. Vetrov knew enough English to work in the mines and to be a successful bootlegger. Todd felt like he could use a drink.

\* \* \*

Maureen sat in Lucy's room on her made bed, holding a bedraggled plush rabbit to her nose. She thought it might smell like Lucy. It didn't. It just smelled like old cotton. She let her arms slowly fall into her lap, still clutching the rabbit.

When Todd had turned eighteen, Coy gave him a hard hat for his birthday. When Todd started working for the mines, Maureen was worried sick. It was bad enough to have a husband down there risking life and limb. She found it hard to sleep at night sometimes.

One calm day in May, Officer Tom Purkey, in full uniform, knocked on the door. It was four-thirty, thirty minutes before the boys usually got off from work. Maureen's heart sank to her feet, and she felt light-headed the moment Tom took off his cap and laid it on his chest. She knew it wasn't Todd, because he had called in sick that morning. He was napping in his bedroom. *I'm a widow*, Maureen thought, before Tom said Lucy's name. Maureen didn't understand. She told Tom so, several times, before she collapsed. When she came to, Coy was standing over her, red-faced. He had mucus caught in his beard. Maureen had the inappropriate thought that he should clean up, because they had company. But Tom wasn't visiting for pleasure, he was there to escort them to the morgue to positively identify Lucy's body.

Lucy had gotten off the school bus that day at Ulie and Paul Brown's house to stay the evening playing with their daughter, Rose. The Browns lived next to the mine, in an old mining

camp house, before the camps had dispersed. The mine had scheduled a blast for four o'clock, but a couple of the boys got into an argument and they didn't end up setting up in time. When the blast did go off, the explosion was bigger than they expected. It shook the ground just enough for a dead limb to crack and fall in the yard. The limb broke Rose's right arm, but it fell on Lucy's neck and crushed her windpipe.

Paul asked Maureen months later if she placed any blame on him for not taking care of that tree sooner. Maureen told him she didn't, but privately, part of her did. Coy didn't blame Paul, he blamed himself, although he hadn't been near the blast site at all.

"I'm general foreman. It's my responsibility. Everything that goes on in that mine is my responsibility. I should have gone down there to check the methane levels myself. God dammit, you can't trust nobody but your damn self to get it done right. Ain't that right, Maureen? Ain't that right?"

It took Maureen a little while to accept that he was overseeing another part of the mine, four miles down. He hadn't even heard the blast. He had assumed, and rightly so, that it had gone off as scheduled at four o'clock, and by the time someone had found him to inform him that it had gone wrong, Tom Purkey was already on his way to the Hicks' house.

A week and two days after Lucy's death, a man from Pioneer Gap Mining Insurance came to the door. He introduced himself as Peter Wallace and asked if he could come in. Coy thought he looked like a string bean in a suit, but politely invited him in. Maureen pulled a kitchen chair to the other side of the coffee table, offered it to Mr. Wallace and then took her place beside Coy on the sofa.

"Let me begin by saying that we at Pioneer Gap Mining Company offer our condolences." He continued on a spiel about their coverage—what it covered, what it didn't. He

showed Coy the original documents that had been signed when Coy accepted benefits as general foreman. He was asked for confirmation that it was his signature. Coy thought the whole thing was ludicrously surreal and off-putting for a reason he couldn't put his finger on. Paul Wallace kept running a non-calloused hand down his tie to smooth it down every few seconds, as if he thought there was a strong wind blowing in the living room.

Mr. Wallace pulled a manila folder out of the open briefcase propped on his knobby knees and set it on the coffee table. In it were several documents he had them read and sign. Most of it was legal gobbledygook that neither Maureen nor Coy understood. Coy privately doubted that Mr. Wallace knew either. Coy signed this and initialed that. He scribbled the date, July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1957, on each one.

“Now the matter of the payout.” He pulled out a memo pad. “A seven year old boy. That's six thousand dollars. He looked up at them and smiled as if this news should please them.

“A girl,” Coy said.

“What?”

“A seven year old girl. My daughter. Her name was Lucy. All this paperwork and you don't have one single scrap that tells you my daughter's name?”

“Oh, yes. Forgive me, Mr. Hicks.” His head bowed to the memo pad again. “four thousand, then.”

“Excuse me?”

“Four thousand dollars. Congratulations.”

“But you said six thousand just a minute ago,” said Maureen.

“Yes ma'am. That's when I believed we had a seven year old boy.”

“So that’s what my daughter is worth?” Maureen stood up. Coy placed a hand on her elbow. “Four thousand dollars, and two less than if she’d been a little boy?”

Mr. Wallace hurriedly gathered his things and placed them in the briefcase. He put on an air of official calmness, but his hand began caressing his tie again.

“I don’t set the payout amounts, Mrs. Hicks. Your check should arrive in two to three weeks. I’ll see myself out.” He bowed his head and murmured a goodbye.

“Oh, you just keep it,” Maureen said, throwing a sofa cushion to the ground. Her voice rose higher and higher. “You can go to hell. You and the lot of you. Four thousand dollars. Just keep it!”

Coy looked as though he was going to be sick. He stood slowly, calmly, and followed Mr. Wallace to the door.

“Have a nice day,” he said to Coy on the way out.

“You oughta be ashamed of yourself.”

Mr. Wallace hesitated on the stoop for a split second. Coy saw the corners of his mouth tighten. He nodded goodbye curtly and crossed the yard to his car.

The check arrived in the mail two weeks later, and Maureen waited another two weeks before she burned it in the coffee can.

\* \* \*

Now, the weather was getting colder. Coy stuffed his wool socks and his nice gloves into a locker and draped his work gloves onto his belt. He carefully folded a flannel shirt and a pair of grey slacks and laid them in the locker as well before changing into his work shirt and coveralls. He put on a thin pair of socks and laced his boots back up. It was always hot in the mines.

When he got down there, he handed newly employed Leroy Mullins a belt with his name on it, a pair of gloves, a breathing apparatus, and a carbide lamp. Leroy wrapped the belt around himself.

“Jesus, this thing must weigh twenty pounds.”

“I’d say that’s about right. You know how to use this?” Coy rattled the carbide lamp.

“It’s like a lighter.”

“More or less. Show me you know,” Coy said and watched as the boy slipped it onto his head and flicked it on to his satisfaction. “Now, try not to shine it directly in nobody’s eyes.” Coy handed him a flame safety lamp to clip onto his belt. “This here’s a possum lamp. Blue or white means go ahead. Yellow means—”

“There’s too much methane. I did get trained.”

“I know you did, but you remember it. Don’t get smart with me, boy, this is important. And what’s too much methane mean?”

Mullins stared at him blankly.

“It means we don’t make a move ‘til I say so. Why don’t you stay out of the way today and just watch.”

Mullins opened his mouth like he might protest, but Coy shot him a stern look and watched as Mullins clipped the lamp to his belt. He seemed to slump under the weight. Coy sighed.

Coy helped his team prepare for a blast. He set his flame safety lamp, which was several times bigger than anyone else’s, on the ground between two beams.

“What’s that?”

“Another possum light. You’re sure you was trained?”

Mullins scowled. "I's just asking. Trying to learn." He waved his hands in front of him in false prostration. "Jesus," he mumbled.

Coy felt his patience waning. "That's good, boy. You don't know something, you ask. But you're supposed to come to me knowing more than you do. This is life and death," he said, pointing at the wall his men were hammering at with picks. "Who trained you, boy?"

"Harper."

That didn't surprise him. Eliot Harper was about as big of a fool as this skinny, pallid kid standing in front of him now. Maureen had once said she didn't know how a person could be so stupid and live, let alone work the mines. "He ain't got the sense God gave a goose," she had said. Coy couldn't help but think she'd feel similarly about Leroy Mullins.

The light blinked yellow on the safety lamp. Coy turned to Mullins, fully expecting another question. The kid kept his lips closed tight over his horsey teeth, but looked expectantly at Coy. The rest of the crew turned to him when he called out.

"I'm going to check the ventilator fans, see if we can get past this today," he said and headed down the mineshaft to do so. He passed Todd on the way.

"How's it going?"

"It's going," said Todd.

*Smart mouths, all of them,* Coy thought, shaking his head as he passed. At least Todd had sense. Some sense.

When Coy got back, his crew was sitting or standing around, waiting on the gas to move.

Mullins asked if Coy cared if he took a break.

"Yes, I do care." Coy checked his watch. "Firstly, it ain't break time. Second, I need all hands on deck. You've been on the clock less than an hour, what do you need a break for?"

Mullins sneered, shook his head and turned sullenly away, muttering something like “forget it.”

“Hey, I brought you something,” Coy said to his back, tapping him on the arm with a safety pamphlet he’d grabbed from the main office on his way back from the ventilator. “Read this.”

“I done did.”

“Read it again.”

Mullins grabbed the pamphlet out of Coy’s hand and headed up the mine shaft as far as he could get away from everybody and still see them. “You make sure you can hear me if I call, Mullins.”

“Yeah, alright,” Mullins said, waving the pamphlet in the air like a white flag.

Coy moved the safety lamp within his view and went to sit next to Adam Rawles, who had been on Coy’s team for eight years, even before Coy was general foreman.

“How’s Elaine?”

“Fine, fine. How is Maureen doing?” There was a hesitation in his voice that Coy was familiar with. Anytime anyone asked how he or Maureen were doing, they wanted to know, but they didn’t want to know. Since Lucy. That question is supposed to come with an easy answer. Coy gave him the easy lie and said she was fine.

He glanced at the lamp. Still yellow. Adam pried the lid off his dinner bucket and took a piece of coffee cake from the pie pan. He tore off a small piece and handed it to Coy.

“Why thank you, Adam.” Coy took a bite. “Mmm, what’s that in there?” he pointed with his pinky to a streak of red inside the cake.

“Cherries,” Adam said, grinning. “Elaine made it.”

“Naw. You mean to tell me you ain’t been baking all these cookies and cakes and cobblers yourself?”

Over the sound of Adam’s hearty guffaw, Coy barely heard Vernon Wilkes say “Shit, boys, watch it!”

Coy glanced at the safety lamp. The yellow light glared at him like an eye. Later, he would recall seeing another yellow light glow and dim before the explosion—the flame of Leroy Mullins’ lighter as the fool raised it to his unlit cigarette and zipped his finger across the striker. There was a sound like trains colliding. Three beams shook loose from above. When they fell, the shaft roof came with them. A massive cloud of dust fell upon the crew. Coy could see silhouettes, and he could hear shouting over the ringing in his ears. He saw three shadowy figures running down the mine shaft, bent over at the waist to avoid hitting the five foot ceiling. One was limping. He thought he saw Wilkes tackling Leroy to the ground, but he wasn’t sure if it was the result of his imagination. His cheek felt warm. He wiped it with his shoulder. Coy was amazed that he was standing upright. He felt lightheaded. When the dust had cleared, he saw that he was trapped behind a wall of debris. He could see out of a six to eight inch triangle that one of the beams had formed with the west wall. Wilkes’ face appeared in front of it. It appeared fuzzy to Coy.

“Shit, man. Shit. Denevue, Milton, and Maples are going to get a rescue crew down here. The goddamn possum hit Maples in the ankle. Shit, Coy, are you all right? Who else is in there with you? Who are we missing? Shit.” Wilkes was running his hands up and down his face and along his coveralls, grabbing tufts of blue-gray cotton between his large hands.



Coy's lungs suddenly felt as though they were on fire. He coughed, hard, until he retched. A stream of blood poured into his eye from his temple as he bent over. He heard Wilkes whine through the opening—"Shit."

"Jesus Christ, Wilkes," Coy said through a cough. He stood and made eye contact with him through the hole. "Calm down. Who we got over there? Maples, Milton, and who else? Denevue?"

"Albright's over here. Berk, too. He's hurt pretty bad." Wilkes turned behind him. Albright was bent over Joe Berkowitz, tying his handkerchief around Berk's leg.

Coy felt nauseated. "That dumbass kid, is he alive?"

"Yeah, he's alive." Coy could vaguely make out a figure with his head down, laying in his hands, past the rest of the crew.

"Well, that's a right damn shame," said Adam from behind Coy. His voice sounded like a wisp.

*Adam*, Coy realized. He turned to his right. He could see Adam's torso, but not his legs.

"Hey, Wilkes! Adam's over here with me. Jesus. Wilkes."

Wilkes heard the urgency in his voice. He came close to the opening, and Coy tried to keep his voice low and calm, but he was beginning to see spots in his right eye. He leaned one hand against the wall. "Wilkes. I need you to remain calm. And quiet. He's trapped under."

Wilkes' hand found his ruddy red beard. He rubbed so hard, Coy thought he was in danger of leaving a bald spot.

"Are you hurt at all?" Coy asked him. Wilkes shook his head. "Run ahead and let the rescue crew know. I don't want any surprises on either end." Wilkes nodded and turned to jog up the mineshaft.

“Adam. How do you feel buddy?”

Adam laughed. The sound of it wrenched Coy’s heart into his throat. It was a gurgling, manic laugh, high pitched and tinged with tears. “I’ve been better.” He wriggled under the debris.

“Hey now, hey now. Don’t move.” Coy placed a hand on his shoulder. He lowered himself to the ground.

“Coy. I can’t feel my legs.” He tilted his head to look. “I can’t see them. Are they still there?” He chuckled again, weakly.

“I’m sure they’re under there somewhere. We’ll get your legs out, buddy.”

When the rescue squad arrived, there came with them a handful of oglers who put on airs of wanting to help. Coy shouted that he was still the damn general foreman no matter what side of the wall he was on and to get back.

It took eight hours to extricate Adam from the collapse. At the third hour, Coy could have left and they urged him to get his head wound looked at, but he stayed with Adam.

At seven and a half hours, Adam yowled like a wild cat. A bunch of guys started yelling, “What, what?” and everybody went hands off until he was able to howl out “My legs!”

Coy gave a weak chuckle that sounded more like a whine. “Well, if it hurts, it means he ain’t paralyzed,” he said to Wilkes.

Wilkes nodded. “He might wish he was right now. Jesus.” Adam’s howls echoed through the mines until he finally passed out from the pain. Coy rode with him in the ambulance. They cleaned Coy’s head wound and placed a butterfly stitch on it on the way over.

Adam had two broken legs and a crushed pelvis. He wouldn’t be able to work for a long while, but eventually, he’d walk again.

Coy fired Leroy Mullins immediately the next morning, by telephone. Coy heard someone else breathing on the party line when he called, but once he started in on Mullins, he heard a female voice exclaim and only the two of them were left on the line. He guessed she didn't appreciate his language. She must have been a gossip, too, because it wasn't long before the incident was all over town.

\* \* \*

Todd punched his card, glad it was Friday, and made his way to the surface. He headed home along a dirt road, beating his empty dinner bucket against his leg. He was lost deep in thought about Lucy and then about Coy, and the mine, when he thought he heard his name, so he looked up. About twelve yards ahead, a group of guys from down below were laughing and talking pretty loudly about Monday's accident.

"You see old man Hicks? He was shaking like a leaf when they got him out of there," one of them said. Douglas, Todd thought his name was, something Douglas.

"You'd be shaking too if you was down in there," said a sandy haired boy Todd didn't know.

"Naw," said Douglas, "he wasn't ever in no danger. The old man's a pussy, is what."

Todd saw red and next think he knew, he had caught up to Douglas and pushed him to the ground. "What you say, boy? Huh?" Douglas leapt up. "What the hell you mean—" He cocked back his fist. Todd dodged the strike with ease. There were a group of boys coming out of the mine from behind Todd that started calling out. Most were for the fight, but a few peacekeepers started trotting toward them as Todd's fingers wound around the fabric in Douglas' shirt and he lifted him up off the ground with one arm.

Todd's free hand darted from his pocket to Douglas' throat in less than a second. The sun caught the blade of Todd's pocketknife on its way up. A bunch of the boys started screaming, some of them yelling for it to stop, and some egging it on.

"Hicks, let him go. He didn't mean no harm by it."

Todd became aware of the crowd gathering, watching him. "Bullshit he didn't," he said, but he lowered Douglas to the ground and flicked his knife closed. A bloom of piss appeared on the front of Douglas' coveralls and he hunkered down on the road. "Son of a bitch," he spat through a whimper.

Todd sneered at him. "I guess everybody's scared of dying, huh, Douglas?"

That night, Todd called up some of the guys he knew from the mines and asked if they wanted to go out. Nobody did, so Todd walked to Vetrov's place and bought himself a bottle of Three Feathers whiskey. He invited Vetrov to come drink with him, but Vetrov's English suddenly became very bad, so Todd took the bottle and headed home. He thought to himself it was more fun to drink alone anyway, because you didn't have to watch your mouth or apologize for anything in the morning. And tonight he wouldn't have to worry if Ellen Scroggins was laughing at him because he was funny or because he was making a fool of himself.

\* \* \*

The next Monday morning, there was an inquiry into why there had been two accidents in half a year under Coy Hicks' management. Coy sat in the office, staring across an immaculate mahogany desk at Earl Neighbors, who was in a light gray suit with a handsome red tie. He cocked his head at Coy and sighed.

"You used to be a hell of a general foreman, Hicks. What's going on?"

“I can’t be everywhere at the same time. I’ve got my hands full of fools that, with all due respect, sir, I didn’t hire. I try to train them, but they’re a bunch of mules that don’t listen. The younger ya’ll hire them, the worse they seem to get.”

Neighbors blustered. “Well, it’s your job, Mr. Hicks, to keep them in line.”

“Ha. Well, as my mama used to say ‘You can’t fix stupid.’”

“I guess not. I think the best solution is going to be that we reassign you to a position you *can* handle. Perhaps back to just foreman.”

“Reassignment. My ass. Demotion, that’s the word you’re looking for.”

Neighbors’ eyebrows raised. “Now, Mr. Hicks. Let’s not get carried away. You’ll still be over your men. You just won’t be over the whole mine anymore. That might be good for you, don’t you think? You can focus on Maureen. And your boy.”

“I focus just fine, thank you. I don’t have to sit behind a big desk and delegate to handle me and mine. Go ahead and find yourself a new general foreman. And while you’re at it, find a new employee. I quit. I’m tired of working my ass off for nothing. I’m tired of good men getting hurt because a bunch of kids that don’t know their ass from a hole in the ground come in here and get hot-headed when they’re given direction.”

“Mr. Hicks. Coy. Why don’t you take the day off and think about this before you make any more declarations. Sleep on it and come see me in the morning.”

“We’re on a first name basis, are we now? No thank you, Earl. I won’t be seeing you in the morning or nary again. My mind is made up.”

He went down in the mine one last time to shake hands with his crew and wish them well. They made a big fuss about him leaving, but he wouldn’t be swayed.

“Neighbors must have really pissed you off for you to leave, Coy. Why don’t you do what he said and take the night to think on it? Even if he is a prick, he might be right about that one thing,” said Wilkes.

But Coy shook his head and said, no, he was sorry, but he was leaving come hell or high water.

Maureen also made a big fuss, especially when he went back down to the mines to convince Todd to give up his livelihood as well. Todd wasn’t having it. He said he’d take his chances getting blown to smithereens over starving to death.

“You won’t starve to death. You can move back in,” offered Coy.

Todd sniffed. “And watch you two starve to death. I’m staying. I know there are other jobs out there. But I don’t know how to do none of them, and I don’t have no car to get to them if I did know how. I’m happy here.”

“You’re happy here. Alright then, you stay here and be happy, then.”

Coy made his way back to the station wagon and Todd went back down into the mines to resume his shift. Coy sat behind the steering wheel a long time. He felt that a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. That he had been carrying a burden that he was unaware of until it had been moved by the injustice of losing Lucy and then his position in the mines. It was if the weight had shifted, and when it did, it became unbearable. He had felt light and free when he walked out of the mines this morning, but now another weight fell heavily to his shoulders as he wondered what they would do now.

\* \* \*

A couple of weeks later, Maureen sat at the kitchen table with a horde of tin cans, filled with spare change. She deftly thumbed them into coin rolls. Coy was out looking for a job. Todd

was down in the mines. There was a threat of snow in the milky sky. Maureen had rolled seventeen dollars and fifty cents when she went on to the next tin. She pulled a Wilkins coffee can full of pennies toward her, but she never emptied it. She thought of Lucy, and she thought of Coy. She spent forty-five minutes on the telephone with Pioneer Gap Insurance Company, lying through her teeth, trying to explain why it had taken her nearly five months to inquire about the check that she said had never come in the mail.

They pushed, but she pushed harder, and Maureen was a loud squeaky wheel. They told her the new check would arrive in three to four weeks, and to watch for it this time. They reminded her there would be dire consequences were she to cash both checks. She assured them that would not happen. "In fact, if I find that first check, I'll burn it. Just to be safe."

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