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15. One Who Escaped

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One Who Escaped

Typically the back windows of trucks in rural America bear items of erotica or patriotica, but on the back of Paul Avington's window was the decal of a miner crawling on his hands and knees with a headlamp lighting the way before him.

I followed the brown pickup to Paul's house. We had met up at a local gas station, either because he didn't trust an outsider or because he was afraid I'd get lost. "You Erin?" he had asked, sizing me up. My first impression of Paul Avington was that he looked benign, but I had never seen a man personify the word *burly* more fully. His frame was large and bearish, his graying blonde hair thick about his head, and his mustache fuzzy over his lip.

We walked into the front room of his home. His son shut off the television, and his wife asked if I wanted anything to drink.

"Pepsi?" she asked. "We've only got caffeine-free."

I wondered if the Avingtons were Mormon; few people shun caffeine otherwise. The possibility of sharing a religion with this enormous and whiskey man made me feel a bit more at home.

His wife gathered a few things, and his son scooped up a boy who was playing on the floor. "We'll leave you in peace," she said.

Paul was sitting in a large armchair near me and began to talk about himself in a very frank and easy way. He had been a miner for thirty years in seven different mines. Before Sago, he worked farther south, where the mines are unionized and the pay is better. I asked him why he became a miner, and his answer surprised me. His family had no history in the mines. "It seemed like a decent enough job. I went to school for a year in mining maintenance."

After reading the recollections of my ancestors, it intrigued me that anybody would choose mining as an occupation. However, as one woman in the Sago congregation had informed me at Reverend Day's service, with a mix of pride and amusement: "West Virginia is an interesting state. The four most popular occupations are health care, farming, mining, and driving coal trucks." Coal mining is among the more profitable. Although only 5 percent of miners have any higher education, an average miner's salary is around \$55,000 annually, and miners can earn as much as \$80,000 a year. Aside from the financial lure, there is apparently something addictive about mining. "If you work in the mines long enough, it's not blood but coal dust in your veins," I had been told by one miner, and a similar explanation runs through the accounts of many others.

Paul carefully explained current mining techniques. A cutting machine removes the coal from the face. A feeder scoops it onto a conveyor belt, where it is dumped into a shuttle car. The shuttle car drives it out from underground and dumps it on a stacker belt, which then feeds it up to a tower. At the precipice, the coal drops off onto a tall pile. Besides mining vehicles and buildings, the stacker belt, tower, and the mountain of pebbled coal are the only parts of this operation that are visible from the outside. As a shuttle car driver, Paul made fifty to sixty trips a day, carrying a load of eight tons on each trip.

In over two hundred years of coal mining history, there have been obvious improvements. Currently miners are trained in mechanics, hydraulics, machinery operations, and electrical systems. In order to set up a longwaller, miners use smaller tunneling machines until a seam of coal up to two miles wide is exposed. The longwaller runs the length of the wall on a track, scraping off coal by the inch to be transported from the mine. In order to maintain this process, miners run draining and ventilation systems and electrical alarm and communication systems. The only job that has changed little since the early days of mining is the work of the fireboss, who carries his gas meter into the mine and crawls through small spaces to check the levels of methane. Otherwise, mining is a far cry from the burden of the Welsh children who crawled through tunnels, dragging a tram behind them, and of little Evan, who loaded coal for his father. It is also distant from the way Zephaniah and Robert mined, blasting the coal with shots and breaking out the chunks with a pickax. Miners' lamps and hats no longer operate with oil and the open flames that so frequently ignited carbon gases. Even so, I asked Paul about his health.

Coal workers' pneumoconiosis, or black lung, is a broad term that covers a range of respiratory diseases acquired from the inhalation of coal dust, like the asthma Zephaniah Thomas died from in 1953. In 1969, Congress ordered an eradication of this disease. In 1977, the Black Lung Disability Trust Fund was created to provide compensations for its victims.

According to the United Mine Workers Association, 1,500 former coal workers still die from black lung each year. This number is not added to the death toll from mining accidents annually, which places coal mining as the one of the most hazardous occupations in America.

“I have an injured back,” Paul confessed.

“From what?” I asked.

“Oh, bending over so long in tunnels. I hope it will last me ten more years. I’m fifty-five. I don’t want to retire until I’m over sixty.”

Paul’s admission brought me back to Wales and Emylyn’s stories of miners’ superstitions about washing their backs—a strong back meant food on the table.

After some small talk, I broached the heart of the matter, “Can you tell me about the accident?”

Paul looked at his large hands and rubbed them together. He rolled his shoulders forward, humility taking over his large frame. I immediately recognized his sadness, his sense of helplessness and loss, but also something else. It was because of this question that he had agreed to speak with me.

The Sago Mine is shaped like a backward *F*. Two main corridors diverge perpendicularly from the main hallway: One Left (1L) and Two Left (2L). Each of these divides into a myriad of rooms where coal is extracted from the face. The thirteen men who died in the Sago mining disaster were working in 2L, the deepest branch of the mine, and most news reports mention only this crew. However, when the mine blew, there was another crew of fifteen men just ten minutes behind them heading toward 1L. This was Paul’s crew.

Reporters had hounded the family members of the lost miners. Reverend Day had beat them off, while offering Christian hospitality in the form of cups of coffee and a seat in his congregation, just as he offered me. But nobody had come to Paul for his story. A miner goes into a mine every day knowing that there is some possibility of hazard and death. A mine groans, and this shifting and creaking of the earth may spark surges of adrenaline in a man who suspects a cave-in, but until a miner has experienced an explosion, there is no memory attached to this fear.

“My crew was just going down to our section on the main track. We threw the switch to go into 1L and then it exploded. Heat and dust and gas. It wasn’t what you’d think; it wasn’t a loud noise—the sound of an air poof.” Paul made a gesture with his hand. He considered carefully as he spoke, trying to isolate the details of the experience from an overall sense of panic. “There was a roof fall. Then, in a split second, dust, debris, and heat. It didn’t take us long, but we went through a lot of dust. I couldn’t see my hand in front of my face, but I only thought of getting out.”

He continued to look at his hands, and I could tell that not far from the relief, there was always the thought of the others. “I feel bad about the

men who were killed. They tried to get out, but couldn't. The main fan was still on after it blew; we was closer to the intake air."

Owen Jones was leading Paul's crew in 1L that morning. When the air from the explosion hit the crew, it blew off his hat and shredded skin on another crew member's face. The carbon monoxide detector on his belt blared a warning that the men had only minutes to get out. But Owen's brother Jesse was working in 2L, deeper in the mine. Owen told the men that he was going back in, although Paul begged him not to. Owen joined the first rescue efforts and only turned back four hours later when it was apparent the carbon monoxide would kill him.

"How did you feel when you got out?" I asked Paul.

"I had lots of different thoughts," he said, crinkling his forehead. "I called my wife. It was the first time I been in an explosion."

Paul pulled out a collection of things from a folder and let them fall into his lap. There was an issue of the *United Mine Workers Magazine* with an article about the deaths. He sorted through pieces of paper and articles dealing with the accident, pulling out ones he thought would interest me. He fingered a medium-sized patch and held it with reverence: "In memory of our fallen Sago miners, January 2006," it read. When I asked him about the reasons for the explosion, he related the story of the lightning. There was no bitterness in his voice; he did not suspect ICG of covering up the causes.