

Two Stories

Manus Dugan

Ron Fischer

When a sudden gust of hot air blasted him, Manus Dugan sensed that something wrong had happened in the mine. The wet timbers receding into the dark of the crosscut seemed thin and fragile. Old worries tormented him. His child refused to be born. Madge was ten days overdue. Every night, he went to work with regret and now this. Dry air doesn't sweep down a mine stope twenty-six hundred feet underground, particularly from the direction of the elevator shaft. In the dark silence, Manus could hear the mine timbers creak and felt a shrinking in his bones. He left his ore car on the skid rail and walked toward the shaft to find out what it meant.

He pictured Madge at home lying across the bed. He could hear how the bedsprings would strain and see Madge's fist wad the purple blanket lying on their bed, her other hand clutching her swollen belly, her face grimacing because of a cramp. Desperation made him walk faster. Day after day, she was pregnant. It made him helpless. In the mornings, he came and lay beside her, listening to the ore trains rumbling over the sunlit hillsides of Butte, the day bright against the skein of green window shade. Sometimes she cried softly and he held her, feeling awake, feeling her heavy, auburn hair

against his face until he drifted into dreams of the mine and its black tunnels.

"Let the other fools blast themselves to bits," she had said loudly when he had asked her to marry him a year and a half ago. Straight time for the Company, that's what she wanted him to work if she was going to get married.

"But there's money in contracting."

"Two hundred dollars is widow's pay when the mine caves. I don't want a man with dirt so deep on him he's got to let it wear off and who'll live past thirty-five only if he's lucky."

What could he say? She had red cheeks on winter days that put you in mind of the petals on a moss rose. Her bright eyes could glance on him and suddenly numb him all over, like having a hammer smack his thumb.

So he gave up mining, went straight time, and took the nipper's job. Maybe he still worked underground carting steel drills and dynamite to the contractors, but he didn't have to stand under loose rock or breathe the gray dust kicked from a miner's buzzie as it hammered hole after hole. After six months of straight time, she married him. It was the closest thing to gold yet.

Manus stopped cold. A black cloud rolled slowly down the crosscut toward him. Smoke hung about two feet off the floor and billowed around him. There was a

fire burning somewhere. The shaft? He took a breath. The air tasted bitter as green willows burning and its ash nudged deep into his lungs where it twitched a cord that made him cough and hack. He backed ten feet away.

He could hear the faraway cracks of explosion and the dull thunder of fire. His neck muscles tightened. He looked at the shell of smoke and imagined bright gold flames bursting the dry timbers of the shaft into ribbons of black ash. The whole shaft, a tower of dry beams and planks half a mile long, was exploding into a volcanic hole. He could picture the glowing cinders and dark smoke rippling from the blazes, blood-red fire balls leaping higher and higher, the long well of liquid blackness roaring with its immolation, and the flames finally erupting on the surface into a blazing geyser, torching the headframe and the elevator cages, spraying the mineyard with white-hot embers, spewing a black cloud of soot into the sky.

In the distance, he heard someone inside the fumes wheeze for air and cough. "Faron!" He called the names of the miners he had just left. "Faron! Ansely! Faron!"

Manus sucked in a breath and charged into the curling cloud. When he needed to breathe again, he stooped over and kept his face in that margin of clear air left between the smoke and the ground. When the

smoke filled the whole crosscut, he wrapped his arm around his head and breathed through the crook of his denim jacket. His carbide light was so dim it was useless. He smacked into a stull and knocked himself down. His cheek lay against the warm steel of the tram rail. His eye caught the sequin of his carbide flame reflecting off the worn steel. The mine rock looked gray against the feeble glow of carbide. No one coughed anymore. The air was hot as a furnace. Although he took his breath through his sleeve and held it as he crawled, his lungs flared as if scraped by a rasp. It was all he could do to hold a cough back.

He touched the man's shoulder, then grabbed a whole arm and felt the body flop. He felt for the man's nose to see whether he was still breathing. His fingertips touched something sticky and warm, blood. Had the man torn his own throat to get a gulp of good air? Manus bolted for clear air. He tripped over the tram rail, got up, and ran on, feeling dizzy and blind. The few minutes it took to stumble into clear air seemed unending. Had the entire crosscut filled up with smoke? Suddenly his carbide lamp opened like a small hand of light against the rock and receding timbers.

When he stopped and turned to look at the cloud swirling toward him, he felt like he had stood for years on this same spot. Life suddenly seemed to repeat itself. A drop of water fell from the rough ceiling above him and landed on his neck. His fingertips were stained

with small rusty spots. Looking at them, he felt the bones of his spine bristle. He coughed and the phlegm in his throat tasted syrupy.

Trapped. There was no way up. Madge and the baby left without him. He had to calm himself. Staying out of the wood gas meant everything now. Somewhere ahead the other miners of the twenty-six hundred were still working. He had to warn them. He began running down the crosscut, his boots thudding against the rail ties, crunching the gravel of the railbed.

He met a crowd of miners who had also felt the rush of hot air and were making for the shaft. Bill Lucas smiled at him. Bill was seventeen, gangly legged and cocky. Bill's eyes darted from Manus to Leonard McClure, the miner who was breaking Bill in. Leonard saw to it that Bill was paying the price: blisters and backache. Manus liked Bill because he didn't peter out. He stuck to his job. Right now he was sorry Bill had.

"The shaft's on fire," Manus said.

Leonard shoved his hat back and rubbed his hairline. With his hat tilted back like a skull cap and with that leather apron over his trousers, Leonard looked like the barrel-chested Jewish butcher who had a shop on Main Street. Whenever he saw Leonard, Manus saw another version of himself, the man Manus was afraid he would become if he hadn't married Madge. Alone and angry, his best feelings blasted and mucked out years ago. The rich veins of compassion

traded for whiskey and the empty pockets the girls on Venus Alley leave a man with.

But what did it matter now? As certainly as he knew the smoke was drifting toward them, he knew that he faced the deepest stope he had ever come upon. This would test all the timber and lagging he had inside him. He couldn't panic. He couldn't let the whole mountain of his being collapse. There had to be a way out. "We got to hole up somewhere and keep the smoke from choking us."

"No," Murphy Shea said. Shea was a Wobblie. He shoved between Leonard and Bill. "The manways. We'll climb out of here."

"What the hell?" Leonard shouted. "We can't climb a half mile out of here." Bill Lucas didn't smile anymore. Spiro Bezersich, Al Cobb, Gozdenica, and the others stared at him.

"We can try," Manus said, knowing the Speculator Mine had a tunnel into the Rainbow Mine on the twenty-two hundred level. "The twenty-two. Just far as the twenty-two. We can walk into the Rainbow and ride the cage up from there."

"Twenty-two," Gozdenica said, "we make." Gozdenica started shoving through the miners, taking the lead toward the raise that had ladders coming down from the twenty-four hundred. As they walked, Manus made out the smudged faces of John McGarry, Spiro Bezersich, Krist Popovich, Joe McAdams, and Al Cobb.

Gozdenica, usually smiling-faced, turned to look at them. He seemed expectant and uncertain. The lime dry smell of dynamite lingered near the last drift they passed. Manus' shirt, wet with sweat, clung to him.

Leonard had a way of sprawling his elbows and legs to make himself the biggest man in a room. Bill Lucas butted around Leonard and Manus. Bill had quit school a year ago. Since then, Manus had watched him load ore cars, muck, and even drive mules on the tram. He was a fast learner who worked hard. As Bill walked in front of them, Manus could see Bill had even picked up Leonard's way of walking, high-headed, like he was some kind of wonder man who knew how to break a dollar's more worth of ore than any other miner, how to wash all the dust out of his blood with a couple of beers and hang on a little harder to those ringlet-haired chippies down in Venus Alley. Leonard, who knew stopes where the rock broke easy, bars where the silver dollars squeezed out of your hand like mercury, and girls who slid under you just as easy, was responsible.

In the manway, men bunched up as everyone waited for the fellow ahead of him to climb high enough so the miner's heels wouldn't boot against his head. Manways and stopes, tunnels and shafts, the mine was a honeycomb without honey. At least they weren't on the thirty-two hundred, Manus thought. The manways didn't go that deep. No one there had any chance of getting out. All he had to do now was open

his palm and an iron rung suddenly filled it. He was climbing out.

At the twenty-four hundred, Manus followed the miners ahead of him down the crosscut and toward the next manway up. No one spoke. They panted and their clothes rustled, their heels crackled the ground. Manus' carbide and the miners' candles etched the bark-stripped posts into gray bones and fragmented their shadows into dark starlings that flitted and weaved across the rock wall.

Before they reached the manway on the twenty-four hundred, some miners ran into them from behind. Negretto and Wortz, Evcovich and Jennis, Jovick, Ned Heston and Godre Galia, and some others—men from the twenty-four hundred. There were many now, maybe twenty or more.

"Gas cut us off," Ned Heston said. His hands looked like fat potatoes.

"How far back?"

"Coming fast."

Herb Carlson behind them stumbled into Manus and apologized. "They're shoving."

"Smoke's coming on 'em," Ned said.

At the manway, Manus heard Leonard shouting, "Keep climbing."

"He won't," Al Cobb said.

"Who's up there?" Leonard demanded.

"Gozdenica."

“That bastard better move his ass!”

Men were strung along the ladder, but no one climbed. “Let them down,” Manus said, seeing that the highest men on the ladder were stepping down instead of climbing up. “Give them room.”

“Come down,” Leonard bellowed. “Get your ass off and let me up.”

Steve came into view. “We’re cut off. It’s all smoke up there.”

Manus shined his carbide upward and squinted into the heights. He saw billows of gas. Behind him men in the stope coughed. Leonard shoved to the iron ladder, clutched its rusty railing, and grabbed Popovich’s shoulders as if he wanted to fling him against the wall. McAdams, Murphy Shea, and a few others pushed through the crush of men to get beside Leonard and get at the ladder.

“No one goes up,” Manus said. The whites of Leonard’s eyes bulged and Shea set his jaw firm.

“Stay here and die then,” Leonard took the unlit cigar that he chewed on from his mouth and tossed it against the rock wall.

“Stay together.” Manus looked at the wild eyes that showed like hens’ eggs in his light. “No one can make that climb. Not in gas.”

“We go ’til we drop,” Leonard said.

“No!” Manus made a fist. “We hole up. All of us, in a blind drift.”

“The twenty-four seventeen.” Steve waved from the ladder. Cobb and Ned Heston repeated his words and headed out of the manway. Motes of dust rained through the dim light. Everyone else held their ground to see what Leonard did.

“All right, all right.” Leonard waved them to follow Cobb and Heston. “The twenty-four seventeen.”

Manus believed in his chances of living when he could keep moving. Al Cobb, a short man who wore a woodsman’s cap cocked to his right side so that his oversized left ear stuck out like the handle of a coffee cup, led them toward the twenty-four seventeen. When everyone stopped, they were facing forty feet of a dead drift.

“What we do?” Jovick asked.

“For Chrissake. Bulkheads. Two of them. Here and there. Them posts and laggings. Pull that canvas off the vent. Pile up rocks. Dirt. We gotta build us two goddamn walls. One here. One away, about two yards away.”

Manus pulled out a pocket knife and cut into the canvas of a vent. “We can use this to line it.” La Montague started ripping more of it down. Cobb took a hammer left in the drift and knocked a stull out of a drift set.

They understood. Jovick uncoupled a hydraulic line. “Is there air?” Manus asked.

“Naw, dead.”

“Take a couple pieces of pipe.”

With the two walls shaping up, Bill Lucas suddenly disappeared down the drift. Manus wondered if he was following Leonard back to the manway. But Leonard was there, shoveling rock and dirt out of the drift and packing it into a mound against the bulkheads. Bill suddenly came back with a small waterkeg left in the crosscut. It was about a quarter full.

“We’re gonna need this.”

“Get behind the bulkhead.”

McAdams and Gozdenica brought boards from the drift set walls. Manus saved a piece of canvas to make a flap for a crawl space between the inner wall and the bulkhead. He had trouble pulling enough saliva together to spit the pasty, sweet dust out of his mouth.

When the walls were finished, he and Cobb waited in the six feet of space between the makeshift bulkheads, plugging holes when they saw wisps of gray smoke seeping through. Where the wall met the ceiling was weakest. One candle burned in the blind drift where the miners sat, backs against the bare rock, and another flickered where Manus and Cobb sat. There were twenty-nine of them. They ripped their shirts, handed up trousers and socks to Cobb and Manus to seal out the smoke.

“That’s enough.” They settled back, like two rows of bats, their backs against the rock wall. Their naked flesh seemed white as talc in the pale glow of

candlelight.

“Take this, for later.” Manus gave Cobb a second length of pipe afterward. Cobb cocked his head, his protruding ear a question mark.

“What for?”

“When they come at us.” Manus said it dryly. He gripped the pipe, thinking that no matter how hard it would be to swing on a man he had worked with, he’d rather see the miner hurt than dead. “Are you with me? If you can’t, I’ll understand.”

Al hefted the pipe against his palm, then slowly nodded. His calloused palm was black with dirt.

Manus felt the weight of his watch and his nipper’s pad touching his chest through his shirt pocket. He wondered whether Madge had had the baby. He took out his watch and checked the time, thirteen minutes after midnight. It would come at a time like this, he thought. They were only into the shift an hour.

It pained every time he took his watch out. Hours became the ballooning of men’s shadows on the rock wall, the dank smell of wet earth mingling with burnt wax, the jab of a sharp rock against his back until the nerve twitched, the burning down of a candle until it sputtered and got replaced before dying out, the shuffle of men who took turns at watching the first bulkhead for seepage.

“We hit the motherlode this time,” said Leonard.

Manus fingered his nipper’s pad where it rested

in his shirt pocket and mapped out all the things he wanted to write on it. La Montague reached a cigarette to the short candle flame. His tobacco glowed ember red as he sucked on the scraggly rolled twig, creating the only color in the dullness.

“Put it out,” Leonard said, but La Montague inhaled and turned the red glow gold. “You’re burning good air.” His arm stretched out and he snatched the cigarette from La Montague’s face. La Montague cursed at him in French.

“Leonard’s right,” Manus said. “No one smokes. Give me the rest of it, La Montague. All you pass it up.”

He dug a hole away from the wall and buried their tobacco. McGarry mumbled a tune to himself. Henry Fowler had a pack of cards and started a game with Mike Spihr and Atha Stewart. Negretto had his head lowered and mumbled over and over something quiet and Catholic. Murphy Shea leaned back on his elbows and kicked Negretto’s feet. “God’s a bum bastard.” Negretto swallowed and looked away from Shea. Shea grinned, repeated himself and laughed.

Hours later, Manus took another turn between the bulkheads. The air smelled worse in this small space than in the big chamber. Smoke had seeped through. He couldn’t see where, no fumes showed, but the air had fouled. The candle burned dimmer, and his breath came heavy as syrup. He didn’t know which to fear more, the gas or the slow poisoning of the big chamber

by every man whose breathing stole another fresh gulp of oxygen and who exhaled poison.

Away from the others, Manus took his nipper’s pad from his trouser pocket. His partner, Steve Gozdenica, looked at the smudge of white paper Manus held in the dark chamber and looked away as if he didn’t want to see it. Manus regretted that Gozdenica saw it. He wanted to write Madge, but he felt that saying anything somehow admitted defeat, betrayed the hope. He didn’t write what he wanted to say or what Gozdenica, whose eyes kept shifting away from him, believed he was writing. He wrote just the facts:

*Been here since 12 o’clock Friday
night. No gas coming through bulkheads.
Have water. All in good spirits.*

He squinted to see the dark pencil marks and held the white paper close to his eyes. He hadn’t betrayed their hope.

“What time is it?” Leonard asked Manus when he crawled back into the blind drift.

“Nine o’clock.”

“Morning?”

“Naw, night.”

“Saturday?”

“That’s right.” Twenty-one hours of waiting had passed. Leonard lay on his side without saying

anything. Men had shit in the diggings, pissed. Sweat loaded with the sharp adrenalin of their fears had made their bodies smell sour as apple vinegar, and exhaled carbon dioxide soured the chamber even more. They took a turn at the water keg. Leonard passed his up.

The water was warm. Manus dozed for the first time until the rumble of sliding rock shook the blind drift.

“Someone’s coming,” Bill Lucas said.

Manus felt the ground tremble again, then heard rocks and timbers clunk as they fell against each other.

“It’s a cave-in somewhere,” Leonard said, “below us. Probably water they’ve poured on the fire’s flooding the thirty-two hundred.”

“Won’t be long now.”

“Won’t they be surprised to find us?” Gozdenica said.

“We got to let them know we’re here.” Nick Jovick began tapping the compressed air line with a rock. Jovick made heavy thuds with a dirge-like slowness. A metallic clang knocked the walls, traveled down the crosscut and, as Jovick and Manus hoped, as far as the shaft, even up the shaft to some listening ear that could pick out his muted throb from all the noise and know it had bubbled up from half-a-mile underground, that someone was still alive and wanting rescue.

Then time became turns at hammering.

McAdams took a turn, Ned, even Murphy Shea. Shea’s pace settled into the same slow thuds that Jovick had made. Manus could hear the hollow metallic ping travel up the compressed air line. Looking intently serious, Shea hammered with the earnestness of one in true prayer. Maybe that’s what all prayer is, Manus thought, the monotonous hammering out of hope.

The pings wore into them. Far off in the mine, rock continued to slide. No one noticed it anymore. Spihr and Fowler no longer shuffled cards but stayed prone, close to the ground to get the good air that had settled there. The candle made only a faint glow now. In his trouser pocket, Manus had just two remaining stubs of the candles he had collected. He decided that when this candle was burned out he would let the darkness settle around them. It would make things worse, but there was no sense burning good air and using up their last hope for light. He wondered whether news of the fire had shocked Madge into giving birth.

“Is anybody gonna spell me?” came Krist Popovich’s voice. “I’ve been at it longest.”

Leonard took his place. After a long row of clinks, he hurled the rock against the pipe. It struck a sharp clang and opened every eye.

“It’s no use. No one’s coming. Not now. Not ever. I say we break the bulkhead and take our chances. The fire’s gotta be out. The smoke’s cleared enough for us to make a climb. What do you say, Manus?”

“We’ll test it. Nobody’ll get far in that gas. Me and Cobb’ll check it first.”

They pulled some canvas from the wall and ceiling. Smoke streamed through the dirt and chinks. Although Al raised a candle, the flow of black smoke wasn’t hard to see.

“Close it up.” Manus said. “We’ll try lower. Maybe it’s hanging above the floor.” They shoved a pipe beneath the wall. Fumes flowed out of the pipe, even though its end was on the ground. Leonard didn’t say anything after Manus told them about the gas.

“Me and you’ll timber fifty-feet,” Manus said to Bill. The boy had a vacant look on his face ever since Leonard threw the rock down. His open hands lay in his lap, palms up. The white of them showed in the dimness. His face seemed sunk, too hollow for sadness.

“That boy’s already learned to tell a ping from a thud. Ain’t no loose rock gonna take him out,” Krist Popovich threw in.

“He’s learned to bar down real good.” Manus smiled at him.

“It’s dangerous,” Bill said.

“She ain’t over yet.” Manus looked from face to face when he said it.

“I mined. Least I can say I did.”

“Damn rights,” said Popovich. “We gonna get you home yet so you take the next shift out.”

“Ain’t no next shift in this mine.”

“Be somebody got to put it back together.”

Manus closed his eyes. Memory could beat this monotonous waiting, turn the darkness into blue sky with clouds unfurling like sails and driving across the vast open space of a valley—no walls, not even the rank smell of his own breath flowing back to him. After a while, Popovich got the hand-sized rock Leonard had thrown away and began rapping the pipe.

Manus passed the water keg around for everyone to dip a finger in so they could wet their lips. The keg had gone almost dry. After lying in the dirt so long, wheezing for a breath, roasting in the heat of the crosscut, a man became so thirsty his lips stuck together. Manus allowed them just a finger’s worth and trusted them with the keg. As the keg passed from man to man, the wooden thumps of hands touching its barrel sounded.

When the keg came back, Manus took out his nipper’s pad. He had seen their faces as each man pressed a glistening finger to his lips and he felt a need to explain. They blamed him for being trapped here. He sensed that in the way they looked at him. His pencil whispered across the scratchpad:

*We were caught
in a trap. Gas
everywhere. Built bulkheads.
Could hear rock fall.*

*Rapped the pipe continuously
since 4 o'clock Sunday morning.*

No answer.

*Must be some fire. Hard
work ahead of the rescuers.*

*Have not
confided my fears to anyone.*

The whittle of his pencil sounded on the coarse paper. No one slept, not if he could help it. They would be opening the sky left inside them or just vacant, listening, hearing his pencil whisper its soft words.

“Write my Beth,” Murphy Shea said. Everyone had heard him write. “Tell her we did the best we could.”

They called out names then. Sarah, Anna, Carolyn, Mary, Rachel. Manus heard only the thin sound of resignation roll through their throats. He thought of stockyard cattle. Leonard stood up. His dark shadow looked like an old grizzly sow's. His leather apron was gone. With his shirt gone, his skin burnished ghostly in the candlelight.

“Goodbyes is it?” He stepped forward as he said it. “I'm not gonna die waitin'.”

“Don't make this ugly.” Manus rose up and slapped the pipe against his palm, but he understood Leonard. He couldn't blame Leonard for wanting to fight out.

“You'd use a pipe on me, huh? How many are goin' with me? Stand up. Don't let Dugan stop us.”

“You're choosin' for all of us if you break that wall, Leonard.”

“And just who are you choosin' for?”

“I won't let you do it. It ain't time for that yet.” Manus had the pipe poking up in front of him, ready to use it on any man who made for the bulkhead.

“I say it is. Get up.” Leonard yanked Yrja Johnson up. James, Shea, Bezersich, and McGarry stood up too. Cobb stood and came beside Manus, flashing his pipe for them to see. Steve Gozdenica made a hard fist and joined Manus. So did Jovick.

“All right, it's us and them,” Leonard said. “And the rest of ya? You gonna wait and die in here when the air goes poison?”

Bill Lucas stood up with Leonard this time, getting right beside him. Manus didn't swing on Bill when they charged. He went for Leonard, swung the pipe, and broke Leonard's head open. The big miner fell hard, the side of his face sticky with blood. Manus didn't whack him again but waited to see what Leonard would do next. Cobb shoved Bill to the side and used the pipe across his back. Jovick and Shea pushed and wrestled with the others.

Murphy Shea pulled Leonard away from the bulkhead. The fight was gone out of Leonard.

“I don't want them to hear about it up top,”

Manus said. “Don’t you be saying what happened down here. It don’t look good for miners fighting themselves. We got to keep our heads. If we wait things out, they won’t have to carry us out of here on slats.” He threw the pipe against the bulkhead. It rattled and bounced into the dirt.

Murphy Shea nodded agreement. “Manus is right.”

Stretching and flickering to stay alive, the candle flame thinned into a faint wisp. The carbon dioxide from all their breathing had filled the chamber with dead air. The candle sputtered in a last try to draw more oxygen, then went out. The darkness plunged so absolute, Manus felt how near they had come to the abyss. It was like slipping out of his body and pulling the blackness into himself. How can there be anything solid again, he wondered. At first he felt lost. To get his bearing, his ears picked up every saw of breath, even the gurgle of air inside Al Cobb’s throat, its gritty rasp against his teeth, tongue, and nostrils.

Without the light, the bulkhead at his back became the only real thing. The darkness settled the weight of inevitability on him. He sensed the others feeling it too. Someone groaned. A hush would pass and then someone else would moan or choke back a cry. Sometimes an outright cry sounded, like a muffled howl that ended in huffs of breath. When men called the names of women, the blurt of their voices stabbed

the blackness like sudden lightning. Some prayed out loud and others burst out crying, making no effort to hold it in anymore.

Men pawed the ground to stir oxygen out of the dirt. Manus could hear the scrapes of their clawing. He did it too, scraped a trench to hold his face into, hoping the hollow spot might catch him one gulp of breath to relieve the tightness. It was slow suffocation. But he could breathe easier; scraping freed enough oxygen in the loose dirt to make a difference.

No one rapped the pipe any more or waited between the bulkheads where the gas had grown too strong. They lay weak, almost lifeless, and groaned for air. He didn’t want to hear them breathe those last dying gasps. He pictured his own death coming to him as he slumped against the bulkhead—Madge left alone, except for his child. Maybe she had his child by now.

He called Madge’s name into the darkness. Then he wrote his last note, using both hands to place each word:

*If death comes it will be by all
oxygen being used from the air.
My Darling Madge,
It hurts my heart
to be taken from you.
Think not of me,*

*if death comes it will be
sleep without suffering.
I ask forgiveness
for any pain I ever caused you.
The place is for
you and the child.*

He tucked the note into his trouser pocket. Dying together served no purpose. He didn't want their lives on his hands, not anymore. He didn't want to hold them back. They had waited long enough and now they were waiting for the inevitable.

"Leonard," he said. "Get up. It's time we make a try." Pulling planks away from the interior wall, he made a hole large enough to get easily through. He went to the outer bulkhead. "There's good air in the Rainbow. Head for the twenty-four raise." He forced himself to stand straight. Ned Heston joined him; so did McAdams. Bill Lucas got up but hesitated.

"Go on. Go!" Leonard sunk his head back down on the ground.

"Leonard?" Manus said, "You coming?"

"Go get 'em, Manus. I'll be resting right here, waiting for you to come get me. Tell Katie I want to see her dance naked to the Whiskey Bottle Honkytonk when they bring me up." The others lay prone, passed out, maybe dead or feeling too hopeless to try.

Manus and Ned tore a hole in the bulkhead. Gas swarmed lazily in. They headed down the drift, Manus, Ned, and McAdams with Bill Lucas following.

Manus went to the manway and began climbing the ladder. Only Ned and McAdams were behind him. He could not see Bill Lucas on the ladder. The smoke was pretty thick.

It made me hold my breath to hear that bell. First nine bells rang, then six, then two. The danger signal. Felt like a thunderbolt had cracked heaven open. Nine-six-two, just like that, from out of nowhere. Over and over. Then twenty-four bells. I had my mask off and could smell the sweet odor of burnt flesh that hung over the mineyard ever since the fire. You just don't get used to a thing like that. It seems to be in the air even when it isn't. The sky was grayer than before. It felt like it took an hour just to count off those bells.

A few women were wandering through the rows of bloated corpses. You couldn't stop them from doing that. They had to come and look. They'd hold handkerchiefs soaked in camphor over their faces so they could stand the smell. I could tell them it was useless. But that was useless too. It was a sorry sight, not something a woman should have to see. One hundred sixty-two by last count, corpses with black and swollen faces, fat cheeks like melons, noses buried,

lips split and fingers big as butcher sausage. I'd carried over twenty of them up myself, but just thinking about what some poor woman had to carry the rest of her life left me cold.

I headed for the cage right away. You see, I was on the crew that checked the twenty-four hundred yesterday. There was nothing in that crosscut. I mean nothing, not one body anywhere.

Me and Tom O'Brien climbed in the cage together and went down to have a look. We found some boy. He kept telling us there were others. I believed him, but Tom said, "We got to get you out of here." Which we did because the boy got sight of a water keg by the station and a powerful urge was on him to have a drink. I had to hold him back. Ain't nothing more poisoned than water that's been through a fire.

There was a wind blowing. I didn't notice it myself, before that is, but when we got the boy up top, he started shivering and the bumps on his naked skin rose up. We got him to the dry fast as we could. Tom told the big boss that there were others down there. We must have walked right up to their bulkhead and turned around. Shit I thought and my stomach went tight, though I knew the best thing was not to think about it.

I had seen some awful things in the last three days, like the two station tenders who rode the cage

down to find out what the smoke meant. That was the beginning of trouble. By the time the hoistman finally got scared, it was too late. He hoisted the cage and brought the fire right up the shaft. I was in the mineyard at the time. All we could do was stand there and watch. The fire just leaped up and surrounded the cage. Roasted those two fellows. When we took their bodies out, their shoes were even burned off them. It had cooked their arms and legs so they loosened and dropped off when we tried to lift them out.

So when I volunteered to go down in the mine and bring up the rest I knew I couldn't let myself get worked up by thinking about anything. If you do, you get emotional and first thing you know you're not any help at all.

We went for the others and brought them up two by two. Twenty-six of them! For the first time, the numbers seemed to count. I wanted one of them women to run over and throw her arms around her husband because he was alive. I wanted the clouds to lift and the sun to show itself. I wanted somebody, anybody, to come over and tell me the rest of my life was going to be all right and that I was going places.

Then this miner named Leonard started calling for Manus Dugan. It had got dark. There was no moon. Me and Tom went back down and started climbing the manways. We found three men. Two were lying on the ground. One was hung up on a

ladder, caught from falling by the rungs. He had short curly hair. He looked clean and trim somehow. Tom helped me lift him down. They were dead. Smoke had got them. I checked the pockets of the one we found on the ladder and found his name on a piece of paper. Manus Dugan. A couple of notes were folded behind it. He had a wife and a child somewhere. I kept telling myself I had work to do and that I didn't feel a thing, not a thing—nothing.

The Tuna Fish Sandwich

Ron Fischer

I'm from Montaa-aaa-na. Sorry, I didn't mean to baa. It just happens sometimes. Slips right out. You know the state, the one that burns itself up every summer. If the forest fires haven't made the news already, they soon will, huge ponderosa pines exploding into golden geysers of flame, plumes of smoke rolling off ridges of green pine.

Or maybe it's the sheepherders you've read about, the ones who shoot replanted wolves or the new age women who run with wolves, on accident, of course. Or maybe it's the stockmen shooting at brucellosis-infected buffalo.

Of course, the story isn't always about men with rifles riding in pickups and shooting at wildlife. Sometimes it's about the wildlife. Mostly, the wildlife leaves the Montanans alone and picks on the tourists, most often California tourists, on accident, I'm sure. You know the story I mean, the grizzly bear that attacks sleeping campers, bites a man's face off, and chews a man's legs down to stumps. I wonder what makes a Californian so tasty to a grizzly?

There are some things you don't have to wonder about: menstruating women. Take a look. Go to Glacier Park or Yellowstone or the Bob Marshall Wilderness. You'll find the brochures: Having Cramps? Your Period? Don't Go Camping. You can bet that after one

of these attacks, local newspapers will run an article trying to warn women campers about the dangers. The headline goes something like *Tampons: Bait for Bears* or *Have Your Monthly, but Save Your Lifetime*.

Now that's the Montana you read about in the papers, even if you don't read the local papers, which, I suspect, most Californians don't. Maybe you've even been to Glacier Park yourself, or maybe you've got a calendar with a picture of Yellowstone Falls on it, tumbling white water cascading over gray rocks and between luscious pines. You got to know this: that's not the part of Montana I'm from. I'm from a place called Anaconda. I grew up there and then moved twenty-four miles away to Butte. Butte's a mining town, and Anaconda's where all the ore dug up in Butte was sent, ground up, and melted down. It's the smelter town. *Smelter*. Listen to the word. You can hear the word *melted* in it and the word *smoke*. Smoke and melted. *Smelter*. That one word says it all. That's Anaconda, furnaces and smokestacks.

The first Californians who came to Montana were hydraulic miners looking for gold. When they found Anaconda, they hooked their hoses up to pumps down by Warm Springs creek, and they hosed all the dirt off the hillsides, flushed every bit of ground down their sluices that settled all the gold and silver out of it. Imagine it, the hills of Anaconda, piles of boulders, dry as bone, empty as the moon. There's no dirt in Anaconda. No trees. They chopped all the trees down to

hold the mines in Butte up.

There is a mountain of black slag. If you think *smelter* sounds bad, say the word *slag* while you're looking at it. You'll want to gag. It's the stuff left over when the gold and silver and copper is scrubbed out of the rock. A mountain of mica waste. There's no fish in the streams around Anaconda, not in Warm Springs creek or the river it flows into, the Clark Fork. From Anaconda clear to Missoula, not a single fish, not even a water spider. To get the copper out of the rock, they soaked the ore in water. The copper dissolves. Places where they soak copper are called leach ponds. It has nothing to do with leeches, but I didn't know that when I was a kid. I kept trying to find me a leech—a big old, gnarly-looking thing, just to see what it would look like close up.

Now you can't keep leach water from soaking into the groundwater, or running off into a stream, so all the water around Anaconda and Butte is bad water, lethal. One time a flock of 262 Canadian snow geese landed in the big lake that was once the Berkeley Pit. All of them died. The *Silence of the Lambs* ain't nothing compared to 262 dead snow geese floating in bad water.

My dad was a smelterman. He used to bring arsenic home and spread it on our lawn. "Makes the grass green," he'd say and smile. It did too, real green, African green, rainforest green. It made my little brother sterile. I haven't had any children either, but

since I'm a teacher, I hate to use a word like *sterile* on myself. *Sterile*. It feels like 262 dead snow geese.

One day my dad was making sandwiches in the kitchen.

"Why are you making sandwiches?" my mom asked him. It was a good question, a very good question. You see, my dad was old school. I never once saw him wash a dish, run a vacuum cleaner, mop a floor, wipe a counter, or make a sandwich. Besides, it was 1:30. We had just eaten tuna fish sandwiches, potato salad, and watermelon. That's what we ate in June when the sky was blue. I had to sit at table with Dad and listen to the smacking of his lips and the chewing sounds he made with his dentures. Why, indeed, was he making a tuna fish sandwich when we had just eaten?

"Leave me alone, Lily," Dad said. "I know what I'm doing."

He said it like the words had "open-at-your-own-risk" stamped on them. "All right," Mom said, "you know what you are doing."

That week, every day we finished lunch at one o'clock, and every day my father would go out to the backyard, get down on his hands and knees, and dig dandelions out of the lawn, and everyday at one-thirty, he came in and made two tuna fish sandwiches, wrapped them in wax paper, and put them in his shirt pockets. Then he would go back to digging dandelions.

"Guess he's hungry," my mom finally decided.

She said this to me as she looked out the back door and watched Dad dig up dandelions. She had a fallen look on her face, as if she had failed him in some way, the inadequacy, I guess, of her own tuna fish sandwiches.

During the depression, my dad was a single man. He and Mom didn't marry until 1945. All those years of the depression, he was a hobo, a man who rode the rails and looked for work. That's, in fact, how he came to Anaconda, riding on an ore train. He had even met Woody Guthrie once. He told me he had been all over this country, from the woods of Portland, Maine, to the grapevines of Monterey, California. Just like the song that Woody sang—"This land is your land. This land is my land, from California, to the New York island"—which was my dad's favorite song, the one he would hum to himself when he dug dandelions.

"Never had a hard time finding work," he said. "They always thought I was a Mexican."

My dad was an Ashkenazi man from Russia, but he did have dark skin and looked more like a Sephardic man, as if he ought to have come from Morocco.

"Mexicans always got the work, you see. They knew how to work. Never hurt the trees in an orchard. Never broke branches. Never ripped a vine. Worked for cheap and hard, and so did I."

I wanted him to tell me about the places he had been to and the hobo jungles and the railroad goons.

"Bad times," he'd say. "Lonely places. Roads so

deserted, you'd think you'd never see your soul again. Makes me too lonely talkin' bout those times."

I think it had something to do with my dad being a hobo that made him make tuna fish sandwiches every day at one-thirty.

Now the state prison in Deer Lodge is 28.3 miles away from Anaconda. My dad and I marked it once on our 1962 red Falcon's odometer. You wouldn't think a place with no trees, no dirt, no fish, you wouldn't think a place like that would be a good place to hide out, but you see, the hills around Anaconda was full of these miners' shacks that those Californians built in the old days. Just an iron stove in them and a cot nailed to the wall, some old-time California newspapers for wallpaper.

About ten years before, a man driving to Yellowstone Park, a man going there to see the falls up close instead of on his wall calendar, well, this fella stopped and picked up two hitchhikers. The highway patrol found the man's corpse. His heart was cut out of him, and all his fingers and thumbs were missing. They found the two hitchhikers, who were from California, driving the man's car. Both of them had the man's fingers in their pockets. The police wondered what happened to the fella's heart, and these hitchhikers said they ate his heart.

I read the news about an escaped convict, one of the guys who were serving life sentences for eating

that man's heart. I got this sudden idea for why Dad was making tuna fish sandwiches at one-thirty in the afternoon.

"Dad," I asked him, "why are you making tuna fish sandwiches at one-thirty in the afternoon?"

"That guy," he said.

"What guy?" I asked.

"Ha, you know, that guy in the alley."

"Oh," I said. Both my parents expected me to read their minds. If it was a thought in their heads, it was supposed to be something I knew too. I'd like to tell you I told my mom about the guy in the alley. I'd like to tell you that the police showed up and caught an escaped convict and that they found a tuna fish sandwich in his pocket. I can only tell you this: I thought about them dead snow geese. I thought about an old miner named Isaac who used to live in a miner's shack up on cemetery hill, probably the very place where that escaped convict was hiding out. I thought about my dad walking down a treeless road somewhere in Nevada and looking at the moon. I thought about a mountain of black slag, a century of black slag sitting on the edge of town, and no fish out there in Warm Springs creek, not even a tree growing alongside its banks. I went into the front room and folded up the newspaper that had two stories on the front page, one about an escaped convict and the other about a grizzly attack, and I carried it out to the backyard. This is true

what I am telling you, all of it. I put that newspaper in the garbage can that stood in our alley beside the garage. My dad was digging dandelions, big yellow dandelions, big as sunflowers, and was humming "This land is your land" to himself.

He looked up at me and said, "They make good salad."

It was a blue-skied day in June. That's what I remember. I put the garbage can lid back on the barrel. It made the sound of rusted metal clapping against rusted metal, and I caught sight of someone walking up the alley, just a blur of a green pant leg.