
THREE

In the morning Peter opened the curtain to six inches of snow piled up on the window ledge. He felt empty as he remembered how it had been the year before in Toronto. Mid October, warm sun, red and yellow leaves falling. He and Rose with their guitars, on a bench by the playground in Christie Pits. Children watching as they made music together. Without thinking his hand came up and slapped the side of his face, startling him away from the memory. He turned from the window and began to dress for work.

His miner's boots looked huge with their thick felt liners and bulbous steel toes. They're like clown's shoes, he thought as he clumped through the snow to the cookhouse for breakfast, anxiety knotting his insides. He made himself eat, hoping the food would settle his stomach, then followed a group of men to the Mine Dry. A toe of his boot caught the edge of the stairs up into the wood frame building and he fell on his outstretched hand, sending a stab of pain through his wrist and his hard hat into the snow. Three men passed him as he got up and brushed himself off. He avoided their eyes, nothing was said, and he entered the building behind them.

Inside was a large room that smelled of sweat and machine oil. Men stood by rows of benches lowering grimy coveralls and heavy jackets that hung from baskets suspended by pulleys attached to the high ceiling. They were changing out of their clean clothes which they put into the basket, then hauled on a rope to hoist the basket back up. Peter pulled a tag from his pocket with the number of his basket on it, but as he had unknowingly changed into his work clothes in his bunkhouse

room, he edged to the wall by the entrance and leaned against it to wait.

Beyond the benches an opening revealed a tiled shower room. A door to Peter's left said "Management Personnel Only," and a window next to it looked into a room where men in white hardhats leaned over a table covered with charts. A few men stood waiting in front of the window and others joined them as they finished dressing for work. The window swung open.

"Alright, listen up."

Peter wondered about the accent. English? Australian? He edged closer to see. "Mine Superintendent" was on the front of the man's white hat, a sharp nose, clipped moustache and starched brown shirt underneath. He flipped through pages on a clipboard.

"We're falling behind on our production targets for the month, and things better pick up this week. There's too much goddamn lag time between drilling, blasting and mucking-out. I want to see the machines moving in quicker between each operation and I especially want to see you goddamn truck drivers haul ass up out of the pit to the crusher. I want things moving up there. Understand?"

There were muttered obscenities from the crowd of miners. A strong voice boomed from behind Peter's shoulder.

"Piss off, De Vleit. I know the mine regulations as well as you do, and we move at the speed that's allowed."

Peter glanced behind him and saw a man a head taller than himself. His moustache was long and ragged, and it looked like he hadn't shaved in days. He wore rimless glasses and a red hard hat with a Union logo on the front, above the words Shop Steward. He pointed a thick finger at the superintendent.

"You're telling us to risk our fucking lives up there while the Company negotiators are telling us to go screw ourselves over a wage increase."

The superintendent's face hardened. "You and your goddamn Union aren't running this mine, McGuinness. I'm running this mine and you do what I tell you to do." He paused and his fingers went to the collar of his shirt, then smoothed across his moustache. "And that goes for

every goddamn one of you. Now, here's today's assignments, and let's get mining."

He called each man's name with their orders. Peter's was last.

"It'll be Rock Reject for you, Stevens." He looked Peter up and down. "See how you like swinging a shovel. Look for Clarkson, the foreman, he'll show you what to do. Get going, the man-haul bus is here."

Peter hurried out of the building. Men were filing out of what looked like an old school bus and they passed him going into the Mine Dry, their faces dirty and bleary-eyed after working the night shift. Peter's shift began boarding the bus and he joined the line. A few steps away he saw Koopman looking his way and he half-raised a hand in hello but Koopman ignored him. Peter dropped his eyes to the beaten-down snow on the ground, stuck his hand into the pocket of his new work coat and waited for his turn to climb onto the bus. He found an empty double seat in the back, sat and stared out the window.

The bus bounced along the potholed road to the foot of the mountain then began to climb, slowing to a crawl at each sharp switchback where muddy snow was piled high. As they gained altitude he could see all of Stikine: the Administration Building, the Mill and a dozen other buildings clustered at one end, all dwarfed by the massive bulk of the tailings pile, and all partly obscured by the haze of dust drifting from it. A strip of forest stood between the plant and the townsite, with the bunkhouses, the cookhouse, the store, the bar, and then rows of streets with single houses. They climbed higher and soon he could see far down the valley and the mountains stretching to the horizon, their peaks glowing in the low morning sun. He remembered a family trip to the Rockies, sitting in the backseat looking out at a wilderness valley, the hum of the road running through his twelve-year-old body. The smell of his mother's perfume and his father's aftershave filling the car. Wanting the trip never to end. He was startled when McGuinness sat down beside him.

"Dave McGuinness, your Union president." He offered a hand that dwarfed Peter's.

"I'm Peter," his voice cracked. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Peter Stevens."

“Good to meet you. Where are you working?”

“He told me to go to Rock Reject to shovel.”

McGuinness shook his head. “There’s a futile fucking job. I did my share of it before I started driving truck.” He glanced down at Peter’s hands resting on his legs, at his long thin fingers. “I hope you’ve got good gloves with you. Shovelling that shit all day will tear up your hands pretty quick.”

Peter curled his hands into fists and slipped them into his coat pockets. “I got a pair in the store yesterday.”

McGuinness smiled and his moustache draped over his top teeth. “Most guys do fuck all in Rock Reject, so don’t bust a gut trying to get much done.”

“Won’t that piss off the superintendent?” Peter asked.

“De Vleit. Don’t get me started on that asshole. The Company brought him here from their operation in South Africa, and he’s been trying to treat us like he treated the miners there. I think it drives him crazy that he can’t have us whipped.”

Peter smiled. He felt like laughing out loud to release the tension he felt, but he stayed quiet. The bus pulled to a stop in front of a battered plywood building.

“We’re here,” McGuinness said. “That’s the Mine office. There’s a heater in there if you need to get out of the cold.” He handed Peter a booklet. “Here’s the contract with the Company, the collective agreement. It’s got all your rights in it. We’re bargaining for a new one with a wage increase but the Company’s taking a hard line. Come to the meeting next Wednesday and you’ll hear a report on the negotiations. The more we’ve got the membership behind us, the stronger we’ll be.”

Peter followed him off the bus. McGuinness pointed to a white pickup truck parked across the road. The driver wore a white hardhat and was talking on a radio. “There’s Clarkson. He’ll show you what to do. If you’ve got any problems with your job, come find me.”

Peter tried to think of something to say, a question to ask that would keep McGuinness with him longer but nothing came into his mind. He stood for a moment watching him head towards a line of immense dump trucks parked along the edge of the rock-strewn roadway with

their engines running, then he turned and walked over to Clarkson's pickup. The foreman was still talking on his radio so Peter stood to the side and waited while snow swirled around him. A horn blared behind him and he turned to see one of the dump trucks bearing down on him, its tires far taller than he was. The truck thundered past as he ran to the edge of the roadway, then two more followed behind, the roar of the engines and the crashing of the empty boxes on the truck beds vibrating through him. He watched as the trucks disappeared down a steeply sloping road, then took a deep breath to try and calm his shaking insides.

A mound of earth and snow four feet high ran along the edge of the road. He put one foot on the mound to brace himself and looked over it across a pit, the far side two hundred yards away and just visible through the blowing snow. The top of the mountain had been sliced off and its centre hollowed out. He leaned forward to look down, staring in amazement into the massive hole in the earth. The pit narrowed as it deepened, with five huge benches ringing the inside. A steep roadway went from bench to bench and he saw the dump trucks banging their way down the hundreds of feet to the bottom level, where a giant shovel sat facing a wall of earth. The bottom of the pit slowly faded from his view as snow began to fall harder.

A door opened and shut behind him and he turned to see Clarkson standing in front of his pickup.

"You the new labourer?" He looked at a sheet of paper from his pocket. "Stevens?"

Peter liked his voice. It had an easiness that made him relax. "That's right. I'm supposed to go to Rock Reject."

"Into the dungeon." He gave Peter a quick smile as he stuck the paper in the back pocket of his jeans, then gestured with his head, "Follow me."

He was tall, his strides long, and Peter hurried to keep up. Fifty yards along they came to a battered plywood building perched on the edge of the road opposite the pit. Its front was mostly open to the road, and it extended several hundred feet down the side of the mountain in the direction of the townsite, somehow clinging to the steep slope. Out of the bottom emerged the tramline of buckets that he had seen

from below the day before. A dump truck drove past, then stopped and backed up to the edge of the open front of the building and tilted up its box, sending a cloud of dust into the air as the load fell inside. Clarkson waved to the driver and climbed up the ladder on the side of the truck to speak to him while Peter waited, looking up the twelve or more feet to where the two men were talking. The wind gusted a heavy flurry of snow against his back and he shivered as it melted on his neck. A few feet away a battered door hung crookedly on the side of the building, and he went through it to get out of the wind.

The door led directly onto a steel grate walkway that skirted the edge of an undulating, v-shaped pit that was chewing the load of rock from the truck. One side of the pit was a huge, rotating steel plate, and the boulders were being methodically crushed into pieces small enough to fall out of the narrow opening at the bottom. A wooden railing separated Peter from the pit. A sudden rush of vertigo made him lean away, back against the plywood wall. He covered his ears against the noise and stared in fascination as the last of the load was crushed small and dropped onto a moving conveyor underneath. Through the open front wall he saw the dump truck pull away, and a moment later Clarkson was beside him.

“This is the jaw crusher,” he shouted. “It’s the first step in the concentration process for the ore. You’d better get yourself some hearing protection from the store since you’ll be spending time in here.”

Peter followed Clarkson down the walkway that extended thirty feet along the edge of the crusher pit. At the far end was a dust-coated booth with a window that overlooked the pit, and Clarkson slid open its door to speak to the man sitting inside. He wore two coats over his coveralls, and earmuffs clamped his hard hat to his thin, bearded face. A heater glowed red inside the cramped compartment, where the surfaces looked as dust-covered as the outside. An open paperback novel sat alongside a control panel, and Clarkson pointed to it.

“Keep that out of sight, Paul. You know the rules.”

Clarkson turned and started down a flight of steel stairs. The crusher operator closed his door. Through a side window Peter saw him pick up the book and settle back in his chair to read.

Peter awkwardly descended the steep stairs in his heavy miner's boots to where a wide conveyor belt came from under the jaw crusher and sped along a dimly lit corridor that sloped steeply down the side of the mountain. Bare bulbs hung from the ceiling, lighting the dust that floated in the cold air, so thick that the view beyond fifty feet was obscured in the haze. Peter felt the back of his throat tighten with each breath he took.

He followed the foreman down the corridor to a door that led into a warm fluorescent-lit room. Koopman sat at a table with a book in his hands while two other men played cards. A water cooler sat next to a filthy sink.

"Shit, you guys," Clarkson said. "If De Vleit shows up and sees you all fucking the dog in here, my ass is on the line."

"De Vleit can go fuck himself, Ian," Koopman said. "And I'll say that to his face, too. If he's so concerned about us not working, then he can get us some goddamn machinery that runs. If my drill is down then I should be sent home with pay and screw this 'go to Rock Reject' bullshit."

Clarkson took off his hardhat and wiped his forehead. "I know what you're saying, Michael, and six months ago I was saying the same thing. But I'm wearing this white hat now and I need you guys to at least look like you've been out shovelling spills back onto the conveyors, or else I can get canned. De Vleit's going to be through here sometime this morning, so give me a break and don't be hanging around in here."

He turned to leave and saw Peter by the door. He turned back to Koopman.

"Show this new guy what to do, will you, Michael?"

Clarkson left. Koopman went to the water cooler and took a drink, then looked at Peter. "He was a shovel operator until a few months ago, then he took the foreman's job. They just had a second kid and he wanted better benefits."

"He seems like a nice guy," Peter said.

"That's right. A lot of the management guys are pricks. Power trippers. But Ian's a good shit." He crumpled his paper cup and threw it on the dirt floor.

“I was in the car with you the other day, coming from Watson Lake,” Peter said.

“That so? I was pretty hungover, can’t say I remember much of the trip.”

“So what should I be doing in here?”

Koopman laughed. “What you should be doing is getting another job. What you’re supposed to be doing is a fucking waste of time. Leave your lunch here, grab that pick and shovel and follow me.”

They stepped out of the lunch room just as a deafening roar rolled over them. Peter covered his ears against the noise.

“That’s a truck load dumped into the crusher,” Koopman shouted. “Happens every few minutes if the digging in the pit is good.” Hearing protectors were attached to the side of his hardhat and he flipped them down over his ears, then started down the corridor.

Jagged lumps of broken rock the size of grapefruit began to speed by on the conveyor belt. The light grew dimmer as they walked downwards along the packed earth floor. Dust coated the unpainted plywood walls and ceiling and Peter tasted it in his mouth. He turned and looked back and saw their footprints like they were in new fallen snow.

They climbed down a flight of wooden stairs beside a ten-foot-high, funnel-shaped machine. The conveyor they had been following dumped ore into its open top and another one led away from the bottom, moving the rock that had been crushed smaller further down the building and out of sight into the murky haze of dust. The machine made a piercing noise—like a nail being driven through his ears. At the bottom of the stairs the corridor was smaller, the ceiling lower. Koopman leaned close to Peter to shout.

“There are three of these cone crushers down the line from the jaw crusher and where the ore drops out of them is where the spills usually happen. We’re standing on spilt ore, so you can shovel away to your heart’s content. Dig the stuff off the walkway and throw it onto the belt.”

Peter looked up at the ceiling timbers that were caked in dust. He raised his hand and touched them. “How come the ceiling’s so low here? It’ll be hard to swing the pick.”

Koopman laughed. “They say this place was built with fifteen-foot

ceilings so that means there's over seven feet of ore spill under our feet. Like I said, it's a futile fucking job. Coffee break's at ten, lunch at noon. Have fun."

Koopman turned and went back up the stairs towards the lunch room. Peter watched him leave, then stared at the machine in front of him that was smashing apart the rock pouring into it and depositing a stream of fist-sized pieces onto a conveyor underneath. It travelled another thirty feet before dumping the ore into the top of another crusher. He searched in his pocket and found a Kleenex, which he tore in half and stuffed into his ears, easing the piercing pain from the noise.

He picked up the shovel, raised it over his head with both hands and rammed it down into the years of compacted spilled rock and dust. The top inch chipped away like it was concrete; the shovel vibrated through his hands and arms. Pain shot through his sore wrist, making him drop the shovel. He took the pick-axe and swung it hard, feeling a satisfying thud as the heavy point sunk in deep. He levered the pick and pried away a chunk the size of his head, then swung again and again. Sweat ran over his face and down his chest and back. His wrist throbbed as he pounded into the waste of the mine.

At ten o'clock Peter stopped digging and wandered down the corridor, past more crushing and screening machines, until he found a door that let him outside. He sat on a boulder next to a pile of discarded machinery and garbage in a truck-turning area that had been cleared of snow. He lit a cigarette. He was on the side of the mountain, where the ore tramline came out of the bottom of Rock Reject, the full buckets swaying from the cable as they floated down the mountainside to the Mill.

The clouds that had brought the snow moved away and the sun lit up snow-covered mountains that stretched endlessly to the southern horizon. He sat motionless, watching the play of light and shadow on the brilliant peaks, the beauty opening a joy inside him. He closed his eyes, clinging to the feeling he hadn't known for so long, only to have it smothered in an instant, pushed back down inside him by remorse. He opened his eyes to the mountains, dull now with the return of the clouds. His numbness returned as well. The wind picked up and he was

suddenly cold, shivering in his damp clothes. He threw his cigarette into the snow and went back to Rock Reject. Above the door someone had nailed a hand-lettered sign: Abandon All Hope Ye Who Enter Here. He read it and nodded in agreement, then took a last breath of outside air and returned to his pick and shovel.

At noon, his face plastered with dust and lined with the tracks of sweat, he returned to the lunch room. Koopman looked up from his book and laughed.

“Jesus, you’re keen. Did you get to the bottom yet?”

Peter shrugged. He took a drink of water from the cooler and blew his nose. Green mucus covered the tissue. “It makes the time go faster, having something to do.”

“That’s probably what Sisyphus thought.”

Peter gave him a puzzled look.

“Futile and hopeless labour, the ultimate fucking punishment. I’m detecting gaps in your education.”

Peter’s face reddened. “Education has to be pretty practical for my family.” He sat on a bench across from Koopman. “Did you study Classics?”

“Yep. Got a B.A.” He sucked on his cigarette and blew a smoke ring into the dusty air. “And you?”

“Oh, I dropped out.” Peter looked around for something to clean the dust from the table, and reached for a dirty, balled-up rag that sat on the edge of the sink. “The sign above the door down at the bottom. That’s Dante, right?”

“You like that?” Koopman smiled. “I shovelled in here my first couple of months and nailed that up when I got a job on a drill. Pretty fucking appropriate, if I do say so.” He dropped his cigarette on the floor and ground it with his boot. “Let me show you something.” From his satchel he took out a cube of shiny green rock, three inches on a side. He put it on the table in front of Peter. “That’s what it’s all about here. Finest ore in the world.”

Peter held it, feeling the smooth, ridged sides. Satiny strands of white fibre escaped from the rock, flexible and silky. “It’s beautiful,” he said.

Koopman extended his hand, and Peter gave him the rock. “They

call this crude. They hire students in the summer to hand-pick blocks like this and bigger after a blast, and it gets specially processed for weaving. NASA uses the stuff.” He hefted it in his hand. “Watch.” His long fingers closed around the shiny green stone and squeezed, grinding it in his fist then opening his hand to reveal a handful of long, white fibers. “Metamorphosis,” he said. “Fibres from stone.” He teased at the asbestos lying in his palm, then dumped it on the dirt floor by the wall. “Fucking stuff’s worth a fortune.” He picked up his book and leaned his back against the wall.

Peter looked at the pile of white fibres for a moment, thinking how the strands resembled milkweed, thinking of a late summer walk with Rose on Manitoulin Island. The roar of a load falling into the jaw crusher snapped his attention back to the room, to the layer of dust on the table he was about to eat at. He wiped it with the stiff, dirty rag and watched the dust fall to the floor.

“It’s like there’s more dust than air in this place,” he said. “Does anyone wear a mask?”

“Couple of guys did a while back but they said they were useless. The filters got clogged with the dust and they froze up in the cold. Couldn’t hardly suck any air through them.” He turned a page in his book. “But it’s amazing what you can get used to when the money’s good.”

Peter opened his lunch bag and unwrapped his sandwiches. Dust floated onto them from the sleeves of his coveralls. More fell from his hands as he tried to wipe the bread clean. He glanced up to see Koopman watching him.

“What the fuck,” he said, turning his attention back to his book. “You’re hungry, you eat.”

Peter looked at his food, half covered with green dust, then ate.