16. A Memorial

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A Memorial

The woods were wet and splotched with a pale green fungus. Rust and yellow colored leaves clung limply to the ends of branches; there had been no snow, and remnants of fall still littered the forest. A mist hung low over Buckhannon River, where one stone-block pillar stood like a solitary omen. This pillar once supported an old mining bridge for railroad tracks. A local had told me that she used to play in the river during the summertime, but in early January, no children laughed or splashed. The water lay perfectly still.

It was just over a year after the accident, and I stood on the bridge overlooking Buckhannon River across from Sago Baptist Church. The area looked as it must have then—the edge of sun over the hills touched the moisture in the air with cool light. The tree cover that had looked so thick and protective on my first visit in the summer was completely bare. Straight trunks lined up one after another, appearing smaller as they climbed the hills on either side.

A week previously, friends and family members of the twelve Sago miners had walked across the bridge to the mine to pin black ribbons and black and white roses on the fence. It was the third gathering at the small white chapel, and public attention—as in the wake of all tragedies—had begun to diminish. The event was unofficial and private; two dozen people participated.

The public memorial service had been held in August in front of a much larger crowd. Men and boys had set up folding chairs on the grass under canopies from the local funeral home. A stage was erected on the rock foundation of the widow's house, and the tilting stone chimney finally dismantled. On the day of the ceremony, the sky rumbled, threatening to

Erin Thomas, 2007

Stone block pillar in Buckhannon River

pour rain on the heads of the mourners gathered on the grounds of Sago Baptist Church to view the memorial: a six foot slab of granite, reflective and dark like the walls of a coal mine. Many came wearing T-shirts with the names of their deceased loved ones printed across them, and this time fewer camera crews camped along the sidelines to record the events.

Governor Joe Manchin spoke to an audience of several hundred. He had been there with the families when they waited for news of their loved ones. Like many West Virginians, Manchin has a connection to coal and even to its tragedies, as his uncle died in the Farmington explosion of 1968, which left seventy-eight dead. Family history counts him in, but in the Sago disaster, the worst since Farmington, some feel he has failed to support the miners' families. Newly established safety regulations have been slow to be implemented in a state that lost twenty-six coal miners in 2006 in onsite accidents. Although investigations and conferences have been held to determine the cause of the Sago explosion, locals feel the results are far from satisfactory. Some among the miners must have grimaced at Manchin's words. President Wilbur Ross of ICG and other company representatives sat in folding chairs placed in front, looking out over the audience of mourners. I wonder if they shifted in their seats just a little.

When Reverend Wease Day and Reverend Roger Foster (another preacher in the Buckhannon area) took the stand, the muscled arms folded across the chests of the miners must have tightened with emotion. The women might have sniffled and sponged the tears off the faces of their children with wadded tissues rummaged from purses. These families would recognize those who had truly done battle for them. Concerning that night months before, at the first gathering at Sago Baptist, when they had waited in anticipation for the thirteen miners to walk across the bridge to meet them, Reverend Foster said: "Folks, they didn't cross the Buckhannon River, but they did cross a river, and as Christians, we call it the River Jordan."

After the names of the fallen were read, the names of those who survived were listed: Paul Avington's crew, as well as Randall McCloy, who was able to attend and be honored with the rest. Rescued from the mine in a coma, he had made steady progress and, after weeks of treatment, was able to eat for himself and open his eyes. By the time of the service, he was walking again, although he had some disability on his right side and permanent visual impairment from the hours with little oxygen. Later, he attended the small gathering to mark the one-year anniversary of the explosion.

Because this mining community recovered only one of thirteen, they have clung to him. West Virginians across the state have followed his recuperation closely, and his wife, Anna, received the Mother of the Year award from a nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation of state history. For many, he is an emblem of continuing grace—that despite tragedy, there are still evidences of mercy. The street he lives on was officially changed to Miracle Road. Later, Sago Road was renamed Coal Miner's Memorial Roadway, a ponderous title for a sudden left into the woods.

Since his recovery, Randall has tried to give back to the mining families who lost their fathers and husbands. In April, four months after the accident, he wrote a letter addressed to "the families and loved ones of my coworkers, victims of the Sago Mine disaster," where he detailed the last moments of his comrades:

> We eventually gave out and quit our attempts at signaling, sitting down behind the curtain on the mine floor, or on buckets or cans that some of us found. The air behind the curtain grew worse, so I tried to lie as low as possible and take shallow breaths. While methane does not have an odor like propane and is considered undetectable, I could tell that it was gassy. We all stayed together behind the curtain from that point on, except for one attempt by Junior Toler and Tom Anderson to find a way out. The heavy smoke and fumes caused them quickly to return. There was just so much gas.
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> We were worried and afraid, but we began to accept our fate. Junior Toler led us all in the Sinner's Prayer. We prayed a little longer, then someone

suggested that we each write letters to our loved ones. I wrote a letter to Anna and my children. When I finished writing, I put the letter in Jackie Weaver's lunch box, where I hoped it would be found.

As time went on I become very dizzy and light-headed. Some drifted off into what appeared to be a deep sleep, and one person sitting near me collapsed and fell off his bucket, not moving. It was clear that there was nothing I could do to help him. The last person I remember speaking to was Jackie Weaver, who reassured me that if it was our time to go, then God's will would be fulfilled. As my trapped coworkers lost consciousness one by one, the room grew still and I continued to sit and wait, unable to do much else. I have no idea how much time went by before I also passed out from the gas and smoke, awaiting rescue.

I crossed back over the bridge to the monument below the white church. The faces of the miners had been etched into the smooth stone, according to the plans I had seen on the church bulletin board months before. It was capped with a miner's hardhat, and the bottom was carved with wheels, suggesting an old-style coal tram. Above the wheels was the quote: "We'll see you on the other side." It was adapted from the note that the former first elder of Sago Baptist, Martin Toler Jr., wrote to his family. Toler was a mining foreman with thirty-four years of experience and, according to McCloy's account, prepared to lead his crew into the next life with the Sinner's Prayer, an Evangelical acknowledgement of God's grace and the willingness of a sinner to be saved. The men must have been like those I met at Reverend Day's service, only with their faces covered with coal dust. Perhaps some of them took off their hardhats and placed them over their hearts for respect:

Father, I know that I have broken Your laws and my sins have separated me from You. I am truly sorry, and now I want to turn away from my past sinful life toward You … I believe that Your son, Jesus Christ, died for my sins, was resurrected from the dead, is alive, and hears my prayer. I invite Jesus to become the Lord of my life, to rule and reign in my heart from this day forward. Please send Your Holy Spirit to help me obey You, and to do Your will for the rest of my life.

Two benches flank each side of the monument, and one is placed directly across from it, with the images of Randall McCloy and the Sago Baptist Church engraved on the top. The other two are engraved with the names of the sixteen miners of the second crew, Paul's crew, who exited the mine alive before the camera crews and rescuers arrived. This was Reverend Day's idea, who realized these men had been overlooked in the ensuing publicity after the explosion. Some felt honored to have their names on the monument; others felt that it was a precursor to a tombstone.

Below the stone tablets were artificial flowers with small drops of rain from the night before on their petals, as well as other mementos left for

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Base of sago memorial

the dead: an evergreen wreath tied with a red bow addressed "Dad we love and miss you so!" signed by Peggy and Daniel, and a small name plaque for "Jerry" next to a bouquet of red roses. A hat with "Mine Rescue 2007" written on the brim with fabric marker snuggled close to the granite stone, nearly covered by the pots of flowers. Most curious was a porcelain angel in a blue clingy dress, with roses springing from her arms and gown.

In our society, erecting monuments is a means of reconciliation: to both honor and commit ourselves to remember. But living without a father or a husband is a daily experience. After the ceremony dedicating the monument in August, the widow of George Hamner Jr. said: "I think the monument is just beautiful. But what would be better is if my husband were alive today. We shouldn't be here today."

In addition to the twenty-six deaths in West Virginia in 2006, there were twenty-three more nationwide. The coal industry hit a ten year high in mining fatalities, which was ironically matched with record highs in coal production and profits. Just the day before I traveled out to West Virginia to visit the monument, 2007 had its first mining accident with the loss of two more miners due to a roof collapse in Cucumber, a mining town on the southern tip of West Virginia.

Lightning has remained the official story for the Sago Mine disaster. This, according to many West Virginians, is a way of dismissing

responsibility to "an act of God." Many harbor skepticism about how the lightning was able to enter the mine after striking the ground two miles away, and they favor the alternative explanation. The day of the explosion was the first day back after the holidays. The fans had been switched off for four days, which is illegal, according to federal regulations. Notably, on the day of the accident when there was still hope of rescue, government inspector McAteer was more concerned about the possibility that flipping a switch could have ignited the methane gas than the lightning strikes that morning.

Near the time the memorial was dedicated, three families filed suits against the ICG, asserting that negligence had caused the accident. Although Sago Mine is not unionized, the United Mine Workers of America has responded to these accusations with a report of their own, stating that sparks generated in the mine by falling rocks or by rocks striking against roof supports were a more likely cause of the accident. The report also blamed the miners' deaths on the lack of effective communication systems installed in the mine, a direct result of ICG's money-saving policy.

More troubling than the lack of resolution and the persistent questions in this case are the two miners that took the blame upon themselves. John Nelson Boni was the fireboss of Sago Mine, responsible for checking the levels of gas. Five days before the accident, he alerted his supervisor that he had detected a small amount of methane that had leaked into the mine. Boni's report stopped there. His supervisor was not concerned. William Lee Chisolm was a dispatcher in charge of alerting crews of high levels of carbon monoxide. An alarm sounded twenty minutes before the mine blew and Chisolm, following procedure, alerted the crews within the mine to verify it. After the accident, Boni retired and Chisolm took a leave of absence. Boni had worked in the mines for thirty-six years, and Chisolm for eleven years. Although neither was accused of any wrongdoing pertaining to the accident, the constant questioning by investigators gnawed at their consciences. Chisolm started drinking heavily, then shot himself in late August. A month later, Boni followed suit with a bullet to his head—two casualties of the intense media attention focused on the disaster.

A month after visiting Sago the second time, I heard that Sago Mine had been closed down in response to the report of the UMWA. I thought about Paul Avington on the day of our interview, that large, gentle man filling an entire easy chair, saying he'd like to be able to work ten more years. Since our interview, he reported that his daily shuttle car trips of eight tons of coal each had become tedious. Coal mining had become tainted by the memory of his fallen comrades and his own sense of neglect. Still, Paul needed that job. I thought of Evan and Zephaniah Thomas, who were never successful at any other job they tried. Now in our specialized

society, expertise is even more crucial in the workforce. Who would hire a fifty-nine-year-old coal miner?

Sago Mine, with its numerous safety violations over the past few years, should be closed. And Sago isn't the only one. In the United States, we currently count yearly mining mortalities by the tens, but in developing countries they bury miners by the hundreds each year. In 2006, just over a month after the miners were trapped in Sago, sixty-six miners awaited death, trapped a mile down in a Mexican mine. Months later in China, which has recently become notorious for unsafe coal mining practices in its push for industrialization, fifty-seven miners were drowned by underground flooding. Early in 2007, not long after two miners were killed by a roof fall in Cucumber, West Virginia, one hundred workers were killed by an explosion in Siberia. Throughout history, mining has been characterized by the sacrifice of the smallest and weakest.

As a coal miner's granddaughter whose ancestors suffered in the industry, I'm inclined to spare future generations from the darkness of a mine. When I think in terms of the process of moving to alternative forms of energy, I imagine the industry dying out as miners like Paul retire, all receiving their benefits and a pat on their burden-bearing backs. Yet, I know better. Change is a process of closings, a process of firings that leaves individuals jobless and without resources. There are always families.

Reading the reports, I found that Sago Mine had only been idled, and the miners who worked there had been given jobs in other mines operated by ICG. I took a deep breath of relief for Paul. But I couldn't help think of the town of Sago, a place where the main industry is mining. After the explosion, ICG had already begun to reduce its workforce, cutting the number of underground workers from ninety to forty-four by the end of 2006.

According to Pam Campbell, the sister-in-law of Marty Bennett, who died in Sago Mine: "We basically fight for what we feel needs to be done for the rest of these coal miners in this area. Because as you know, coal mining is a very, very big part of this town. We need coal mining, but we need safe coal mines."

In line with this sentiment was a discussion string on the Internet site "Volition Forums." Janjojo, Missy1970, Maylinda, and LisaBGoesShopping closely followed the events unfolding from the Sago mining disaster. All four women are West Virginians and related in some way to mining. Through their correspondence, the whole saga of the explosion unfolded: the reports in local and national media, the money-making schemes masquerading as donation drives, scholarships at Wesleyan University for the children of the deceased, and the recovery of Randall McCloy. An article *Vanity Fair* published that was critical of the coal industry in West Virginia generated quite a bit of traffic between the four women and other

sympathizers. Wrote Missy1970: "About it saying the impact on the land. Not just because my husband is a coal miner, and that is how we pay the bills, but I look at it this way. This is God's Land, and He gave someone the knowledge to know how to mine coal or it wouldn't be done. Further more God knows what he is doing to the land by giving people the knowledge and know how of mining coal. Sounds like a bunch of tree huggers wrote that article."

The views this coal miner's wife attributes to tree hugging would probably not be far from my own, and I think of a conversation I had with my father while driving through Price Canyon. In central Utah in 1999, the German mining company RAG AG opened the Willow Creek mine right next to the Caste Gate shafts—the tunnels crisscrossed underground. Knowing the history of the mines in the area, and that they were apt to be gaseous, the company took every safety precaution to ensure ample ventilation. There was a cheerfulness that set into Price and Carbon County, seeing coal being piled once more on the hillside. For them, it meant miners at work and economic prosperity. Only two years later, methane escaped into the mining tunnels and caught fire. A well-trained rescue crew was able to evacuate all the workers except for two.

After the explosion, mining efforts were abandoned and the shaft closed up. The mining equipment has never been recovered, and to this day a longwaller, a piece of machinery about five hundred feet long, is stalled in the position where it was abandoned in six years ago. In line with the strict reclamation laws in Utah, the site has been reseeded with sagebrush, the buildings removed, and the opening of the mine filled in. From the road it is impossible to see any difference between the mining grounds and the surrounding foothills.

As my father explained this to me, I felt a sense of great satisfaction as we passed by the one remaining, monumental wall to Castle Gate. Other than the graveyard, there are no visible remains of the mining camp my grandfather grew up in or the subsequent mining efforts, only pale brown shale, brush, and the magnificent rise of the mountains. It was as if the negative impacts of the explosions, the strikers and strikebreakers, and the burning crosses of my grandfather's childhood fears had been erased.

However, after the Willow Creek mine closed, Price's economy went into a nosedive. It took years for it to recover. Government officials and energy specialists in the area are still analyzing the remaining coal reserves in the belly of that reclaimed piece of mountain and considering the possibility of cutting it right back open.

To disappear, to be assimilated back into the woods; to have Paul's shuttle car rusted and overgrown with vines, the continuous miners shut up in the hillside under the room and pillar maze of 1L and 2L, Miner's Memorial Road cracked by tree roots, the blue house drooping into a

Greg Smith

Sago Mine, 2007

pile of old boards sprinkled with pale yellow fungus. This is not what the people of Sago want, to have their style of living eradicated.

The last time I visited Sago, I left Reverend Day on one of the memorial benches, his face shaded under a straw hat. The foundation of the widow's house and the bush had been uprooted, and next to the monument a new home was being erected, still just sheetwall and board. Fred "Bear" Ware's son had bought the property to be close to the monument. From the church, I drove to Sago Mine and walked up to the gates surrounding the complex. Inside, a woman sitting under a pavilion bolted to her feet. "You can't take a picture here," she ordered. She looked afraid, and I suddenly felt sorry for her.

Sago Mine had been opened nine years previously by Anchor Coal. After a short period of operation, it was closed when a helicopter dropping an employee off at the tipple crashed into the side of the mountain, killing the president inside. Other companies had deemed the mine unfit to work, but ICG reopened it. The surrounding community was grateful, because it meant jobs. ICG later closed the mine, after putting operations on stall for months—people talked too much of ghosts. Farther down the seam, ICG opened another entrance to the tunnels inside, renaming the mine Imperial in hopes of erasing the negative associations with the accident. This mine cuts into the mountainside under the Alban cemetery, where both of Wease Day's parents are buried. Near the cemetery, lives his father-in-law, a retired miner who went to work every morning thinking that he might not come back one day. Now, ICG is tunneling right under his home.