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The Big Sleep: The Malartic Mine Fire of 1947

Bryan D. Palmer and Robin Lunn

MINES HAVE BEEN THE LIFEblood of specific Canadian locales.¹ They have also been chambers of death, workplaces in which safety and working-class welfare have been sacrificed in the interests of profit and production. The resulting cave-ins, explosions, slides, and fires have killed workers by the thousands over the course of the last two centuries. Between 1871 and 1939 more than 1,600 were killed in Nova Scotia's mines; in Alberta, over 1,000 miners died on the job in the years 1905-1945. Workers had an acute sense of what it meant, on a daily basis, to risk their lives in the bowels of the earth. In some sectors of the mining industry a language of tragedy evolved — "blood on the coal" — indicative of the perils of work "in the trade," while particular mine disasters remain embedded in the popular memory of many mining communities.² The recent 1992 deaths of 26 miners in

¹Jack Timmerman's writings, including the original manuscript of "The Big Sleep," which follows this introduction, were preserved by his wife, Bess Day, who packed and unpacked them many times during family moves after Timmerman's death. They are now in the possession of his daughter, Robin Lunn.

²For background on Nova Scotia and Alberta see Allen Seager, "A Proletariat in Wild Rose Country: The Alberta Miners, 1905-1945," PhD thesis, York University, 1982; David Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Miners, 1917-1926," PhD thesis, Dalhousie University, 1979; Paul MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers: Labour in Cape Breton* (Toronto 1976). Evocative studies of specific events include David Jay Bercuson, "Tragedy at Bellevue: Anatomy of a Mine Disaster," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 3 (1978), 221-32; Ian McKay, "Springhill 1958," *New Maritimes*, 2 (December 1983/January 1984), 4-16; Seager, "Frank Slide: Did the Bryan D. Palmer and Robin Lunn, "The Big Sleep: The Malartic Mine Fire of 1947," *Labour/Le Travail*, 39 (Spring 1997), 225-40.

Westray's Pictou County mine are not so much an aberration — as crude as the accounts of greed, political manipulation, and corrupt avoidance of safety responsibilities are — as they are representative of a sadly recurring process, an almost ritual-like blood sacrifice of labour by those who value dollars over lives.³

One such moment of sacrifice took place in 1947 in the No. 4 shaft of the East Malartic Gold Mine in northwestern Québec. Located a mere 18 miles from Val d'Or, Malartic was a new mining town of approximately 4,000 in the late 1940s, production having commenced in 1935-1937. The town's mines produced at least \$1.5 million annually, output peaking in 1941 at just under \$3 million. Local 696 of the International Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Union reported a membership of 246 in the 1940s, but unionism's activities receive little treatment in the town's 50th Anniversary "booster" publication.⁴ No doubt the construction of the mine shafts, some 2700 feet deep, the labours of extracting ore and building a base for trade unionism in the inhospitable climate of a company town, registered particular histories, now obscured.

What left its imprint on the historical record, albeit incompletely, was the fire that started in No. 4 shaft on Thursday 23 April 1947, a blaze that supposedly commenced in the lunch room of the tenth level, and quickly filled the shaft with dense smoke. Apparently caused by a discarded cigarette, tossed aside after a midnight meal — this was the official "explanation" — the blaze drove five of the sixteen miners to attempt an escape up the shaft. Four managed to make it to the surface alive, while one miner, 45-year-old Tralan Lucaci, succumbed to asphyxiation. The remaining eleven miners retreated down the shaft in an attempt to avoid the rising smoke.

Twelve hours later, with rescue squads and equipment rushed in from neighbouring mines as far away as Kirkland Lake (and later dispatched from Timmins and North Bay as well), the trapped men were still unaccounted for.⁵ Local

Greed of the Coal-Owners Bring Turtle Mountain Down?" *The Beaver* (April-May 1996), 41-7. For broad, international statements on miners indicative of the tragic suffering of this group of workers and how it cultivates a specific world view see John Berger, "Miners," in *Keeping a Rendezvous* (New York 1991); E.P. Thompson, "A Special Case," *New Society*, 24 February 1972.

³Popular accounts of the Westray deaths include Dean Jobb, *Calculated Risk: Greed, Politics and the Westray Tragedy* (Halifax 1995); Shaun Comish, *The Westray Tragedy: A Miner's Story* (Halifax 1993). Note particularly the discussion in Harry Glasbeek and Eric Tucker, "Death by Consensus: The Westray Mine Story," in David Frank and Gregory S. Kealey, eds., *Labour and Working-Class History in Atlantic Canada: A Reader* (St. John's 1995), 399-439.

⁴Mike Solski and John Smaller, *Mine Mill: The History of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers in Canada Since 1895* (Ottawa 1984), 76; Malartic, 1937-1987: '*S'unir pour grandir!*' (Malartic 1987), 66.

⁵The trapped miners were: Fernand Morel, Heliodore Aubin, Prosper Cossette, Gerard Dube, Marcel Chabot, Angel Detigny, Jean Charles Rheault, Albert Beaupres, Robert Poitras, Edgar Lacroix, John Gunn Macdonald.

officials, provincial mining inspectors, clergymen, and doctors, as well as mine managers, gathered at the scene. Women, many with babies in their arms, sobbed outside the mine's gate, some attempting to climb the wire fence or force entry to the shaft. Rumours spread that rescuers, who manipulated vents on the shaft levels to clear smoke and fight the fires burning at the timbers, were closing in on the entombed miners on Friday. It was possible that, at one point late in the rescue efforts, the eleven men were just one hour from liberation. Their fate was sealed, however, when an air line burst early Saturday morning, flooding the mine with carbon monoxide that would, according to mine supervisors, have killed any survivors within a matter of minutes.

Donald M. MacLean, mine manager, issued a statement at 6 AM Saturday giving up any hope of freeing the trapped miners. Faced with the destruction of the million dollar mine shaft, company officials and the Québec mining inspector made the decision to seal all air vents and flood the shaft with six million gallons of water, drowning the fire and ending any uncertainty about the life chances of the eleven trapped miners. The local coroner announced plans for an inquest, and in the House of Commons Co-Operative Commonwealth leader M.J. Coldwell questioned Labour Minister Humphrey Mitchell about safety devices in the country's mines: Mitchell replied with the characteristic evasiveness that miners have come to expect from parliamentarians — this was a matter for the provincial government to address, as was any inquiry into the Malartic events. No. 4 shaft was sealed for a month until 23 May 1947. At that point Jack Timmerman, a 32-year-old miner, born and raised in Kingston, Ontario, was asked to be one of the original party of 6 to make a descent into the mine and begin the operations of pumping out the flooded chamber and recovering the bodies of the lost miners.⁶

Timmerman was born 2 February 1915 of Dutch-Irish background, a second-generation Canadian raised, along with two brothers, by his mother and grandparents, his father having abandoned the family in 1914 just before Jack was born. Growing up in the 1930s, Timmerman's immediate family was poor, but sustained itself on the mother's stenographer wage, help from kin, and after-school jobs landed by the boys, who became popular, thrived educationally, and were well-known in local sports' circles. But economic prospects were nil at the depth of the Great Depression, and after high school graduation Timmerman rode the rails and may possibly have found work in the Sudbury mines in 1935, an experience that would have aided him in securing the Malartic employment in the late 1940s. It also probably allowed him insight into the technological transformation of mining,

⁶The above account of the events of April 1947 draws on a series of articles in the Kingston *Whig-Standard*, including "Malartic Gold Mine Fire Kills Worker; 11 Others Missing," 24 April 1947; "Rescuers Dig All Night: No Word from Trapped Men ..." 25 April 1947; "Give Up Hope for Malartic Miners," 26 April 1947; "Didn't Believe Fire Serious, 11 Gold Miners Seal Doom," 28 April 1947; "Seal Off Malartic Mine," 28 April 1947; "Plan Inquest at Malartic," 29 April 1947.

then displacing some of the skills and traditional knowledges of miners, a process he outlined in a 1949 *Canadian Business Magazine* article, "Anyone Can Be A Miner Now." His Sudbury sojourn, however, could not have been lengthy: in 1936 he was trucking in Barkerville, British Columbia. In his travels he was accumulating a store of understanding about working-class life, as well as some commitments to labour's rights and an attachment to socialist ideas.

Timmerman carried his growing sense of working-class entitlement back to his home town of Kingston, where he married, became a father, and drove a grocery truck for a wholesaler. In 1940 he was hired at Alcan, where he promptly threw himself into the cause of organizing a union, aligning himself with the United Electrical Workers. His initial efforts failed to galvanize unambiguous support, a strike vote was lost, and Timmerman was ironically elected to the Employees Council, what was in effect a company union. He was soon given the boot from that body, displaced from his Tubing Department job, and pushed promotionally into a new lab building. Opposed to the war and highly ambivalent about working in a plant producing for the Allied effort, Timmerman was obviously torn in different directions by material need and personal conviction. Under wartime regulations, his choices were limited: work in an "essential industry" or sign-up. As is often the case, outside forces resolved his dilemmas for him, but hardly in a manner that proved satisfactory. By 1944 the war was winding down, and Alcan began laying off workers, preparing for the coming of the post-war reconversion to peace-time production with its obvious workforce reductions. Timmerman got his walking papers. A Woodsworthian pacifist and confirmed atheist, he was then ironically called to military service, a cause he looked on with considerable anguish. He went to basic training committed to doing the minimal routinized "Zombie-like" tasks, refusing the enthusiasms of the army with obvious disdain. But the war soon ended and Timmerman never actually saw overseas action. Jobless, somewhat adrift, and known in Kingston as a union agitator, the war's end was a time of uncertainty for Timmerman.⁷

To complicate matters, Timmerman's personal life was in the midst of considerable turmoil. His first marriage was breaking up, and he was falling in love with Bess Day, a doctor's daughter with literary aspirations, a woman who would encourage him to write.⁸ Both Day and Timmerman were already married, and to make an unfortunate situation worse their spouses were related. The divorces were

⁷On Timmerman and Alcan see David Brian Akers, "Capital Organizes Labour: Company Paternalism, Industrial Unionism, and Alcan Workers in Kingston, Ontario, 1941-1945," MA thesis, Queen's University, 1987.

⁸I do not read Timmerman's writing as an escape from class or a repudiation of his labour politics, but an extension of these dimensions of his life. In this sense there is little to place Timmerman in the tradition of those 19th-century worker writers discussed in Jacques Ranciere, *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France* (Philadelphia 1989). More pertinent is Douglas Wixson, *Worker-Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Midwestern Literary Radicalism, 1898-1990* (Urbana 1994).

messy. But Timmerman seemed to have found a partner who shared his growing need to cultivate his creative impulses. He completed a novel about newsboys growing up in Kingston in 1944. It probably seemed an appropriate time to leave Kingston, however, and Timmerman found his way to the East Malartic Mine. He and Day married there in 1946.

Little is known of his time in Malartic, but he was outspoken about the 1947 fire and eventually moved from East Malartic to Canadian Malartic Mines in 1949. Undoubtedly a union man, he was a “pusher,” demanding overtime bonuses and proving something of a thorn in the side of management. In August of 1950 he suffered a heart attack on the job; his recovery was difficult and slow and it was apparent he would never again do arduous physical labour. He battled with the Québec Workmen’s Compensation Board, trying unsuccessfully to secure some relief from the crippling expense of medical bills. The strain took its toll, worsening his physical condition. Writing became, out of necessity, his livelihood, although hardly a lucrative one. The family soon moved south, Bess securing a job as city-editor of the Woodstock daily newspaper, the *Sentinel Review*. Timmerman’s time was devoted to his family and his new literary vocation. He sold a few stories, wrote a satirical play about his wife’s attempts to find work with the federal civil service in Ottawa, and took on the occasional paid assignment for the newspaper. He died in June 1953 while covering the local candidate for the upcoming provincial election.

“The Big Sleep,” written in 1948, and Timmerman’s account of the 1947 Malartic events, is something of a period piece. Convinced that no Canadian magazine would take the account, Timmerman sent it to the American magazine *True*, a sensationalist pulp fiction outlet that provided an almost caricatured forum for the “man’s” story.⁹ Destined not to be published in his lifetime, it has a 1940s ring to it, the Chandleresque tone evident, not only in the title, but in the *noirish* images of the fire’s aftermath: bodies floating placidly in underground caverns; an almost surreal environment of suspension, men dangling by safety harnesses, the “banshee-like” moans of continuous pumping ringing always in their ears; the climate of odiferous decomposition; acts of human recovery that involve rafting, piking, and basketing corpses that are then transported from the already secure grave of the shaft to an intruding surface of forensic investigation; the startling final discovery as a prying shovel eases into the soft flesh of a staring face.¹⁰

Throughout it all, Timmerman sustains an eminently masculine style, one of class resignation that nevertheless refuses defeat. Its resiliency lies in its basic

⁹Brief comment on *True*, which probably had its most prominence in the 1920s and 1930s and was associated with magazines such as *True Confessions*, *Darling Detective*, and *Startling Detective*, is found in Robert Polito, *Savage Art: A Biography of Jim Thompson* (New York 1995), 321, 451.

¹⁰Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* was first published in February 1939 by the New York publisher Alfred A. Knopf.

articulation of humanity in the face of deaths that are never actually conceded as necessary, in its staunch insistence of class difference, and in its final ability, at the point of actually locating the miners' bodies, to open the issue to a collective discussion, posing the ultimate revelation to authority in terms of class experience, tension, and hostility. What seems an almost sacred subject — the recovery of the victimized dead — becomes a medium through which, in what Mike Davis has called "noir's transformational grammar," Timmerman explores the shadows of the miners' culture where danger and death are best confronted with the distanced edge of rough masculinity, a humour that recognized the ludicrousness of so much of capitalism's project.¹¹

The Malartic fire and its devastating losses reversed Marx's dictum that history repeats itself, "the first time as tragedy, the second as farce."¹² Miners joked about risking their lives to dig gold thousands of feet below the earth's surface, so that it could be transported 2000 miles to Fort Knox, where it would be incarcerated in an underground fortress. This was truly farce. In the spring of 1947, however, the Malartic miners, Timmerman among them, went back into the ground as tragedy, locating their dead brothers so that they could be brought to the surface, only to be returned to the earth in ways that satisfied convention, but paled in anti-climactic significance before their miners' ceremonial burial that preceded the final ascent.¹³ To Timmerman it was "utter stupidity ... the macabre jest had come home to roost." One senses the desperation of his realization, far more effective in its ultimate *noirish* condemnation than a blunt attack on capital's responsibility, but also, perhaps, far less soothing. Timmerman made his own trip to the surface and, like many a man before him, "got roaring, stinking drunk." For him, the ultimate personal tragedy was that he would have barely two more years before mine work would take its own toll, and only three years, after that, in which he would live as a struggling working-class writer, destined, like many others, to die without the recognition that he deserved.

¹¹On noir and the masculine style see Ken Worpole, *Dockers and Detectives: Popular Reading — Popular Writing* (London 1983); Ernest Mandel, *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story* (London 1984); Fredric Jameson, "The Synoptic Chandler," in Joan Copjec, ed., *Shades of Noir* (London 1993), 33-56; David Madden, ed., *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties* (Carbondale and Edwardsville 1968); and Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York 1990), esp. 38.

¹²Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow 1968), 97.

¹³In the town's 107-page self-promotional history, *Malartic, 1937-1987*, 99, the 1947 events receive barely a mention, but there is a picture of the 21 June 1947 public funeral, in which it appears that coffins are transported by two flat-bed trucks preceded by what seems a modest turn-out of townspeople.

THE BIG SLEEP

JACK TIMMERMAN

THIS SUMMER, if you hit the Tourist Trail to Canada and your venturesome spirit follows the route of the original prospectors through the string of fabulous gold-mining towns that Northwestern Quebec flaunts like a necklace of raw nuggets — Noranda ... Malartic ... Val d'Or — take especial care as you enter the eastern approaches to the Town of Malartic and you will see a unique and notable monument to man's disastrous struggle for gold. A half mile from the highway and across a crater-like "glory-hole" caused by underground cave-ins, a pure white cement pillar rises one hundred and forty feet above the rank muskeg and scrub bushland. There is no plaque upon this imposing edifice to commemorate the sixteen men who died two thousand six hundred feet beneath it during its construction nor is there any bas relief work in the cement depicting the heroic feats of the rescue workers who, armed with hooked poles like peaveys, floated on makeshift rafts into an odoriferous underground station and like loggers on a drive, steered their former buddies, dead for two months, into wickerwork baskets. A monument in the hearts and minds of the bereaved members of the community, the white pillar serves a more functional purpose as the headframe of East Malartic Mine's new inclined shaft No. 4 — affectionately nicknamed "The Big Slope" at its inception, now and for evermore, branded by the miners with typically callous humour as "The Big Sleep."

It is a necessary outlet, this harsh and sometimes, cruel humour of the miner, especially the shaftmen of which I am one. Practical jokes are an essential opiate to relieve the unnatural conditions of working underground, a soporific to ease the tension of ever present danger and also, the only means available to vent one's spleen on a man who has aroused in you a violent dislike. The mining regulations, in their wisdom, decree instant dismissal for striking another man underground but there is no edict against throwing pie, the result being most lunch periods underground take on the semblance of an old Mack Sennett comedy. However, the one that gets the pie in the face usually goes one better the next day, like Fred, the Ukrainian, who wrapped the paper from a stick of dynamite around an eight inch

length of loading stick to resemble the original explosive, cut the detonating cap from a short piece of fuse and inserted the fuse in the false stick of powder.

This ingenious contrivance Fred lit in the crowded lunchroom and his fiendish laughter at the resulting mess of overturned lunch pails deterred not a whit the frantic exodus of alarmed miners through the lunchroom door. Deranged laughter is not a rarity underground and to men who are familiar with all the legendary stories of suicide among miners, the spectacle of a man apparently intent on blowing himself to bits is a very convincing prod to get as far away as possible. Definitely, it is not a subject to stand around and discuss, sanely and calmly.

Childish, that grown men should comport themselves like this? Yes, miners are childish in more ways than one and yet an especially youthful trait of theirs is both enviable and admirable. Despite their hard and dangerous occupation, their coarse jesting and crude profanity, most miners retain the deep, unshakable, abiding faith of childhood — the main source of their strength, I sensed but failed to understand, in overcoming the near insurmountable task of rescue which confronted our shaft crew when twelve men of the graveyard shift were trapped below the fire which broke out on the tenth level of No. 4 shaft on April 23rd, 1947 and later, on October 7, when four members of my own shift plunged to their death from a height of five hundred feet in a free riding timber cage.

The fire, the miners trapped a half mile underground and the fate of the new million dollar shaft made a natural news story that Canadian newspapers played up to the hilt for the better part of two months, which is no mean feat in itself in these days of short-lived headlines. Even the international press featured the story when the underground drama was at its height. Claustrophobia — the fear of enclosed places — a universal characteristic of mankind, has always amplified an underground or undersea disaster out of all proportion to the number of lives involved and the East Malartic Mine fire was no exception. Besides, this fire had a few new angles of its own to set the copy writers imaginations aflame.

No. 4 shaft, East Malartic Mines, is cut out of the solid rock on a sixty-one degree angle to a depth of 2,700 feet. It is exactly like an elevator shaft in a skyscraper but its dimensions of 36 feet by 10 feet are separated by British Columbia fir timbers into five compartments — the manway compartment strung with ladders as an emergency escape route, two skip compartments to haul the ore to surface and two cage compartments — one to carry timber and mining gear, the other to transport thirty-five miners at one time. These cages and skips run on wheels up and down 85 pound railroad rails which are spiked to the timber that completely lines the shaft. This tremendous amount of timber formed the fuel for the fire. Above tenth level, there were several escape routes but 625 feet below, where the shaftmen mucked, drilled and blasted the shaft deeper, there was no other way out than to climb the ladders through the smoke and past the fire which started right at the shaft station. Four men made it and escaped with their lives, a fifth managed to get as far as the tenth level but succumbed and fell to the trolley tracks

where a search crew on the electric motor ran into him but there was no word from eleven men.

Now, began the terrific pressure on the mine officials and the chief mining inspector for the Province of Quebec. Here was a million dollar mine shaft going up in smoke that could be saved by smothering or drowning the fire but here, also, was the decided possibility of eleven men alive somewhere in the mine. And to make matters worse, here was the combined press of Canada featuring front-page pictures of the tearful wives and children of the entombed miners clinging to the wire fence surrounding the mine and asking the pertinent question, "Where are our daddies?" A day went by, then another and finally, the fateful decision to seal the mine was made after the gauges on the air compressors showed a major break in the air pipes somewhere in the mine which, normally, would prevent enough air reaching a hidden cul-de-sac in the mine where miners might sustain life for days. Hundreds of cement bags and tons of sand were piled over all air vents to the mine and an estimated six million gallons of water was poured down the shaft in a combined attempt to smother or quench the fire. All of which did not lessen the uncertainty or mounting hysteria one iota.

The company kept us shaftmen and all other miners busy doing Joe-jobs on surface till May the 23rd, the day the mine was unsealed. I was among the first six men asked to go underground to install a pump above tenth level, the height of the flooding. It had been a long, long month of waiting but now began the longest month of my life.

No. 4 Shaft was a proper mess. The fire that had started on the tenth level had burned out all the timber 350 feet up the shaft to the eighth level. As the wood was consumed, tons upon tons of steel rails, air and water pipe and a special crawl beam for the bucket hoists were released on a timber-smashing career down the shaft. The two bucket hoists, each with a thousand feet of steel cable, had followed. The wooden bins which held over a hundred tons of muck were no more — the muck was back where it came from. Tons of rock loosened by the heat of the fire and the cold of the water, hung over our heads like the sword of Damocles yet we decided to try and bulkhead the shaft off thirty feet above tenth level rather than wait the two months that would be necessary to re-timber up to the eighth level. Fools for luck, that we were, we did it without so much as a scratched finger, yet I shall never be able to forget the terrorized, mad scrambling dashes down the drift or tunnel at the sound of distant rumbling. Back we would go, choking on the dry rock dust that permeated the air after every rock slide, to find the tenth level station filled with mountainous slabs of rock. However, finally our bulkhead held and after setting up two small hoists in the station and attaching muck skips to each, we were ready to begin the descent.

For once the imaginations of the copy writers of the world-wide press fell far short of the actuality. They described us as "working like mad men, tearing away at the muck with our bare hands," but not one came close to the mark — the day

by day grind of dangling in safety harness from life ropes, for no one knew when the tangle of muck, splintered timber, steel rails and pipe might give way; the complete re-timbering job that had to be done; the back-breaking handling of the muck, three and four times before it was ultimately disposed of; the ever present danger of loosened rock and above all, the continuous banshee-like moaning of our pumps as they stirred the odoriferous water in which the decomposing bodies were to lie for two months before receiving Christian burial.

Yet, should we be censured for having fun during the ordeal? I think not. It was a necessary safety valve for our pent-up emotions and fears. Like the day we could hardly eat our lunch from laughing at the plight of highly imaginative Frankie Novosel, the Yugoslav, whom we left alone during the lunch period behind the spruce lagging which lines the shaft, where he had nailed himself in with no means of escape till we chose to let him out. Left alone, that is, with the discomforting admonishment to "Look out for the ghosts, Frankie!" And another shift we laughed ourselves through eight hours of heart-breaking work was the time Big Mike Dopudja turned on the air pump suddenly behind Fat Joe Cyczicki who, normally as slow and clumsy as an ox, clambered up his life line with the agility of a chimpanzee when he imagined the sudden noise was the muck pile giving away.

I remember so vividly that graveyard shift we found the bodies as I shall always be able to picture with ease every preceding shift of that month of rescue work. I had just come down the shaft on our muck skip with the last set of timber we had to place above eleventh level. The pumps, left running between the change of shifts, had lowered the water two feet below the brow of the station, a vast cavern blasted out of the hanging wall — 52 feet long, 36 feet long and 12 feet high. The station, exposed to the air for the first time in two months, gave a strong hint that our search was at an end.

Charley Walsh supplied the necessary curiosity. Down on his knees on the muck which blocked four compartments and with his lamp in his hand instead of clamped on his hat, Charley practically stood on his head to peer into the station.

"Say, gang, come here," shouted Charley, excitedly. "I can see one of the bodies. There's another. And there's another."

So it went, until six of our former comrades could be seen floating near the roof of the station through the small peephole in the muckpile. For awhile, all I could think of was that dead men don't all do the 'Deadman's Float' — some of these guys seemed to be swimming peacefully on their backs, well out of the water as if they were lying on planks, and propelling themselves along in the ripples flung from our pumps with strange bundles of blackened rags where their hands should have been.

Then arose one of those ridiculous situations which are aligned often with tragedy, when simple men are met with something bigger than themselves; we began to argue among ourselves whether or not we should tell anybody!

To be accurate, we did keep our secret for nearly two hours before the management was roused out of bed at 2.30 a.m. Perhaps that had something to do with all of us agreeing to the disclosure. Any working man who has ever laboured on graveyard shift will understand our pleasure in getting the boss out of bed.

If that seems ludicrous — risking our lives for a month and then, becoming extraordinary shy after attaining our goal — consider the scene of the actual rescue when the water was finally pumped low enough in the one open compartment to enable the shaftmen to float into the station on hastily constructed rafts and while one tried to steer a corpse with a pike pole, two others attempted to maneuver a hinged Indian wicker-work basket about the inert form. Then the case was strapped shut like an Egyptian sarcophagus and the hole dripping burden was hauled up the ladders by ropes to the waiting cage which transported it to tenth level where a timber truck rolled it down to the improvised undertaking parlour — the welding shop — to be viewed by the coroner's jury and then placed in hermetically sealed coffins.

Franked, the Yugoslav, did not think it ludicrous.

"She's a poor life, Jackie, this mining," he said to me as we walked heavy-footed in our big mucking boots back down the drift to the shaft after delivering the eleventh victim to the welding shop. "A man works hard to eat, to build a little home for his family, to give some money to his church and perhaps, to save a few dollars for his old age. Then he ends up like those poor fellows." Frankie shook his head. "I tell you, Jackie, mining's a poor life."

It was easy for me to agree with Frankie then and during the next two weeks, especially when the complete roof of the eleventh station stripped itself to a depth of five feet and came crashing down while we were searching for the last victim. Luckily, a certain amount of cracking and groaning had given us sufficient warning to escape but all those additional tons of rock had to be broken with hammers and turned over by hand in the search that continued. Ironically, after continuously exposing ourselves to danger in the station, the last body was found eventually thirty feet below the station in the shaft. Upon poor Leo Kulukowski fell the full brunt of what we had all feared every inch of the way down the shaft — the prying of a shovel into something soft, the lifting of a rock from a staring face. Leo's nickname among the shaft crew was Donald Duck because of his almost continuous squawking but this time, as he dropped the rock back and leaped up the ladders five rungs at a jump outdoing his namesake by a country mile, no one blamed him a damn bit.

The second accident at East Malartic Mine that year resulted in the death of a surface worker engaged in the construction of the all-cement headframe. He fell from the scaffolding with a loaded cement buggy. His death kept alive the growing legend that No. 4 shaft was jinxed but otherwise, affected the shaft crew very little. Surface is such a distant land when one is a half mile or more underground. Besides, we were busy clearing the shaft of its tangle all the way to twelfth level and fixing

up the burnt out section from ten to eighth level. All during this time of rescue and repair work, we had been using the alternative, vertical shaft No. 3 for transportation of men and supplies but soon, we would be putting the heavy railroad rails down the shaft preparatory for mining operations to begin. The temporary thirty-pound rails we had used for the rescue work would be too light for the heavy muck skips.

October the seventh, the day of the third accident, started auspiciously for Charley Hughes, Charley Walsh and myself. Fat Joe Cyczicki, our shaft-crew leader, gave us our orders to stay on surface and send down the big rails to tenth level. At long last, the brand new hoist was ready for its first day of operation.

Surface! that magic seldom-ever land to an underground man. A chance to feel the sun on our backs during working hours, an opportunity to eat our lunch by other than feeble lamplight, a brief but oh, how welcome respite from damp, dark rock walls and their baleful, foreboding omnipresence. And it was such an easy shift, a novelty in a shaftman's life. It was child's play for the three of us, with the aid of a small but strong tigger hoist, to load the forty foot rails on two skips in tandem and send them down to the tenth level where Fat Joe, Romeo Tardif, Leonard Armstrong, Leo Culhane, George Briere and Frankie Novosel unloaded them.

The day went by like an underground man's dream but in retrospect, there occurred several of those curious incidents — seemingly unrelated links in a chain of circumstances — which seem to portend all major disasters and that leave simple men to wonder at the forceful hand that guides them to their destinies.

When Kenny McLennan, the shaft captain, joined the three of us in the shaft headframe that morning, he asked me first thing,

"What are you doing here? I told Joe to leave Leonard on surface and to take you underground."

I was unable to fathom, then or now, why Fat Joe changed the captain's instructions nor did I think to ask him when he came up to surface at lunchtime. He reported that he and the rest of the boys were having just as easy a shift underground and I do believe Joe would have remained on surface for the afternoon if a pipefitter had not asked him to deliver a heavy pipe elbow to fourth level. We laughed heartily at his feigned timidity as he shouted, "Goodbye, boys," and his mock attempt to shake hands with Kenny before his descent. After months of riding up and down the shaft in tipsy buckets or timber buggies suspended from a slender three-quarter inch cable, the tandem skips hooked to the fat, one and five-eighths inch cable looked so reassuring.

Again at the fateful moment of 3.25 in the afternoon, when the two Charleys and I began walking to the change house, our shift completed, down on tenth level Frankie Novosel persuaded George Briere to get off the new skips and accompany him up No. 3 shaft. Two hundred and ten feet below, on the eleventh level, a solitary electrician dismantled his scaffolding from the skip compartment where he had been installing a signal box and thereby, averted death by scant seconds as the

electric power cut off on the brand new hoist, the foolproof automatic brake failed to function and the tandem skips plunged with sickening speed past the spot where he had been working, carrying Fat Joe, Romeo, Leo and Leonard to their watery graves at the twelfth level.

The three of us who had spent the day on surface were half undressed when Kenny, the captain, came running into the change house.

"Get your clothes on, fellows. The hoistman says the skips have gone down!"

With pounding hearts we scrambled back into our mining clothes, grabbed our lamps and ran pell-mell to No. 3 shaft, arriving just in time to meet Frankie and George getting off the first cage, both entirely in ignorance of the accident. Our anxious faces, coinciding with the mine accident signal — nine bells — which the electrician began sounding far below, soon enlightened them.

Frankie and George jumped back into the cage and the rest of us followed. Down to the tenth level we plunged, then sprinted the length of the 1600 feet drift leading to No. 4 shaft. As there was no other hoist and cage to operate, we had to take to the ladders strung down the manway compartment to reach the twelfth level, four hundred feet below. I was the last man of the five down the ladders as I had to make some major adjustments to my clothing due to my hurried dressing, so it was to me, several ladder lengths above twelfth level, that Frankie cried,

"Jackie, go back up and tell them to bring down the baskets!"

"Can you see them, Frankie?" I shouted back.

"No, but they're done for sure. They've gone right through the bulkhead!

I rested for a few moments against the ladders. The bulkhead gone! and below it still lay two hundred and thirty-five feet of water, muck, timber, rails and pipe, the aftermath of the fire. If the skips had punched a hole in that mess —! It was enough to give any man reason for pause. If only the bulkhead had held, rescue would have been possible in an hour or two but now with the twelve inch thick timbers smashed to matchwood, a month or two was within the realm of possibility. Despondently, I descended the remaining ladders and joined the others.

Twelfth level was a nightmare. Originally cut out of the rock to the same dimensions as the eleventh level, the heat of the fire had caused a great triangular slip of rock — sixty-five feet long and thirty feet thick at its base — to come crashing from its roof to completely block two compartments of the shaft. Water and broken timber sealed the other three compartments. Only the skip cable, shiny and black with grease, stretching from surface to the water line, gave a clue to the presence of the skips below; a very slim clue to their exact whereabouts it turned out to be, however, as the hoistman, subsequently, reported five hundred feet of slack cable below the twelfth level.

The five of us stood there on the big slab of rock across the shaft quietly recounting to each other the better qualities of Fat Joe, Romeo, Leo and Leonard.

"Do you remember the time Fat Joe and Leo —"

That kind of talk. Something like a wake. Occasionally, we looked up at the unsupported, weakened roof of the station with justifiable apprehension. We could think of absolutely nothing to do. We felt completely helpless.

With the arrival of the afternoon shift of the shaft crew and the shift bosses and the mine captains, our peaceful mourning was rudely shattered. The air became filled with wonderful, impracticable ideas shouted back and forth and the ladders began to jam with messengers ascending and descending, intent on carrying out these senseless errands. It was some time after the other four remnants of my shift had been dispatched on such missions that I began to get over my feeling of resentment at the intrusion. Suddenly, I realized, despite their general air of efficiency, that the intruders were completely helpless like myself; just simple, baffled men trying to do their best. The end result of all this confusion was exactly nothing. Until permission was received from the inspector of mines for the hoist to attempt to pull up the cable, there was absolutely nothing to do. One by one, the latecomers began to join me and the talk swung back to,

“Did you know Leonard was getting the Mining Medal for bravery during the fire?”

The same kind of talk. Only different people.

This then was the situation into which a young man of twenty-five to thirty years stepped. He was dressed in an outlandish-sized oil suit and ill-fitting miner’s hat and I could tell he had never been underground before by his first inane action in violating the initial rule of mining safety — never remove your hard hat. I had scarcely time to wonder what fool had allowed this greenhorn to wander down here as he teetered back and forth on the narrow plank bridging the black water when, to my utter amazement, everyone about me, all experienced miners who should have known better, began removing their hats, also; this, with tons of loose rock hanging over their heads.

I nudged the man next to me for an explanation, “Who’s that mutt-head?” I asked.

“Father Kinlough, the priest,” he whispered.

Grudgingly, I removed my own hat after a last look at the roof. Peculiarly, I discovered my apprehension had disappeared.

“What’s he doing?” I whispered back, as the young man fished a purple cloth fringed with gold from his pocket and fastened it around his neck.

“He’s going to give Absolution, I guess.”

The young priest crossed himself and spoke a few words and then began reading from a small black book. As he read in either Latin or French and as I am entirely unfamiliar with the ritual of the Catholic Church, I can not vouch for the exact form of service he gave. However, as one who has attended Midnight Mass at Christmas in magnificent St. Mary’s Cathedral at Kingston, Ontario, I willingly swear that I have never witnessed a more impressive and sincere ceremony than

that given by Father Kinlough amidst the candlelight twinkling of our miners' lamps in the arched nave of the twelfth station a half mile below surface.

Yet, like a child who becomes engrossed in trivia while events of magnitude are occurring about him, I stared fascinated at the beads of water that gathered on the young priest's forehead and formed into rivulets which coursed down his nose and contours of his cheekbones to drop unchecked to the water beneath his feet.

Sweat! I have seldom seen a man in another occupation sweat so much. Understand, it was not the light perspiration of nervous tension or fear which most men exude their first hours underground. After climbing down the open timberwork of the shaft, which can be likened to the steel structural work of 2700 foot building on surface, this man was completely bland to the dangers about him. His was the honest sweat of a man forced to extreme physical and mental exertion in stale, foetid air, clothed in sweltering oilers. His was the unabashed sweat of a shaftman.

The service completed, Father Kinlough straddled the plank and rested his back against the ladder the better to enjoy the cigarette a shaftman proffered him. Gratefully, he inhaled, then casually flicked the sweat from his forehead with his hand.

"To think that men have to work in a hole like this," he marvelled. "A man would have to be an athlete."

It was two days later, on the Thursday, that we worked twelve hours in the "hole"—shaftmen, mechanics, electricians and miners—all tied to life ropes every third set of timber from twelfth level to a hundred feet above tenth level. Until late in the afternoon, that was the most interesting part of the day for me, looking up the shaft from my position as third man above twelfth level and watching all the miners' lamps blinking back. Normally pitch black with unrelieved darkness, the shaft looked like Main Street on a Saturday night. Permission had been granted finally to pull up the big cable and our job was to lift the knotted kinks over the timbers where they might catch. It was a hard, monotonous chore for everyone but well rewarded.

At five o'clock in the afternoon came a great shout from below; the skips were free of the water! From my perch in the shaft, my own eyes could discern the limp form of Leonard Armstrong flung across the top of the skip as clearly as an hour later they could see his blanketed basket on top of the electric motor as I drove him along tenth level to No. 3 shaft, his recovery preceeding the others by two days.

I helped to carry Leonard to the waiting cage and as the door clanged shut behind and the cage rose, I could sense the eyes of the other miners upon me. They all knew by then the trick of fate, for lack of a better expression, which kept me on surface and sent Leonard underground. If they expected some such words from me as "There, but for the Grace of God, go I," I disappointed them; suddenly, the utter stupidity of it all had struck me. A standard joke among miners was the farcical situation where we dug gold out of the ground in Malartic, Quebec, sent it two thousand miles to Fort Knox, U.S.A. and had it returned to the ground. Now, the

macabre jest had come home to roost; here we were sending one of our own to surface to be reinterred in a ceremony that could not fail to be anti-climaxial to the beautiful, inspiring service that had been read in the twelfth station.

I took the next cage to surface and like many a man before me, I went into town and got roaring, stinking drunk.

The End.

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