Ludlow Sketches

by James Pagliasotti
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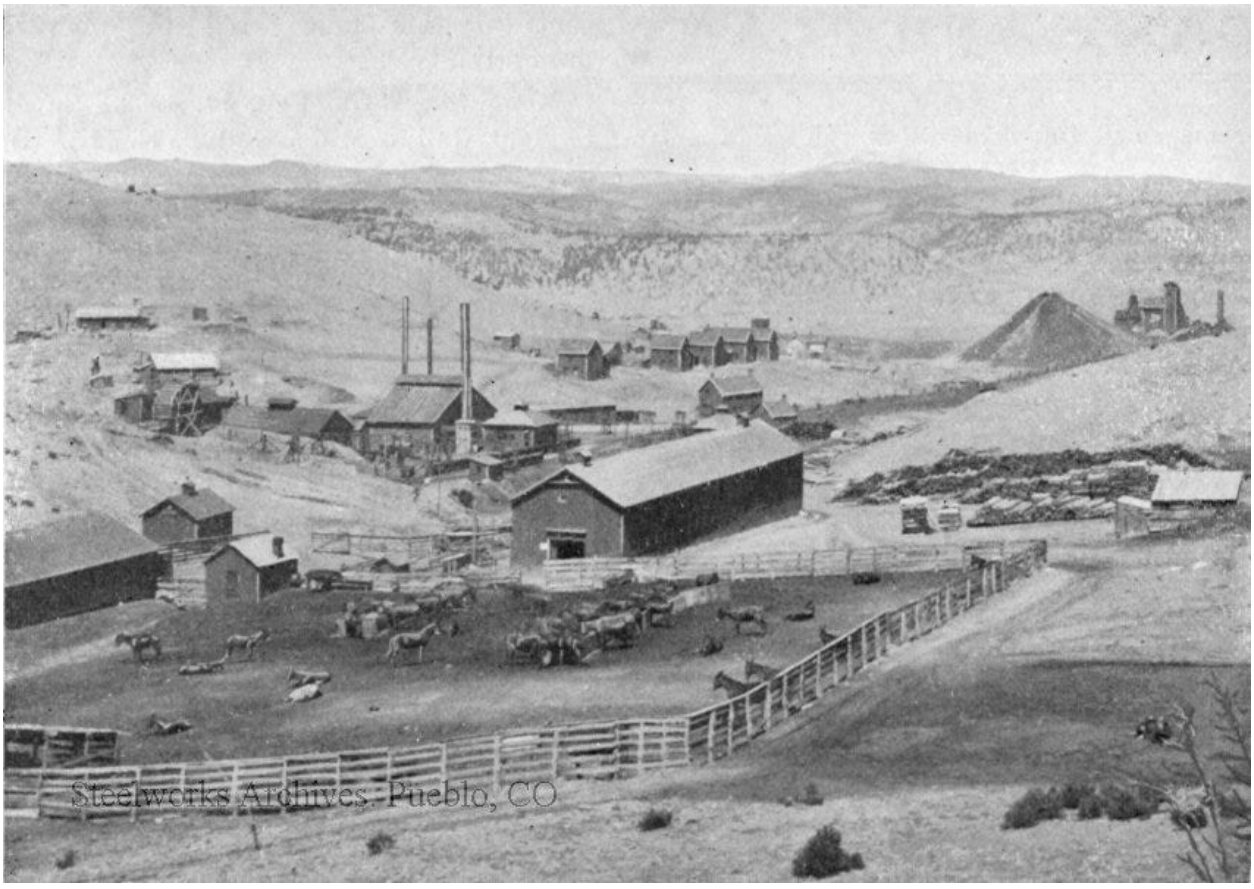

Sopris Mine - credit: Christopher J. Schreck

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John D, Rockefeller Sr. and Jr.

Chapter One: The Forza

Santino Forza came to the mountains of Colorado as a child from Italy. At age seven, his father sent him to work in the coal mines.

"They have work for small people - close quarters where men can't fit," he said.

The boy's mother said, "My god, he's only seven!"

"Tell them you're ten," his father said. "They don't care."

The railroad tracks near the boy's home led to the mine. As the sun rose behind him, he walked between the rails, trying to step from one crosstie to the next, but they were too far apart for his legs to reach. His lunch was in the sack he carried, a hunk of bread, an apple, and some dry meat. He held it to his chest but as he walked he tired and the sack bounced in the gravel whenever his arms sagged.

The mine was a busy place. A lot of people coming to work, the night shift emerging from the shaft, their faces dark with coal dust and smeared where they had wiped snot from their nose or traces of tobacco

juice from the chew in their cheek. Those just arriving were clean in comparison, their clothes rumpled but recently laundered, their faces shaved around their mustaches and dotted with black spots clotted beneath the skin.

Mules hitched to coal cars were led by handlers on the narrow tracks that ran deep into the mine. The long lashes above their eyes were darkly dusted with coal and crusts of black soot clung to the corners of their mouths. The manure they dropped as they trod in and out was collected where it fell in gunnysacks the handlers carried. The bosses auctioned it off each day to those who could afford it as fuel to heat their homes.

The boy climbed the few steps to the door of the office near the entry to the mine. The room held two desks, a few chairs, and shelves stacked with papers. At the back was the door to another room. It was closed.

"Sonny Forza?" the clerk said. "Sal's kid?" The boy nodded yes. "How's he coming along?"

Sonny told him his leg was healing, the stump still itched him awful and kept him awake, but the doctors said it would calm down in time and that his wooden leg looked like a good fit.

"Sounds like he'll be good as new," the clerk said. "Back at work in no time and there's always a place for a good worker like your dad. Bet he can use the money, too, after all this time laid up."

The boy just nodded, said nothing about the struggle, the foodstuffs almost exhausted, the rent past due, the debt they owed the store. Nothing needed to be said. They all knew. When you went down, the bills piled up and the credit ran out fast.

It was the same for everybody if their luck went bad. It's why all of them worked as much as they could wherever they could. Hereabouts, there was the Sopris Mine that ran year around and a couple of others that ran sometimes and not others. If you got on at Sopris, you held on tight.

Sonny got on. They gave him a hard hat a few sizes too large but strapped up tight to his chin. "You want this one." the quartermaster told him. "The headlamp's good. The light's strong. You're gonna need it."

He followed one of the mule handlers along the tracks deep into the mine shaft, which sloped steadily downward at a modest grade until they reached the cage. It was an elevator of steel bars large enough for one of the carts the mules pulled with room alongside for a couple of men. Two operators cranked it up and down.

"The mules only work up here?" Sonny said.

"These do. There's maybe twenty head at other levels down below. They never come out until the company retires them. Say they have to take them to the surface a little at a time or they go blind in the sunlight."

He rode with an empty cart a long way down into the dark. When the cage halted, a small dark man removed the empty cart, backed a mule so a cart loaded with coal replaced it in the cage, hooked the mule to the empty cart, and led him away. Sonny followed a series of torches toward the sound of men working. When he reached them, one looked down at him, shook his head slightly, pointed to another cage in the distance, said "when you get off, ask for Slovak."

It was very dark where the next leg landed. Even the torches seemed dimmer. Dust was thick in the air and the smell of gunpowder was strong. A group of men with headlamps lit were picking with axes at seams in the wall. Slovak was there, a giant among the others, but gentle and precise in the directions he gave.

"You take this pick axe and this packet with you. DO NOT drop the packet. Treat it with care. It has three sticks of dynamite and a spool of wick that's tied to them sticks.

"We're blasting out tunnels down here to get at the coal. The tighter you can get into that crease at the end of the tunnel, right there where it closes down to nothing, that's where you put the charge. Get it?

"You dig out a little notch with that pick and get them sticks in there so's they're touching the top and the bottom of the tunnel. Close as you can, anyhow. Just tuck it in there and real slow-like spool out that wick as you back out of there. We'll light the fuse from here. That's when we'll blow the hell out of that rock."

The blast felt to the boy like it shook the earth loose from his world. His ears rang with a noise that was unidentifiable. Acrid smoke flooded through the tunnel of dust and dirt around the edge of the corner where they gathered. Above them two crossbeams of timber tilted now at an odd angle and he heard through the ruckus raging around him a wild flapping of wings and the shrill cry of a bird unseen but caged nearby.

"Good work," Slovak said to him, his hand on the boy's shoulder and his eyes drifting from his face to the group of men moving with caution into the blear. "We'll give them a minute to clear the debris and then you do it again." He lifted the lid of a wooden carton and drew out three more sticks of dynamite, with which he replenished the boy's bag. "Take it slow and steady," he said.

That was a shift in the mine. A dozen detonations and about fifty feet of new tunnel, new seams, new opportunity to reap the riches for the bosses. For the workers, it was noise, smoke, dirt, dust, dank air and danger. Getting though a shift was enough to accomplish. They were glad when they did.

For the boy, it was hands that trembled a little, snot black as axle grease blown from his nose that smelled nothing but gunpowder, and eyes that squinted tightly at the brightness when he emerged from the mine and headed home, even though it already was dusk.

It was all of that and a buzzing in his head that lasted until he finally fell asleep after a supper of soup and bread that night in his cot in his home of sod sunk in the ground with earthen walls, windows of sheer chamois cloth stretched over the opening, and a floor of clay swept spotlessly clean by his mother daily with a broom she bundled herself from stalks of straw. He slept. Tomorrow was another day.

Breaker Boys Sorting Coal c. 1880

Chapter Two: John Forza

John Forza was sixteen in 1913. He'd been working in the coal mines since he was a child and had saved enough money to buy a car. He bought it from the widow of guy he knew who died in the mine last year. His widow was nearly penniless and the car was not easy to sell but Johnny took it off her hands. It was five years old but it ran.

In the bakery in Trinidad at the foot of Raton Pass, Johnny saw fifteen year old Constance Bellina biting into a pastry. She had powdered sugar on her lips and a twinkle in her eyes. It was love at first sight.

He took a deep breath, walked up to her, smiled wide and said, "You want to go for a ride in my car?"

"You don't have a car," she said.

"Oh, yes I do," said Johnny, nodding affirmatively, his eyes sparkling and his smile growing bigger.

Mrs. Bellina stepped into the picture, edged herself between the two kids, said to John Forza, “If you want to take my daughter for a ride, you can call on her after church on Sunday like a proper gentleman.”

She and Constance left Johnny standing there, his smile a little diminished when Constance gave him a quick look as she passed through the door and onto the boardwalk along the street. Her mother thought that was the end of the matter. The family lived along the creek bed high on the Pass and there were no roads nearby.

That Sunday at noon, while her husband was out back feeding the pigs and the cow, Mrs. Bellina and Constance heard a noise that brought them out of the house and onto the front porch. From a distance down the creek bed, dry since last spring when the snowmelt was exhausted, came John Forza with a team of mules pulling his car. He stopped them out front and walked around to the passenger door of his Model T Ford, which he opened and, with the sweep of his arm, welcomed Constance aboard.

When they finally reached the roadway a half mile distant, John tied the mules to a tree, put the wrench into the block where the starter was seated and cranked for all he was worth. The car fired up, the exhaust sent white puffs of smoke into the crisp mountain air behind them, the body shook from side to side, and John took Connie for the first of many rides they would share over a lifetime together. When he died at 92, they had just celebrated their 75th wedding anniversary. Not even Hallmark has cards for that kind of longevity.

Sod House c. 1900

Chapter Three: the Mines

“We ought to at least think about it,” Carla Tuga said to Thomas. “It’s an opportunity.”

“I’d feel like a scavenger,” Thomas said to her. “Taking advantage of the dead.”

“It’s terrible, I know,” she said, “but the dead are dead and there’s nothing we can do about it. They need workers and those homes are sitting empty.”

“I’ve got work right here and we have a home. A place of our own, too. Don’t forget that. The company owns them places.”

“Yes, but they’re really nice. They have wood floors, electric lights, windows, too, of real glass, and the pump is right inside with a sink. You don’t have to haul the water.”

He understood. This place of theirs was spotless inside, but it was simple. Dug down into the earth with a floor of clay, the walls and roof of sod mixed with mud and straw, windows of chamois cloth stretched thin to let in a little light and keep out the flies. He raised the wick of the lantern some, brightened the room a little. It wasn’t so bad, but he understood.

Sopris was better than some, but Dawson was as good as it gets. Everybody said so. It wasn’t a union shop, but they paid the best, had good equipment, a mercantile store with lots of good food and clothes, all the stuff a guy might need, and he heard they had fashion showings for the women, all that and a hospital on site and even an opera house where they put on live shows. The best safety for the workers, too, is what everybody said. Not that it did them much good in the end.

“The weather’s no good for moving now. Maybe we can talk about it in the Spring. I hear that Greek is making noise about a strike. That happens, we’ll be damn glad we have a place of our own. Company will turn out the families from them houses in town, you watch and see.”

“Go on strike, how those men gonna feed their families then? I know it’s hard work but they should be glad to have it, all of you.”

“Yeah, they say the only thing worse than work in the mine is no work at all.”

“That’s a good thing to remember. No work, no food. Not much else to do around here that earns a wage.”

“I do remember it. That’s why I walk myself up the hill every morning. Sometimes the worker has to stand up for himself though. You work a shift and drag all that coal to the scales, time after time you know the weight isn’t right. Fellow wasn’t looking one day, I stood on that scales and said I weighed one seventy when you know I go one

seventy-five. Always have. They're going to keep shorting us as long as we allow it."

"A strike is going to fix that, Thomas? I wish someone would tell me how. Where is everybody going to live when they get kicked out of their homes? While you guys are fixing the scales, where are they going to live? How are they going to eat? Do the strikers think about that?"

"The Greek says the union has hundreds of tents. Going to build a tent city down at Ludlow. Everybody will have shelter."

"Tents? Winter at the foot of the Rockies and we're going to live in tents? That's the solution Mr. Mine Workers is going to give us?"

"Not us. We have a place. That's what I'm trying to remind you. We have a place. It's not much but it's ours. Nobody can take it from us."

"I'm reminded, Thomas. You have reminded me. I know we're better off than some of them up at Sopris."

She walked in tight circles, shaking her head from side to side, wringing her hands in her apron, a tension about her mouth. She stopped, looked at Thomas where he sat at the table, the light of the lantern flickering across his troubled face.

"They will be put out of their homes, yes," she said, "and we will be free to starve right here in our very own place while all our friends are freezing in tents down there on the flats. And we do this so that you can teach that Mr. Rockefeller a lesson about how his business is supposed to work. Is that right?

"Tell me that's so and I will believe you, my husband, because I love you. And I will try to understand. But I will tell you, too, that I'm afraid. I'm afraid because you and all these brave men that we know talk of strikes, of making things right at the mine, and I want to believe in what you believe, that it will make a difference."

Tears were welling in her eyes and it pained him to see her this way, but she stood upright in front of him and placed a hand gently on his shoulder .

“I’m afraid because you are fighting against people who are much bigger than we are. I can see so much that we have to lose, but I can’t see how it’s possible we might win.”

Ludlow c. 1914 - credit du.edu

Chapter Four: Strike

They went out on strike, all the mines in the state, and Colorado Fuel & Iron quickly turned them out of their homes, cut off their credit at the store, sent them packing. There would be no negotiations. The company brought in hired guns and had the National Guard add them to their ranks. These were the peacekeepers.

They escorted the scabs who took the miners' jobs right to the gates of the mines. They stood by passively when the company's hired goons among them beat the strikers who harassed the scabs. The beatings were severe, but the strikers got in some licks, too. Not often and not enough but that's the way it progressed. That was the cost of doing what needed to be done.

The strikers and their families in Southern Colorado were gathered at Ludlow on a plot of land north of Trinidad where a tent city was formed. It was a sizable gathering, 1200, maybe even 1500 miners and their families settled on the flats at the foot of the Rockies as winter began to blow down the mountain front and settle in against the hills.

Perhaps the sheer numbers, their proximity to each other, and their passion for the cause would keep them warm.

Life as it does gathered a rhythm in this uncertain abode as the families set about making do in challenging circumstance. No one had much but most of them shared what they had. The exhilaration of the first week settled into a hopeful, concerned pace that like the people themselves ultimately was practical. They knew their place in the social order, the odds they faced, and were braving the consequences of acting out in a desperate effort to improve their station just a little.

“Only what’s fair,” the Greek reminded them when they gathered at the kitchen where the union fed them, “that’s all we’re asking. They treat the damned mules better than they do us. At least they don’t short them their feed like they do us the coal we dug.”

The truth was the company shorted the mules, too, but the miners nodded in agreement. They knew the drill, what this strike was about, the suite of grievances that made it necessary. But they still had to face the wife, the kids, their worried faces and wan support for this reality the strike imposed on them as it wore on.

That was before the gunshots, random bullets in the night that pierced the tents and what little shelter they provided. A child was wounded. A miner killed. A new reality came calling.

The families dug pits into the ground beneath the walls of the tents to better shelter themselves when they slept. The cellars became the living quarters as the violence increased. The understanding came to them it wasn’t just their jobs at risk but their very lives. The specter of death joined them at Ludlow.

Rockefeller's Militia in and around Ludlow c. 1911

Chapter Five: Militia

"Connie, I've been looking all over for you," John Forza said to her, holding her by the shoulders and looking relieved as he said it. "I was worried. Your mother wouldn't say where you were. I had to beg your dad a while 'til he finally told me."

"They wanted me to be in town. Thought I'd be safer here."

"I think they're right about that. The damned militia is everywhere now, shooting things up and scaring folks. Not just the miners anymore. Seems like they want everybody to suffer for us being out on strike."

"They're in town, too!"

"In Trinidad?"

"Just past sunset last night. Two of 'em rode down the street there. Shot my cousin's dog dead, right here in the yard."

“Bastards! They’ll get theirs.” He was twisting his hands together, his head shaking just a little side to side. “This is no good, none of it.”

He held her shoulders again, looking at her with a fierce passion. “We need to get out of here. You and me. Go away somewhere and leave this behind us.”

“How we gonna go somewhere? You got to have money to do that.”

“I’ve got a little saved.”

“Gonna take more than a little. You got to have work, too. Out on strike, that little won’t last long.”

“I’ll build it back up. Strike won’t last forever.”

“It’s been months already, Johnny. When’s it gonna end? Anyhow, my folks won’t let me go off with you.”

“We’ll get married.”

“I’m sixteen. They won’t let me do that neither. Not any time soon.”

“Maybe we’ll give ‘em a reason to know why we need to hurry it.”

She looked down at the ground between them, at his battered, muddy boots. He watched her eyes consider it, a brief smile cross her lips. “Where would we go anyhow?”

“Maybe Denver.”

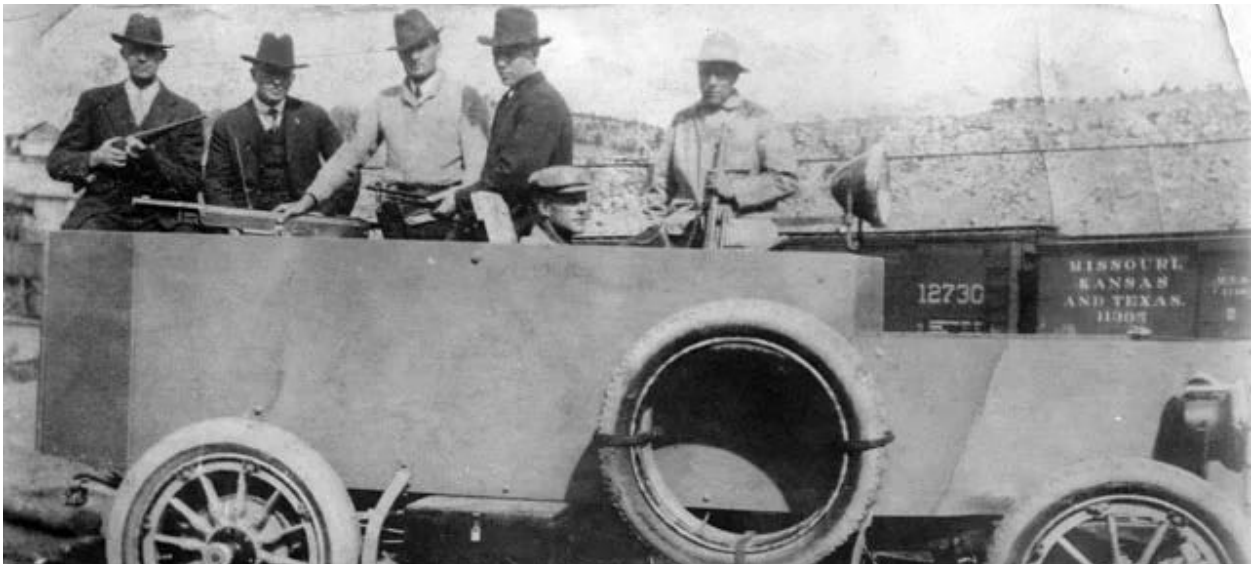
“Denver? We can’t afford Trinidad and you want to drag me off to Denver?”

“Lots of jobs in Denver.”

“Not for miners, they ain’t. Really, John Forza. I might need a more thoughtful man.”

“I am thinking on it. Denver’s just a thought. There’s other places, too.”

“You let me know when the answer comes to you, Johnny. Then we can talk about hurrying things along.”



The Militia and the Death Special - credit: du.edu

Chapter Six: Death Special

“They killed a couple mine guards, word is,” Thomas Tuga said to Carla. “Some of our guys shot ‘em down from a distance with them flat-shooting rifles. That’s what’s being said anyhow. Expect all hell will break out now. Militia will make it so.”

“Killing is no good,” she said back to him. “Never. Don’t matter which side it is that dies. They’re people just like us.”

“They work for the company against our interests. Don’t say they’re just like us.”

“They work for the company just like you work for the company. When you’re working, that is. They’re just workers, too, doing what Mr. Rockefeller tells them to do. There’s no pleasure to be had in killing them.”

“Yeah, it’s really getting out of hand. Beatings, shootings, even some explosions. We’ve been doing our share of it, they say. I hear they blew up one of the mines.”

“They? You mean we, don’t you? Us strikers! Just ‘cause you didn’t pull the trigger, set the charge, don’t mean you don’t have a hand in it. It’s your union, Thomas.”

“Wasn’t for them, most of these folks’d have nowhere to live, nothing to eat. We’re lucky that way, you and me. This place ain’t much, but it’s a damn sight better than living in those tents. People are getting by, but I mean, Christ. Threw them all out of their homes. Day One. Wouldn’t even talk about it first. See if there was some kind of solution. Just told everyone to get out and that was that.”

“What did you expect? You knew what would happen. You told me so yourself. Strike the mine and what did you think? They’re gonna say, ‘let’s talk.’ Like they care about you, any of us? They just go out and hire more people who want the work.”

“Scabs. Taking our jobs while we’re trying to make things better for all of us. For them too, the bastards, but we don’t even get the chance. Always another chump to take the collier’s job.”

“I knew we should have gone over to Dawson before all this got so messy.”

“Pretty messy over there, too. Non-union shop, that one. Phelps-Dodge supposed to run the best mines in the business. 296 dead there, Carla, just a couple of months back! Nearly 300 hundred men. Wasn’t no man on man killing there. Just the nature of the work when it goes bad cooked them right where they were working and blew them all to hell.”

“Oh, my god, Thomas. I know all that. I’m so sorry for all those men, their families. It’s such dangerous work you do. Every woman in these camps holds her breath when you go off to work and don’t breathe again ‘til you come home that night. That’s the way it is. But those folks at Dawson, well, it’s a real town instead of a camp and they say the mines are as safe as they can make them.”

“Yeah, we know all that. Trying to make it so their non-union shop is better than our union shop. And they’ve done it, sure enough. But so

what. CF&I doesn't give a damn whether we like it or not. Take it or leave it, that's the way they do it. That's exactly why we're out on strike. No way else it's going to change."

"I understand that, Thomas. I do. But now I'm worried this strike will make it so the folks in Dawson won't hire you anymore. If we was to go there, I mean."

"I'd have to say I'm non-union for them to hire me. That's a lot to ask of me, Carla."

"There's a lot to make better if we was to get on there. Ignoring that's a lot to ask of me, Thomas."

"Let me share what the Greek told us down at the union tent. Mining across this whole country, on average, three workers die every year out of every thousand men working. In Colorado, it's more than seven. The last few years here, it's been more than ten. Ten men out of every thousand every year. There's 7,000 men working in the Colorado coal fields. Lotta funerals. And those men risk it so they can feed their families. Every day they do it, they see the company cheat 'em. That's a fact. That's the truth of mining and that's why we're out on strike."

"It seems funny to me, Thomas, that all those things you guys are striking for, better wages, safer working place, a collier on the scales to make sure the weights are right, all that is how they already do it at Dawson. Plus they have a real town to live in, nice homes, some stores and shops, good schools, a hospital. They treat you like people over there, not just workers. Like you can have a decent life. You do your part and they do theirs. That's why I want to get on there, Thomas. Can't you see?"

"I do see it, Carla. I understand why you want it. It looks damned good to me too times like this and I know they're hiring right now. 300 jobs to fill. But you have to see it from my place, too. It isn't union and I'm a union man. I'd have to lie when they asked me if I want to get hired. It grates on me to deny it after what I've seen from the company."

“It’s a different company. Different in every way, near as I can tell. How much better is your strike gonna make things at Sopris? Do you think CF&I is going to see the light?”

“I’ll think about it, wife. I will think about it. Like I said the last time we talked about it, maybe come Spring we can take a look.”

Ludlow Aftermath - credit: en.wikipedia.org

Chapter Seven: Aftermath at Ludlow

The aftermath played out for weeks. The violence accelerated, both sides taking after the other with a vengeance. Many people died.

The Greek and two other men were arrested by the militia. They were found that night shot in the back, the Greek with his skull bashed in. That was how negotiations with strikers were conducted, even after burning them out of their tents, killing their wives and children, the stench of scorched flesh still hanging in the air.

The strikers went on the offensive, looting and burning company property, beating, sometimes killing company people. The battle raged along a forty mile line from Trinidad to Walsenburg for better than two weeks. Violence was a purgative for the bile and the feculence that accumulated over a time of deprivation and terror.

By the time the President called in federal troops and something like calm was established, some 200 people had died. “For what,” many

of the survivors asked themselves. Very little at the mines was changed. But they achieved notoriety.

The graphic images of the miners, their families, their plight, the horrors they suffered at the hands of Rockefeller and his thugs were seared into the public consciousness. Back East, the newspapers covered the massacre and its aftermath extensively. The Rockefellers had a public relations crisis on their hands. Their social position teetered. They blinked ever so slightly.

Still, people said quietly among themselves, there was something distinctly uncouth about the whole matter. “Distasteful,” they said. “Surely these things could be better handled.” They settled back in their favorite chair near the fireplace, a glass of good scotch in hand, lit their pipe and the lamp at the side table, unfolded the Times and read some more. “The bloodiest labor dispute in history,” the paper said. They sipped their drink, shook their head, said, “It certainly seems a mess.”

And it was. For everyone concerned the stakes if not the miners’ wages were raised. No official recognition of the union was accepted by CF&I, no demands were met, and many of the strikers lost their jobs when the strike finally ended. But elected officials took note, proposed legislation, called for new safety measures, initiated inspections, held hearings, considered charges against militia and miners alike.

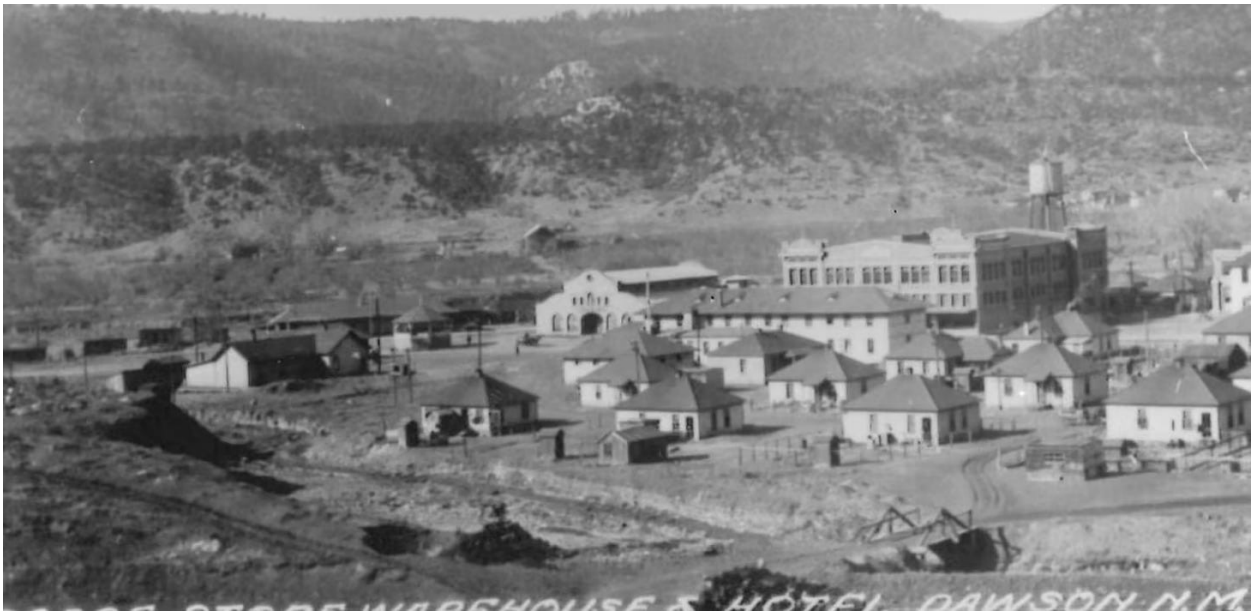
Over 400 of the strikers were arrested. Three-fourths of them were charged with murder. In the end, only the strike leader, John R. Lawson, was found guilty and eventually his conviction was overturned by the State Supreme Court.

Among the militia, 10 officers of the National Guard and a dozen soldiers were court-martialed. Rockefeller’s hired troops, the Baldwin-Felts militia, were investigated for the execution-style killing of the Greek and other strike leaders, if not for burning down the tent city and the deaths of dozens of the men, women, and children in their canvas shelters. Their head man, Karl Linderfelt, was found responsible but he and the others were acquitted and freed to pursue their business unimpeded.

The miners who got their jobs back went about scratching a living from seams of coal deep in the bowels of the earth, those who weren't rehired drifted elsewhere in search of work, the militia found strike-breaking contracts at other labor troubles, and the Rockefeller père et fils continued to mint money from the labor of the least among us.

While his shyly earnest son tried to put a better face on the company's labor relations, mighty John D. Rockefeller himself was questioned by a Congressional Committee and advised that even knowing his hired thugs were committing atrocities against the strikers, he would have done nothing to prevent them. It's simply business.

And after all that was said and done, in the dust, the dirt, and the ash, among those shot dead and those who escaped the barrage of bullets, those who fled the walls of flame and those charred in the pits beneath their meager shelter, on the chilled and wind-swept flats near the foot of the Rockies at Ludlow, only the dead remained.



Dawson, NM c. 1910

Chapter Eight: Dawson, New Mexico

Connie was sitting on the front steps of the porch at her cousin's home in Trinidad. Her hands were in her lap, a blanket covering them, but they twisted as she spoke.

"What are we gonna do, Johnny? It scares me to think about staying around here. After all that trouble, those poor people dead, charging the miners with crimes and letting the militia go scott free. It makes me afraid to be here."

John Forza stood with one foot on the step and the other on the walkway. He was a short man with ramrod posture and a large, handsome face that was troubled, but he spoke with the firm confidence of a young man used to making his own way.

"We'll go over to Dawson after we get married. Plenty of work there. Tom Tuga just got back. Got hired day one. He and the missus are packing up and heading over there for good."

"What about that place of theirs?"

“Leaving it behind, I guess. Maybe try to sell it.”

“Maybe they’d let us have it. I know Carla. I could ask her.”

“I’m through living in sod houses, Connie. Want something better for us. Besides, you just said you wanted out of here.”

“How’s that gonna happen, Johnny? My folks won’t let us get married, not yet. They think I’m too young.”

“Tell ‘em you’re in a way. You are, aren’t you?”

Her head lowered, her voice quivered. “Seems like it. Thanks to you.”

His face lifted just slightly, his jaw jutted, he nearly smiled but said nothing.

“They won’t like it,” she said. “Not a bit.”

“What else is there to do about it? They’ll see that sure enough. Getting married’s the only thing to do. It’s all that makes sense.”

“And leaving home, too. How are they gonna feel about that?”

“Over to Dawson. Ain’t that far away. And their daughter will be living in a fine home with running water and an indoor privy. Husband with a steady job. A real hospital where the baby’s born. Let them think on it and they’ll come to see it’s for the best.”

“You sure they’ll hire you? Not a union shop, is it? They don’t want union.”

“I asked Tom about that," he said quickly. His posture sagged a bit, his gaze drifted away down the street. “He swore me not to tell.”

“Tell what?” she said. “You got to lie to get the work, isn’t it?”

He looked at her with something that softened his face, his eyes watered, his voice quieted nearly to inaudible. “Yeah,” he said in a whisper, “you got to lie.”

They held each other’s gaze for a long moment, saying nothing, his a question, hers resolve, a crevice in their doings crossed, an understanding found.

“I’ll talk to my folks,” she said.

Mercantile Store, Dawson, NM c. 1915

Chapter Nine: A Dream or Something

“Oh, Johnny! I can’t believe this is real. It’s too fancy for us. Way too fancy! I can’t even believe I’m standing here. It’s like a dream or something.”

“You’re gonna have to get used to it, Connie. This is where we live now. This is home.”

“Just look at this place. I never seen anything like it. Not even in Trinidad. There’s nothing like this. I just never. I mean, who can even afford something like this?”

“Why, we can. You can,” John Forza said to her. He put an arm around her shoulders, pulled her closer to him, reached out with his other arm and swept it around the room.

They stood in the center aisle of the Mercantile store between the garlanded columns that rose two stories to the ceiling above. All around them were shelves and bins with crisp new merchandise, shirts, blouses, pants, dresses, pillows, sheets and bedding, every sort of finery.

“I think you should have yourself a bonnet, Connie. One of these ones here.” He reached toward a display of hats perched on short arms lifting in every direction from a post that stood taller than he was, each of them decorated with feathers or flowers or even small animal figures dancing on the brim. “Let me buy one for you.”

“We can’t afford that,” she said, glancing at him before her eyes turned again to the hats and her hands clasped above her breasts. After a moment, she looked at him, said almost shyly, “could I really?”

“You’re a married woman now,” John said, and smiled at her. “A fine woman in this fine new town. We want you to look the part. Like we belong here.”

“We do, don’t we, John? We do belong. Tell me we do. It just seems so unreal. This town. Our new home. All this,” she said, looking around wide-eyed and breathless at the towering place of abundance where they stood.

“And a baby coming, too,” he said. “I start work tomorrow morning. Better pay than Sopris. We got a beautiful place to live. Running water, coal furnace, all wood floors, real glass in the windows. Good doctors, too, at the hospital. It’s all we could ask for, Connie. We got our whole lives ahead of us now. We’re just getting started.”

They looked at each other, each in their own way trying to absorb the reality of what he said and the generosity of this new place where they found themselves. She took his hand, held it to her side near her belly, smiled gently. He nodded his assurance, smiled broadly, his eyes warm, his chin lifted toward her with pride.

“Go ahead and get you one of those bonnets,” he said. “Any one you want.”

Dawson, NM Miners c. 1918 - credit: AHEPA District 21

King of Number 6

“Not bad,” John Forza said. “Not bad at all. It was mostly showing me the ropes, new guy and all, but we got in a good day’s work.”

He was back from his first shift in Number 6 mine at Dawson, standing just inside the back door of the new place where he and Connie were living now, covered in soot and dust, which fell from his jacket as he removed it and hung it on a hook next to his hat. There was a ring of white skin showing from the middle of his forehead to his shock of hair; everything below it from nose to toes was black with coal dust.

“Give me good weight too when I closed out. Every bit of it accounted for and marked down right. That’s gonna make a difference come payday.”

Connie was sweeping circles around where he stood, trying to gather the dirt as it fell on these beautiful wooden floors and catch it in the dustpan. More fell with every move he made.

“Get out of those clothes and into the tub,” she said to him. “I drew you a hot bath. Can you believe it? Hot water right out of the faucet. Like for a king or something.”

“King of the Number 6. That’s me,” he said with a laugh, and then, as he began to peel off the overalls, “Woman, some privacy if you would. You can do your sweeping when I’m in the tub.”

What he didn’t tell her was the conversations he had with some of the guys over the break while they ate. They heard he was from Trinidad and wanted to know about Ludlow. “Was it as bad as they said?”

“Every bit,” he said. “Them union guys…” and here he had to remember not to say “us union guys.” He looked them in the eye one at a time before continuing, saw nothing but interest in what they asked. “Them union guys got shot at by the National Guard, least ways by the company guys that was with ‘em. The Militia, they called ‘em. Shot up the tents just random-like near every night. Beat the hell out of people, too.”

“Fact is,” Tom Tuga said, and here he looked around at the group of men seated there amid the debris, guys he’d come to know these past couple of months since he came over from Sopris and was now introducing Johnny around, “them union guys had been striking some of the mines over there, just here and there, few days at a time. But it really got a head of steam after the explosion here.”

The stillness after he spoke got his attention. John’s too. Both of them wanted to ask about it, hear from the people who lived through it, thought better of it for now. Tuga said nothing more and after a bit John thought he should continue, tell them about what they asked and maybe soon enough they’d answer his questions about Dawson.

“It’s true enough what Tom says. There was a little bit of striking here and there for a few months, lots of talk about it and the Mine Workers was pushing for everyone to walk out. Things were pretty bad and them union guys had their reasons, that’s for sure, but a lot of us needed the work bad.” Here he glanced at Tom, who nodded in agreement at the way he’d said it.

“Come that awful day here at Dawson though, word got around quick and it was like the dam broke. All them guys walked out, the company kicked ‘em out the same morning, no discussions or nothing. Sent their families packing, turned them out, locked the doors, closed off the store, said ‘the hell with you, get out.’ Just like that.

“The Mine Workers set up them tent camps, like the big one at Ludlow, had food to hand out, some supplies, too, and the troubles started pretty much right away. You have to appreciate that Mr. Rockefeller is nothing like the folks here.

“If he ran things like the Phelps Dodge company, there would have been no strike. People want to work, danger and all, but they want a fair shake, too. CF&I just says ‘the hell with you if you don’t like it. We’ll find somebody else to do the job and you can starve for all we care.’ That’s the truth of it.”

“Spoken like a union man,” a guy named Lazlo said, “even if you aren’t one.”

“You suggesting something you ain’t willing to say?” John said, and began to stand up, but Tuga tugged at his sleeve, said, “Don’t pay Laz no mind. That’s the first thing the guys told me when I got here. Now I’m passing it along to you.”

“Didn’t mean to rile you,” Lazlo said. “Just that some folks around here think the explosion was because of those strikes up your way, partly anyhow. Ramping up our production schedules here to cover the demand when those mines up there shut down. So I have some feelings about you Colorado guys. Some think that was the cause. I don’t know that to be true. May be a fact. May not. One true fact is that I lost my brother that day. That much I do know to be true and it haunts me.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” John said. “I truly am. Too damned many of us die in these mines. But at least it happens to men who are working for their families. Honest work that keeps them housed and fed. Things just go bad through no fault of their own.”

“Not like Ludlow,” Lazlo said. “That what you mean?”

“I did not mean that. Not like that. You can bet those people believed in what they were doing. They were honest, standing up for what they thought was right. What I did mean is folks died there because they were murdered. Wasn’t no accident.”

He looked from face to face, each a pair of eyes wide and white looking back at him from black faces. “There’s a lot to tell about how it went down, how it came to that terrible day and what happened that night. They say a couple of hundred people in all died in the Coalfield War. That’s what they’re calling it now and that’s what they say. People on both sides were killed, mostly colliers but some company people, too.

“The day after Easter, the National Guard showed up at Ludlow to arrest somebody, or get somebody released, something like that. Folks in the camp noticed the Guard was setting up machine guns on the ridge above the camp. Right after, there was a couple of explosions of some kind and the Guard opened fire on the camp.

“Everybody ran for cover. Some got shot. Some killed. The miners fought back and the bullets rang all day long. That machine gun took its toll. Finally, late afternoon, near dark, a train come along between the Guard position and the camp and stopped dead on the tracks. God bless that trainman. A lot of the miners got away then, but the Guard came down from the ridge with torches and cans of gasoline and started burning everything down.

“They poured gas on the tents and set ‘em on fire with people still in them! Women and little children suffocated or burned to death! The ones that tried to run were shot. That Greek, the one that ran the union, got captured with a couple of his men. Guy named Linderfelt from the

Militia had it out for him. Supposedly bashed in his skull with a rifle butt and shot him dead. In the back. Same with the other two.

"I wasn't there when it happened so I'm just telling you what everybody says. Some say 25, some say 50 were burned to death in their tents. Charred like animals in a oven. Little children clinging to the edge of the pits where the tent burned down on top of them. I walked through that camp the next day and the smell was something awful. What I saw I expect I'll never forget."

He looked at Lazlo, held his hands out, palms up, said, "My brother was there and he survived. Shot in the knee and lost the leg but he lived through it. It's not like losing a brother, I understand that. But I lost friends there. My friends lost their own people there. It was a horrible thing for everybody; the pain was terrible. I know that to be true and I have to tell you it haunts me, too."

Medical Exam Room c. 1920 - credit: melnickmedicalmuseum.com

This Old Bull

“Carla took me by the clinic today,” Connie said to John.

He was standing in the little room by the back door, covered head to foot in coal dust, just back at midnight from the evening shift they had him working now, drinking a bottle of beer in deep, greedy gulps. He finished the beer, belched, looked at the bottle still cold in his hand and smiled.

“This sure cuts the thirst I work up. It gets awful dry down there in the hole.”

“You ought to wash up first,” Connie said to him. “You’re swallowing that dust down to your belly this way.”

“Might be part of why I like the taste so much,” he said to her with a glint in his eye, nudging her playfully in the ribs. “I’ll wash up before the next one and see if there’s a difference.” He looked at her with that surprising earnestness he could muster, asked, “How was the clinic?”

She busied herself with straightening up for a moment before answering. “It was fine,” she said finally, looking at him directly before returning to her task. “It was very clean, top to bottom. That part was nice. Everything there was white, seemed like. Green and white. It shined pretty much everwhere you looked.” She said quietly, almost to herself, “It was different than I expected but fine, I guess.”

“What’d the doctor have to say?”

“He said everything seems good. Listened to my belly for a long time, more than a minute, I’d say. Said he could hear a good, strong heartbeat. That means I’m halfway along. And the baby’s in a good position, too. If it wasn’t, you might hear nothing.”

“Well, that’s good to know, isn’t it? What else he have to say?”

“Said watch my weight, don’t be ballooning up like some. Then there’s not likely to be any problem.” She looked away for a moment, debating how much more to say, held her stomach unconsciously, then said, “He said a young heifer like me won’t have a time of it. Just like to slide out like a calf in the field when the time comes.”

She walked a ways away from him, turned back and said, “I didn’t like him saying that. He’s a doctor and all doesn’t mean he should get familiar.”

John looked up from where he sat, removing his boots, said, “Ah, Connie, he didn’t mean nothing by it. Just trying to tell you not to worry. Things will be okay. That’s what he meant to say.”

“Calling me a cow? That supposed to make me feel good?”

He wanted to hug her but was filthy from work. All he could say was, “Don’t go getting all sensitive now, Connie. I’m sure he meant well. Just didn’t say the right thing, is all. The important thing is you and the baby are fine. That’s what matters. That’s the thing to carry away from it.” He grinned at her, said, “Anybody can tell you ain’t no heifer."

She squinted at him, deciding her response, letting go her hurt enough to allow a little humor to escape. “Well, Johnny, he was to examine you he’d see right off where the bull comes from. Doesn’t take much of a doctor to see that.”

“Well, this old bull is gonna wash up, if that’s all right with you. You got yourself readjusted now, you might be good enough to get me another beer.”

“You’ll be ballooning up yourself you keep drinking those beers.”

“Two a night is my limit, wife. That’s reasonable, I believe, hard as I work. Like you say, it takes a bit to wash down the dust. Takes a while to slow down, too, ease into bed after all that racket in the mine. Easier though with this hot bath waiting. Working in a mine and I’ve never been cleaner in my life. That bath and a couple of beers settles a man right down.”

“Yeah, it’s different, ain’t it?” she said. “Getting to bed in the middle of the night. I’m still getting used to it. Not like farming, up when the cock crows. Early bird and the worm. All those things they say.”

“That’s why they keep those roosters out toward the edge of town here, so’s a man can get his rest, sleep ‘til eight or nine, even ten if he needs to. Wide awake and pay attention when you’re in the hole. None of that ‘cockadoodledoo’ at sunup when you only been asleep a few hours.

"We’re not chasing worms anyhow, Connie. Aiming a lot higher now. Collier pay’s a damn site better than farming, too. Just takes some getting used to, working these hours. Once you’re readjusted, it’s all just fine.”

“Like the doctor, huh?” Connie said, nodded once and went to fetch the beer.

Coal Miner at Dawson, NM c. 1920 - credit: newmexicomagazine.org

Cave In

John Forza got the support posts wedged tight against each wall of the shaft and set the beam firmly in place, tight against the roof. He used to hate this work at Sopris. The company didn't pay you for it and it took time away from ripping out the seams of coal. "For your own good's why you do it. Why should we pay you to be safe?"

That's the way they were there. Cheat you every way they could. Not like here at Dawson where the company treats a man with respect. Give fair weight and pay you for getting the supports in place. That and all the other extra work trying to shore up these holes. Dangerous work no matter how you do it, but the right way moved the odds to your side. They wanted you to be safe. As much as you could be.

He walked further into the tunnel toward where the next set of posts were stacked. His stride was quick and sure. He was feeling good

about things, this job, this town, his beautiful wife with a baby on the way, everything coming together like a man could be proud and feel right about himself. He was very good with it all, even humming a little tune to himself, when close behind him with a thunderous crash that shook the floor beneath his feet the earth fell, the roof collapsed, debris rained on him in chunks and shards, a few sizable pieces hard against his back, and he fell to his knees

The air was thick with dust to where he couldn't see a thing. The lamp in his hat cast a ghostly glow of light that was swallowed by a dense cloud of particles fine enough to float. He raised the handkerchief from his throat to cover his nose and mouth. It helped a little but breathing was hard and he coughed with every other breath.

After a few minutes he got his bearings well enough to stand, blindly feel his way to the wall, lean against it and take inventory of his pain. One knee hurt, his ribs around back on the right side gave him notice when he took a deep breath, and there was a smatter of blood just below his right ear. Mostly he felt okay. A little stunned, maybe, like his head was buzzing a bit, but not injured much as far as he could tell.

But he was alone. The crew was working back behind him, how far back he wasn't sure. Wasn't sure either how much of the tunnel collapsed, whether any of them might have been caught in it. If not, they were okay. They could get out. He on the other hand was cut off. Sealed in. Alone. Until they come find him.

The dust took a long time to settle. By the time it was clear enough to see, his chest was phlegmy and he held the handkerchief aside to blow clots of black snot from his nose. He looked for a long while at the wall of earth that closed off his exit. Other than that there wasn't much to see. He found his hammer in the debris, shut off the lamp to save the battery, and thought about the cave-in in the dark.

There was no way to tell how far it extended toward the exit, but as he thought about it, his confidence in the braces he had built was strong. He suspected the fracture came this side of that last beam and

the back of the tunnel that fell was not that deep. If he was right, the crew would dig him out. If not, well, not.

Too soon to think that way, he reminded himself, but the silence was ominous. It was cold, too, standing there, then sitting and standing again, and quiet as it was he heard none of the evidence a miner hopes for when he’s trapped in a hole that’s collapsed and his fellow miners are frantically working to dig him out.

Mining Cave-In - credit: Library of Congress

Company

The first sound John Forza heard was not what he was hoping for, not the sound of pick-axes digging away at the caved-in roof of the mine shaft, not voices calling for him to make a noise, let them know he was alive. That wasn't what he heard.

Instead, it was footsteps, a voice muttering as it came toward him. "Whoa," he said as he stood up and fumbled with the lamp on his hat.

"Whoa yourself. Who's that?" the voice said back. The man's light preceded him as he rounded a bend in the tunnel. The dust was much settled but still plenty of it evident in the beam of light.

"Forza," John said. "Who the hell are you?"

“Johnny, it’s Lazlo.” he said and very soon after came into view. “What the hell happened?”

“Better question is: what the hell are you doing in here? I thought I was cut off alone.”

“Guess it’s you’re lucky day, Johnny. I’m here to keep you company.”

“Damn, I never figured. Thought I was the lead man setting the beams.”

“Nah, the shift boss sent me in to check that flat-lie seam we uncovered. Feared there was binder in it but I found none. Was just about to turn back when I heard the cave-in. Come down right behind you, did it?”

“It did. Knocked me down, in fact. Had set a few beams and was coming this way to set the next one when the back came down. No warning when it give way.”

“How far back was that last beam?”

“Maybe twenty yards or so. Not less.”

“That’s good. If you set it right, probably just that piece to here is what come down.”

“I set it right,” John said, quick and sharp.

“I wasn’t saying otherwise,” Lazlo said. “Just thinking we might be in good shape here. Them guys get everyone on it, they can clear a fall that size maybe by morning.”

“That long? Think there’s enough oxygen to last us?”

“Now that there’s two of us sucking up the air, you mean?”

“That is a factor. Crossed my mind it did. Still, I’m glad to have the company.”

“Plenty of air here to last us, I believe, long as it stays sweet. It’s the damp that worries a man in this situation, cut off from the fan and all. So far though I don’t get any taste of that.”

“Hard not to start digging out from this side,” John said. “Guess the smart thing is to sit tight, but it’d be easier to take if we was working it.”

“Then the air would be a problem,” Lazlo said. “Breathe easy is our best chance.”

“Morning, huh?” John said quietly. Until then, he hadn’t thought his way through it, not all the way. Until Laz said, ‘our best chance,’ he hadn’t thought about not making it. Hadn’t even thought about being hungry. Thirsty. Hadn’t thought about the black damp, not likely anyhow in a cave-in if the air holds out, maybe methane though in a case like this, said to kill a man in a matter of minutes. Hadn’t really thought of any of it. Until now.

“How far in was that flat-lie?” he said.

“Hundred yards or so. Right there at the end of the tunnel.”

“So we do have us some air to work with.”

“Long as we breathe easy."

They sat down after a while, nothing much to speak of. Both of them without saying so were waiting for the sound of the rescue underway. Neither of them heard it yet. Wondering if they figured it wrong, if more of the back fell than they were thinking, that they might be a lot further from getting out than morning. That thinking raised the possibility: if ever. John began to think about Connie. The baby to be.

“You got your lunch pail with you?” Lazlo said.

“Nah. Nothing but this sledge hammer. Food’s with the rest of my gear. Back there,” he said, indicating with a nod of his head the other side of the fall.

“I got mine. Canteen, too. We’ll be all right. Happy to share. My wife always packs more than I can eat anyhow.”

“Would appreciate a little water, if you can spare it.” John said. “I get dry pretty quick.”

“Hungry, too, I’ll bet.” Lazlo said, handing him the canteen. He cracked open the lunch pail, said, “Let’s see what the missus sent along.”

Baked chicken, an apple, a good sized hunk of bread and a big piece of cheese. They ate in silence, each of them thinking his thoughts, glad for the food, go sparing with the water, which had to last.

“Lookee here,” Lazlo said, and held out a Hershey bar. “Share and share alike.” He passed half the candy to Forza.

“That was something of a feast,” John said when they were finished eating. “I will be sure to thank your woman when I see her next.”

“We will be seeing them, yours and mine both. That’s the attitude. Now, I’ve been giving some thought to this fall, the way the roof come down, and it occurs to me this might be a Kettle Bottom that’s the cause.”

“Kettle Bottom? Guess I’ve heard of such a thing but I don’t know what it is.”

“See, you set that beam, the last one, and it shores up the back of the tunnel, the roof I mean, but it changes the geometry, maybe the physics, I’m not certain which it is that applies.” He hummed a bit of a tune for a moment, as though he was calling up what it was he wanted to say, how to explain it.

“I don’t like to spend too much time thinking about all the forces at play in this work we’re doing, because it can overwhelm a man. Here we are, these old troglodytes burrowing deeper and deeper into the earth, and where we go we create a vacuum, well, more like an absence really, a space where things used to be that aren’t anymore. I always imagine the earth craving what was and deciding how to adapt.”

“Trogodikes?” John Forza said.

“Troglodytes. Cavemen. People in the old times that lived in caves.”

“Well, okay. But we aren’t living here.”

“We make our living here. Am I right? We spend a good bit of our time here, digging out a living and making the bosses rich.”

“What’s this got to do with Kettle Bottoms?”

“An excellent question! There is a stability at play in the earth. What holds everything in place. That makes sense, doesn’t it? But that stability is made up of lots of different things: rocks, coal, quartze, other minerals, plain old dirt, vegetation, and bones of animals, all pressing on each other, all sorts of things come together like that to make a stable earth. And we start tunneling in it.

“We core out a piece of the earth and I always imagine it groaning over what it gives up, that gold, or silver, or coal, the oil and gas, water, too, from them wells, even the sand and gravel that we strip away, all of it is a piece of the earth that we remove and it’s less stable because of what we do.”

“This Kettle thing in here somewhere?”

“It is, and I was just coming to that. I mean, after all, we have time on our hands here and not much else we can do except talk now that chocolate bar’s gone so I’m not in a particular hurry. But here’s what I’m getting to.

“We carve out a piece of the earth and we shore up the walls the best we can so the roof don’t fall in on us and, whoop, it does. Like that.” He pointed to the wall of coal and rock and dirt that hemmed them in. “And you don’t wonder that it happened all that much because you’re actually surprised it don’t happen more often than it does.

“But still, you say to yourself, why now? What was it this time that caused the back of this tunnel to fall in? Just right there in that particular place where it did. And thinking about this particular time

that has us sitting here like it does, I have to say I think a Kettle Bottom just might have been the cause."

"Could I ask why that is on your mind?"

"As I was saying, all these forces are at play, holding things together and mostly what they make is a pretty solid piece of work. Evidence of that every collier knows by how hard it is to carve these shafts and get at them seams of coal. Here and there, though, there's places that aren't quite as solid."

"Like draw slate you mean?"

"That or a slip or deposits of sand and scree, any of the friable stuff that might benefit from scaling if you saw it in time. That soft stuff is what can be the first to move when the pressure changes."

"And that's where the Kettle is?"

"Not exactly. I mean, probably it could be but it might just be a soft spot by itself that gives way all of a sudden. Because it's a kind of calcified vegetation, the remains of a big tree that still could be rotting just a little bit."

"Must be a helluva big tree to bring down that much roof."

"It's as big as a tree, maybe a cottonwood or some such, with all its roots pulled back into the base of it and the branches withered down along the trunk, and then it firms up some as the decay slows down. Pretty soon you have a big ol' barrel-shaped plug held in place by all the pressures 'til we come along and disturb 'em."

"The Kettle Bottom, huh. I guess that makes sense when you figure a tree was like to be growing in dirt or sand or whatever. Not in rock. So maybe them Kettles are gonna be settled in a soft spot to begin with."

"That's the theory."

They were quiet then, each of them thinking his thoughts, mulling over what was said, feeling to a greater degree now that always present sense of the weight above them and the pressures Laz brought so clearly forward from the back of the mind.

John stared at the wall of earth that separated them from everything else that was their life and wondered if somewhere in the pile of rock was a tree had settled just a little further and brought down the roof.

“Son of a bitch,” he said, and shook his head slightly side to side.

Laz said, “This mining life is something, ain’t it?”

The Dark

Remembering

“Can’t help but wonder what’s keeping ‘em,” John Forza said.

Lazlo nodded, although in the dark Johnny didn’t see it, said, “I have to admit I’ve been wondering on that myself.”

He was quiet for a few moments, breathing a little faster John noticed, when he finally said, “The day that explosion tore us up, guys were digging within minutes.”

John said nothing, letting him come to terms with what more he had to say or not. Lazlo was quiet for a long time; then he said, “I was in Five when the Two mine blew. Said it shot a flame a hundred yards out the entry into the air. It shook the entire town, knocked people off their feet as they was walking, knocked out windows.

“Everybody came running when they heard the siren, from the other mines, guys on other shifts, even guys from the other camps nearby. Within minutes it seemed like, there were hundreds of men come to help and more coming all the time.

“Me and three other guys were running toward the entry when the first crew met us coming the other way. Them two tunnels were connected then, just like now, and they were hoping to get in that way.

"Had to tell them it caved in Five for sure. That’s what saved us. The four of us anyways. Guys further in not so much.”

He stopped talking then, sounded to be gulping air a bit, muttered to himself, “breathe easy,” and made a strange noise deep in his throat that maybe came from his belly, like stifling a groan.

“Seized up the fan right there in the ventilation shaft. 15 feet across and supposed to be fire proof but the blast cratered the housing. Shut the whole thing down. Took hours to get that fan cranking again.

"The guys who tried to come in that way got turned back by the gas. Between the fire and the poison air, we had a good idea what’s in store for us. But everybody set to digging.

“The entry to the Two mine was buried down the tunnel over a hundred yards. Took about 10 hours to clear a way in. We were digging out the Five. It wasn’t near as deep but there was less of us and it took us about the same.

"Just a ferocious effort both places. Men were lifting rocks weighed more than they did. Tossing ‘em aside and grabbing more. Nobody was gonna rest ’til we got in.”

He was breathing hard again. John reached out, touched his shoulder, nodded to him in the dark. “Breathe easy,” he said.

Laz was quiet for a while. John could hear his breathing slow, some sounds deep and guttural in his throat, shifting his weight from side to side where he sat.

“Didn’t mean to get started with this,” he said. “It’s hard to talk about. Once you start up, I mean, it just keeps coming.”

“It’s all right. It’s all right, don’t worry about it. Whatever you have to say, I’m listening.”

He said nothing at all for a long time, made noises that were not words or even their beginnings but rather just disturbances to his system that he was getting under control, a rumbling in his guts maybe or traces of pain.

You’d think it would be quiet here, John thought to himself, other than the random noises of two men sitting in the dark in a cave, but it wasn’t so. There was sound of dripping and groaning and ticking, sounds that almost weren’t sounds at all but just sensations like something shifted in the air. It was those pressures, he realized, that Lazlo had brought to mind, the insides of the earth leaning on itself.

“Once you hear them,” Laz said quietly, as though he read Johnny’s mind, “you never can unhear them. Sorry I brought it up.”

After a while, he said, “I was a school teacher. Did you know that? In Albuquerque. I taught in the high school. I liked it but the pay was lousy. When I got married, my brother said, “I can get you a job in the mines.’ So I came to Dawson.

“János was my hero. Everything an older brother should be. Smart, funny, handsome, the girls loved him, a great athlete, too. He was the best pitcher in the state in school. For our Dawson team, even older he still had the best arm. He was good to me. Always had my back. I wish you could have known him. You got the same name.”

“John? That’s János in American?”

“Like Laszlo is Lazlo. We adapt.”

“Like Gianni for me. That’s what my papa always called me. My mama said, ‘John! It’s John! We aren’t in Italy anymore, Santino.’ Everybody called him Sonny. Told me his pa sent him off to the mines when he was seven. He did the same for me at ten. They don’t allow that anymore, but that’s the way it was.”

“They say there’s 24 different languages spoken in this mine. That hasn’t changed none. Lots of different names all doing the same dirty work.”

“I always heard tell at Sopris the same thing. Maybe 27 in all. Everybody speaking something different. But we all got along.”

“I think about that a lot. All these different places we come from, all these different ways to America, and we all end up working in the mines. Might be the only reason they let us in.”

“Kinda like all them different pressures you were talking about. Us miners with our own ways of doing things pushing back at them. Making our own kinda solidarity, you might say, once we got in.”

“That’s a damned smart observation, Johnny. You mighta been a teacher yourself.”

“I thought you were gonna say, ‘spoken like a union man even if you ain’t one.’”

“There’s plenty a union men working here, Johnny. Quiet like. You ain’t the only one.”

Dawson, NM Rescue Operation c. 1920 - credit: Nick Pappas

Bodies in Repose

Maybe they slept for a while. John wasn't sure. It seemed like a lot of time had passed where nothing was said or even noticed. But they did notice the silence that held only the sounds of the earth and nothing human that was active except them.

"You expect they know we're here, don't you?" he said.

"You leave your tag at the check house?"

"Of course. Like every day."

"Then they know you're here."

"Sure taking their time getting after us."

"That's a fact," Lazlo said. After a moment, he added, "How far back was the rest of your crew?"

“Better part of a half-mile. Most of ‘em still working that main seam we opened up weeks back. I was timbering this new shot we were getting to next after that was dug out.” He thought about it for a minute, said, “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“That they might not have heard the back fall? Yes I am. If it’s as small as we’ve been speculating, might be they never knew. Won’t until the shift ends and we don’t check out.” He lit the lantern on his cap, reached in a pocket and took out his time piece, clicked open the case, said, “That would be right about now.”

“Jesus God,” John said. “Midnight and they ain’t even missed us yet. That puts a different light on it, don’t it?”

Lazlo turned to him, the lamp lighting John’s face, said, “We’ll be fine. This ain’t nothing. They’ll come dig us out any time now.” He shrugged, doused the light, said, “After what we went through last time, this is just a inconvenience.”

A matter of time, John thought to himself. Everything is a matter of time. How soon the crew would come looking for us. How long to dig us out. How much more silence before Lazlo commences to tell his story. That part came soon enough.

“When we broke through that fall in Five, finally got a hole through the top on one side, the air knocked us back. The gas was terrible. Poured through the opening and gave us pause for what we were likely to find.

“We got the gas masks hooked up and crawled through, one at a time. Imagine how we felt when the first thing we saw was four men face down in the dirt at the foot of the fall and not moving. But damned if they weren’t still alive! Barely breathing but we got them back through to the other side and carried out to the medical tent, and they survived it.

“Had their kerchiefs wetted down and breathed through them all that time. Near dead when we found them but the doctors pumped ‘em

full of oxygen and brought them around. Gave us hope, a real burst of energy after all that digging, but things went to hell from there."

He was quiet again, breathing a little ragged for a bit, and then calm and still. Much as he had always wanted to hear about it, John for the moment was more focused on his own situation, whether and when he'd get dug out, whether the air would hold up for them, whether more of the roof might fall.

"Most of us seen someone die at one time or another," Lazlo said. "It's something else entirely to come on four, five, ten at a time lying dead. People you know, work with, share a beer and swap lies. Lying dead at your feet and that's it. They're gone. Ain't coming back. The finality of it on such a scale is brutal. It numbs you.

"We left 'em where they were, still looking for any that might be alive, but it was just more and more bodies. I was sick to my stomach. Got to believe every one of us was staring through our masks at nothing but death felt the same. It's hard to describe the sense that comes over you, just like there's no air to breathe but the canister on your back and you see nothing but death all around you like life has been sucked out of the world itself except the little container of it that's you.

"Then something happened that was so strange, it snapped us out of it - for a minute, anyhow. We come around one bend in the tunnel and standing there in front of us was a mule - live as could be. Started braying at us, like it was hungry or something, and we thought if he's alive maybe we will find some survivors. And damned if we didn't"

He paused, then, took a few deep breathes, seemed to be recollecting how that moment felt, life in a deep field of destruction, and John could sense he was smiling at the memory.

"In a little room off the main tunnel was a guy sitting there, his kerchief covering his nose and his eyes blinking like he was just coming around. Mule brought him to, all that noise woke him up from that long last nap he was taking, the one he might never have seen the light side of again, and a couple of the guys got him all the way out to the med tent. Still works here today, in fact. That was a helluva great moment.

“He was the last one though. Not another man in either mine, Two or Five, was found alive. Not a one. 261 men dead. Two more died among the rescuers, lost their heads somehow, took off their masks and the gas got them. 263 men died in all. Them in Five dead of the gas. In Two the blast is what killed ‘em.

“We got to the tunnel where they was connected,” he said, speaking very quietly and slowly, “and made our way into Two. Everything was charred. The walls were black. You could smell the smoke even through the mask.

“There were lots of bodies, groups of ‘em that were burned and scattered by the blast, some missing limbs, some with the clothing shredded right off their bodies. Some were standing like they were fixed to the wall, their hands held in front of their face like to ward off the fire.”

He said nothing for a long time, his breathing fast and shallow, his body noticeably trembling some John could sense even in the dark. He sighed, a very deep exhalation of breath and an audible shudder, then he continued.

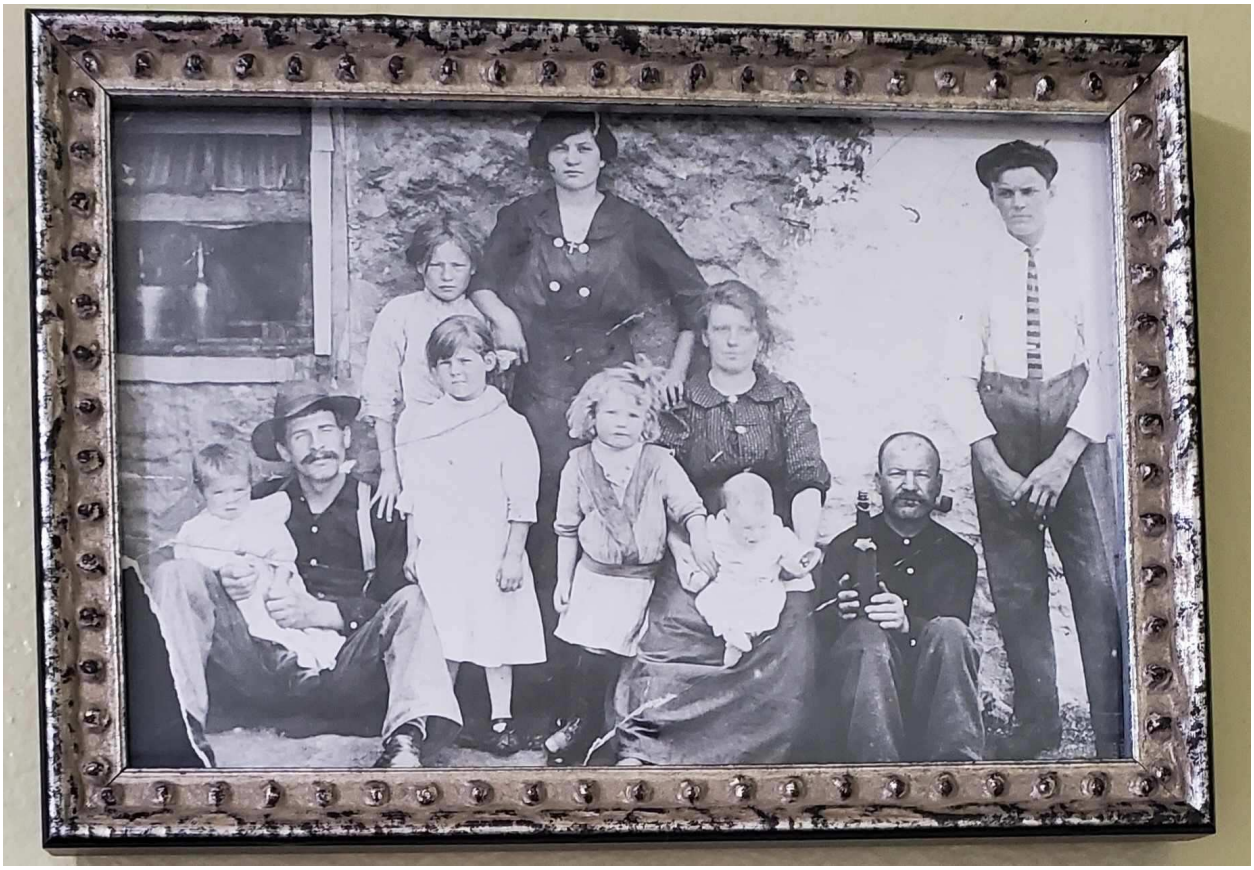
“Near to the ignition point, I found my brother. He was seated against the wall with his legs bent, his boots flat on the floor, looking almost like he was napping. I knew he was dead but I wanted to hold him. This powerful feeling came over me and I rushed to him, fell to my knees, and grabbed his shoulders to hold him close.

“The skin came off in my hands. I leaned back and his body fell off his bones. He was nothing but ash and a skeleton. Cooked through by that fire and burned to a crisp.

“Ah!” he said, “God in Christ Jesus, my beautiful brother! I don’t remember anything after that. My guys tried to help me up but they tell me I wouldn’t let go of János. They led me out of the mine. I carried his skeleton all the way.

“The doctors knocked me out, some kind of sedative they gave me, but I’m told they had to pry my hands loose from my brother, what was

left of him. I don’t remember that part but it makes sense that I couldn’t let go. Even after burying what was left of him, I still to this day can’t believe he’s gone.”



Connie (center standing), Her Family, and a Friend in a Hat

Premonitions

The hospital was very quiet. Connie nursed the baby, Anna, they had named her, and when the child was sated, the nurse returned her to the nursery. It was peaceful then. She drifted off to sleep.

Connie had a dream. Her father and mother were seated in their home. It was larger now and they were older. Angelo puffed away on his pipe and when he sipped his cider, his hands appeared to tremble. Carolina seemed severe, distracted, looked different seated there without a child on her lap. All their children were grown now, married, making families of their own.

They came through the door, one after another, each with their brood, and soon the house was full of brothers and sisters, their spouses and children. Angelo beamed. Carolina called her aside, said, “Your

boys are wonderful, strong and handsome, but where is the baby Anna?"

"The baby," Connie said to herself, "the baby. Where's the baby?" She looked through the house, rushed from room to room, her disquiet growing, a feeling of panic coming over her. "Where's the baby?"

She looked outside, under the bushes and up in the trees, down in the cellar and the coop out back. The baby was nowhere to be found. She went to the neighbors, asked had they seen her, searched their homes while they shook their heads and muttered sadly, "Poor woman. She's lost her baby."

Connie stood in the muddy stretch between the houses, crying and pulling her hair. John appeared at her side, put an arm around her, tried to console her, said, "Don't cry. It's not your fault. Nothing to be done about it. It will be all right."

Connie returned to her parents' home. Her mother looked at her accusingly.

"Johnny says it will be all right," Connie said to her.

Carolina said, "Those men don't know. If you've lost your baby it, will never be all right."

She woke with a start, her heart pounding, her eyes wet. She rose from the bed, made her way down the hall in the dark, looking for the nursery. A nurse appeared suddenly, asked "What are you doing?"

"The nursery," Connie said to her, "My baby. I have to see my baby."

"The children are sleeping," the nurse said to her. "You should be, too."

Connie tried to push past her. "I need to find Anna to see she's all right."

“You need to calm down,” the nurse said, but she seemed to accept the importance of helping to quiet her fears.

“Anna is fine,” she said. “If you’ll promise to be still, you can see her through the nursery window.”

They passed through a door and down a short hall to where a large window looked in on three cribs, each with a baby wrapped in a blanket and sleeping peacefully. Connie pressed her nose against the glass, stared very hard from one to the next, saw Anna breathing easily, a gentle smile on her face.

“Thank you,” she said to the nurse, “thank you. I feared I’d lost her.”

“She’s just fine. You needn’t worry. Motherhood is so much responsibility, it can be unsettling. Lots of new mothers are afraid for their children. You’re not alone.”

She patted Connie’s arm, allowed her yet another look, said, “Let’s get you back to your room now. You need your sleep. Everything is going to be all right.”

Connie slept peacefully the rest of the night, awoke only when a nurse brought Anna to her breast and they were joined again.

World War I- credit: britannica.com

Influenza

“Flu that’s going round is really something,” Tom Tuga said to John Forza. “They say it’s killing people by the thousands, even right here in the U.S.”

John nodded his agreement, said, “They say it’s all them soldiers back from the war, carried it with ‘em from overseas. Something them Frenchmen or Germans started. That’s what they say.”

“Must be why we’ve been safe here. Coal’s more important than another rifle in the fight. Kept us working so nobody here got infected.”

“Give thanks for that. All them guys that won the battle and still lost their lives. Gotta be sorry for them.”

“And their families, too. Come back from the war, all that death and killing. No sooner get home than people start dying all around you again. Makes a man wonder what’s fair in this world.”

“I don’t wonder it. Fair is something personal a man can choose to do. The way he treats others. But there ain’t no fairness in the world I

can see. Nothing fair about how it's set up. It's all about what you're born to, what hand you're dealt. That's the way I see it."

"You got a point there, Johnny. Here we are digging coal in the mines so other guys can kill each other in them ditches overseas, and all the while Mr. Rockefeller is sitting in his big old home in New York City counting his pennies that pile up."

"Counting his dollars, you mean. And lots of 'em. Well, you and me got work, and it's here in Dawson and not at Sopris working for that sumbitch! We've got a couple of dollars ourselves, enough to pay for this dinner and a couple of beers. I guess we should be grateful for that."

"With Carla and Connie over to Trinidad, we're still eating pretty good. Dawson treats us fair enough for a couple of working stiffs."

"Damn site better here than fighting overseas, that's for sure. I'm glad the ladies were able to get there to welcome David home. I gotta believe he'll be happy to see them."

"Connie's folk to meet the baby, too. Got to be a kick for them, a first grand-baby and all. Carla said Connie never let on, but you could tell she was feeling proud."

A couple of days later, the boss called John aside when he arrived for his shift. "They need to see you up at the office," he said.

"A call for you came in from Trinidad," the man at the desk said. He looked away. "Something important, I guess. You're to call this number. The operator will put you through."

"Johnny, it's Angelo," his father-in-law said. He answered on the first ring. "It's the baby. She's taken ill. Mother and Connie are at the hospital. I don't know how serious, but Connie wanted you to know."

He went to the office first thing the next morning, asked permission to call again. "Don't be making a habit of it," said the man at the desk as he handed John the phone.

“Johnny, it’s David. They say it’s the flu. We’re all praying but she’s pretty sick. Poor little thing. Connie’s a wreck. Hasn’t slept for two days now. Maybe you ought to be here, if there’s any way you can.”

“I’ll be there quick as possible,” John said, and went to find the boss.

He made it in less than three hours. Got service in Raton, topped off the radiator and filled the tires for the trip over the pass. He drove straight to Angelo’s new home on 3rd Street, first time he’d been there, a lot nicer than the old place at Sopris.

Angelo answered the door, opened the screen, hugged John where he stood on the porch. He stepped back, held his son-in-law by the shoulders, slowly shook his head. David came onto the porch, looked Johnny in the eye, said, “She passed an hour ago. Doctors said there was nothing to do. Spanish Flu it was. She never had a chance.”

The three of them drove to the hospital in David’s car. The priest was just leaving the room as they got there. He touched John on the shoulder, said, “I got her baptized before she died and gave her the last rites, too. She’s in heaven now, son.” He looked from one to another of them until Angelo slipped him a sawbuck. He palmed it, said, “Bless you,” and was gone without another word.

Connie sat in a chair in the corner of the room, Carolina stood next to her. She came to hug John but Connie just looked at him briefly, nodded once, and looked away. She wasn’t crying, barely looked to be breathing, was motionless as a statue.

He put his hand on her shoulder, kissed her lightly on the forehead through the veil that covered her face. She glanced at him briefly as he straightened up, then stared past him at the crib. It was empty. He looked at Carolina. “They’re getting her ready,” she said.

A nurse arrived, followed by a large man who carried a wooden box. In it, wrapped in swaddling that covered her completely, was the baby. John took the box, set it on the bed, and began to unwrap the covering so he could see his little girl.

Connie rose from her seat, walked to John, swatted his hand, said, “Leave her be. Bring her as she is,” and walked from the room. The others followed, Carolina first, then Angelo, and John carrying the box with David behind him. A few of the nurses and orderlies bowed their heads as the grim procession passed.

Near the front door, a man stepped from an office, said, “I’m sorry for your loss,” and tucked an envelope in the box next to Anna’s body. “A bill for her care,” he said with a sad smile. “To pay when you’re ready. There’s no hurry. Take a few days.”

Anna Rest In Peace - courtesy Joanne Pagliasotti

Transitioning

They drove home in silence. John tried to talk to Connie, say something to console her, but she turned her head from him, looked out the window. She held the box with little Anna dead in the blankets that covered her all the way back to Dawson. She didn't cry, didn't speak, just stared straight ahead as if she tried to see what awaited her and nothing came into focus.

He stopped the car at the top of Raton Pass, to let the engine cool he told her, and hiked up to the old mission near where he first took her for a ride when they were kids. He knelt at the broken alter in the ruins of the old church and prayed to God to help him through these next few days, to keep this rent in the fabric of his new family from tearing completely apart.

Connie was still seated in the car when he returned, stoic, unmoved. She did look at him for just a moment before they drove on, a brief flicker of the woman he knew and loved showed in her eyes, as though she joined him in that recollection of a special time before this pain and sorrow descended on them. Almost immediately the silence came over her again. She said nothing as they drove on.

John realized as they reached Dawson no one there knew what befell them, no one took notice of their arrival or if they did they stayed out of sight. He took the box from Connie's lap and carried his dead daughter into their home. He looked around for a place to set her; nowhere seemed appropriate and finally he placed her on the kitchen table, where Connie stopped and stared at the swaddled form that was her baby newly born and newly dead.

She put her hands to her face, made an anguished sound from deep inside her, and began to cry. John put an arm around her shoulders, held her gently as she sobbed, her body heaving with unspeakable sorrow, and her fingers clutching at her hair. He wanted to console her, but what could he possibly say to ease the pain of something so terrible as this.

He held her for a long time, her weeping and moaning went on until finally from exhaustion she sagged against him and was quiet except for moments of spasm and gulps of air. He led her to a chair and kissed her forehead, looked at her eyes that after a time found his and came into focus. “What will we do?” she said to him in a faint voice.

It had been so long since she’d spoken he was startled. He took a moment to gather himself. He wanted to say the right thing.

“We’ll go on. We’ll find a way to keep going. We won’t let this horrible loss stop us. We’ll be strong, Connie, like I know you are, like I can be.” She looked at him softly as he spoke, her eyes pleading for comfort, her attention reaching for any shred of hope. He tried his best to give her something to believe, to hold on to, to see herself, to see them, starting again. To see a future beyond this awful moment.

“We’ll get through this, and we’ll get back to work, making a family, making our life. We can do that, Connie. We can do that together. Nothing else makes sense. There’s nothing else to do. It will be all right.”

She remembered her dream, her baby lost, standing in the mud pulling her hair and crying, Johnny come to calm her, arm around her shoulder, saying, “It will be all right.”

“You men don’t understand,” she said to him, a weary anger in her voice. “A mother, a new mother coming home with a dead baby to where all her new things are that will never get worn. Can you imagine that?”

She looked away to the distance and then back to where the box rested on the table. “We’ll get through it, Johnny. Like you say. We’ll go on. We’ll make a family and we’ll live our life.“ She turned and looked at him, said quietly but fiercely, “But it will never be all right. I will never be all right. You need to understand that, Johnny. It won’t be the same. I will never be all right.”

A few minutes passed before she spoke again. “I was born at home. That old sod house in Sopris. Just my mother and a midwife. In the

family bed on a dirt floor with just my mother and a 20 year old girl to get me birthed. My mother, that woman, me, we’re all still alive."

“There’s little Anna, all the care, them doctors and nurses, that wonderful hospital right here in town. That’s how she was born and here she is a few months later dead in a box on the table.”

Dawson, NM 1920

Reclamation

It was a long time before Connie began to come around, longer than John expected, and even when that light in her eyes returned, it was only briefly, little flashes of that girl he knew before tragedy befell the woman. There would be something that pleased her, made her smile, a flicker of renewal, her spirit reemerging, that lit up her face and returned the sparkle to her eyes. Soon enough, all too soon, it would be extinguished, as though that dark place in her soul grabbed her back from a lighter vision and blew out the flame.

John was on the day shift now, which gave them back a normal rhythm to their lives, rising with the dawn and retiring late evening. It gave him more time to spend with her enjoying some of the pleasures this little town had to offer. The live performances at the Opera House were a new experience that left them both amazed and startled. Motion pictures at the theater were Connie's favorite indulgence. The comedies of Charlie Chaplin and this new guy, Buster Keaton, made her smile, even laugh out loud.

It gave him hope for their future, that given the time and some of these life-affirming entertainments Dawson offered them, she might find her way free of the oppressive weight Anna's death had settled on her. The way of life they led here was far more generous than anything they could imagine as they were raised up and funneled into the rigor of daily survival and making do in the mining camps of Colorado.

By comparison, Dawson was a place of nearly daunting generosity: steady work, a nice home, schools, healthcare, shopping, entertainment, and pay for the coal John mined sufficient to pay for these pleasures and still put a little aside each payday. In truth, it was everything he wanted to believe he might provide her when they first talked of marriage. That it came to be seemed like a gift greater than he dared ask.

Now that it was theirs, this piece of the American Dream their people came to this country seeking, something unexpected had taken from them with a vengeance all the satisfaction and the peace of mind they might enjoy. Instead, a pall came over their life together, a period of mourning and grief that colored nearly every moment of each day with an oppressive gloom.

John saw his place in this time of their lives as the one who needed to restart the joy and the enthusiasm they had lost, the belief in the future and what they could make of it as husband and wife, parents of a family, respectable members of the community, as two people who came together and achieved success in their own modest way. Getting that done was a challenge. It took some time. A long time.

Life here in Dawson had been so full of promise for them, and still was, to John's way of thinking, that he hoped eventually she'd regain that optimism, that enthusiasm for building a life together and providing for a family that would have so much more than they had as children. That opportunity was still in front of them, theirs to be had, if they could get beyond the terrible sadness of their loss, that searing pain of someone suddenly taken from them so quickly after they'd barely begun this journey.

From a place of deep sorrow, hurt the like of which she'd never known before, Connie watched her husband go about his ways to comfort her, try to draw her out of a depression that was nearly blinding. She was touched by his kindness, the sensitivity he showed for her anguish, his persistent ability to draw her focus toward the light even as it was mostly unrewarded.

Were her mood not so dark, she would have been amused at his efforts, seeing the banty rooster in him, the irrepressible nature he took to each day's challenges and even this tragedy that had befallen them. She knew despite their different ways of reacting that it had stunned him, too, reached into that tender heart of his and shook his faith.

Unlike her, though, he refused to dwell on misfortune. The roof fell in on you, knocked you to your knees, you got up, cleared away the debris and got back to work.

If you're John Forza, that's what you do. This man she yielded to those years past, this man she loves now. She sees him differently, but even in her pain and sorrow, she notices the affection is deeper, her respect for him greater, the partnership they've joined stronger.

Connie is shattered, her heart broken, but terrible as this loss is, and it is worse than anything she could have imagined, it has confirmed he loves and cares for her even at her worst. She'll never be the same again, but she will be better.

A Child’s Grave - credit: leosmith.jpg

Reassessment

One thing that troubled Connie long after her daughter was buried was so few people attended the service. It was held at St. John's a couple of days after they brought her back to Dawson, and while she and Johnny weren't all that well known yet, they knew a lot more people in town than the few who joined them in burying their daughter.

"It was the flu," Carla said to her when Connie mentioned it in confidence. "People were afraid." She hesitated, looked away for a moment, said, "Some of them were unhappy you brought her home. They feared it might get started here."

Her friend's face clouded over, troubled by this unexpected news layered on her heartache. "Don't think poorly of them, Connie. It's not they didn't care. They sent all them beautiful flowers. It was the best they could do. Every one of them felt for you. We all did. It's just that people were afraid."

She watched for a sign her words might be helping, finally said, "All of us feared the plague. Even me and Tom were scared to come. Lazlo and his missus, too. He told us so. We came because we couldn't let you be alone, but we were fearful, Connie.

"It's nothing to be hurt about. It's a terrible thing you suffered, just as awful a thing as can happen, and our heart went out to you. Every one of us. But people were scared it might spread and be a even worse disaster. That's why people stayed away."

Connie stewed about what she learned for several days. The next time she and Carla got together, soon after "hello, have a seat, how are you today, will you have some coffee?" and immediately after she poured her friend a cup from the percolator and offered her some cream and a spoon, she sat down herself, looked directly at Carla with unfamiliar intensity, and said abruptly:

"Did they really think I'd leave my daughter buried back in Trinidad? Throw her away somewhere like garbage and just move on? Forget about her buried over in some other town. Is that what they

thought? I wouldn't want her here with me where at least I could pay my respects? Is that the kind of person they think I should be?"

Grief turns to anger, Carla's mother always said, and added it's good that it does. She watched Connie find a focus for feelings to replace the pain. Over the next weeks, her friend grew sullen, carried an edge in her voice, an attitude of cool detachment joined her encounters with neighbors, even friends.

The litmus was who had been there for her, the distance in her response to others an assessment of whom among them might have questioned her decision to return to town with her deceased daughter, which of them might have thought she should have left her in a cold, distant grave.

It was disquieting to witness Connie's girlish enthusiasm and quiet reserve replaced by an attitude of hostility barely restrained and nearly if not quite made apparent to those who interacted with her. Better though, Carla thought, than seeing her withdraw deeper into suffering. Her anger animated her at a time when she might otherwise have turned to stone.

It was months later, nearly half a year, when Connie confided she was pregnant again. She was cautious in saying so, as if she wondered whether it was too soon, somehow disrespectful of Anna, a digression from the sorrow her death deserved.

"I think that's wonderful," Carla said, "just grand. I'm happy for you. Does John know?"

"Well, he's been working on it hard enough," Connie said quietly, and for the first time in such a long time she laughed, less in embarrassment than the audacity of sharing such a thing.

"But I haven't told him yet. I wanted to be certain," and her voice trailed away briefly before she added, "He'll be so happy and I'm glad to give him that.

"But,” she said, looking into the eyes of her friend and feeling tears well in her own, “I just don’t want him to forget her.”

Pregnant Woman c. 1920 by Jacob Bendien

Renewal

Connie felt awful but Johnny was buzzing like a king bee. He literally was whistling his way off to work after breakfast each morning while Connie headed to the privy, where she spent part of everyday throwing up and the rest of the day feeling miserable.

She didn’t remember pregnancy being this bad the first time around and hoped there was nothing wrong. She just couldn’t handle another loss at this stage of her life. She couldn’t bear it.

John Forza felt renewed. He was certain the family tragedy was behind them now and the dreams he had for their future were back on track. Kids, yes, there would be this one and more if he had his way.

He was certain, too, that Connie would be willing, once she regained her footing as mother of a healthy, happy child. Then her sense of balance would be restored and there would be more children to come, a fine family to support with his hard work in the mines and another big step along that pathway they walked from immigrant families to successful citizens of this greatest of countries.

They sat one evening on the back porch of their home. A full moon crested the ridge of mountains to the east.

“There’s an eclipse tonight,” John said. “Blood Moon is what Laz calls it. Tells me the earth is exactly between the sun and the moon for an hour or two.

"The moon’s still right there to begin, but it gets dimmer a little at a time, just not as bright. Then it gets real dark, like slices of it disappear until you can barely see it anymore, and soon enough there’s a red rim around it. Blood Moon. Get it?”

“That sounds creepy,” Connie said, tucking herself tighter in her shawl. “My aunt Betty called it the Crazy Moon. Said the full moon made people act funny.”

“Yeah, some folks say it’s bad luck, especially this eclipse. A few of the guys called in sick today. Didn’t feel right about going underground, I guess. Me? It’s all the same. Any ol’ kinda moon as long as they pay me.”

They watched the brilliant gleam of the moon rising in the sky, the shapes of the trees and the rocks it illuminated and the shadows they cast, looking down this valley where their community grew up around seams of coal and coke deep in bowels of the hills, where they now called home.

“Never seen that Blood Moon myself,” John said. “Usually sound asleep and snoring by the time that stuff takes place. Guess I could stay up tonight to see it for myself. Just for the experience, you know? Man has to keep growing, don’t he?”

“Stay up ‘til when?”

“Right about midnight or thereabouts. That’s when it’s supposed to happen.”

“And it takes a couple of hours to work itself out?”

“That’s what Laz told me. Comes a point where it looks like a bite gets taken out of the moon, then more and more of it disappears until it’s all in the shadow.”

“Shadow of what?”

“Why, the shadow of the earth, of course. It blocks out the sun if you was standing on the moon.”

“Makes me dizzy just to think about it.”

“Yeah, it’s hard to figure. The way Laz explained it made sense. But I keep thinking the sun must be bigger than that.”

“And why does it turn red?”

“That’s another part I didn’t understand.”

“Well, I’ll tell you something important,” Connie said. “Sitting here talking about all this stuff I come to realize: this is the first time I’ve felt good in months. Real good, in fact. I was feeling like a peach that’s ripened when it dawned on me.”

John looked at her with that intensity he seemed like he could summon at will, the one that shone on her all the powerful feelings he carried through his days of relentless optimism, the one that always concluded with that dazzling smile of his.

“Well, that is good to hear,” he said. “I couldn’t help but notice you are looking very damned good tonight. A ripe peach is a good way to describe it. But I didn’t want to say nothin’ just out of respect for you’ve been feeling bad. It is a sight better to have the looks and the feelings on the same track, I’d say.”

She smiled, threw him a coquettish look, said, “Maybe it’s that moon.”

“Maybe it’s just time,” he said.

Carolina Gasparetti Menapace - courtesy Bruno Rudolfi

A New Life

Connie was feeling better. A lot better. There were moments, more than a few, when she felt happy. The specter of her daughter's death never left her, not ever, but at times the deep sorrow that attended it softened a bit, drifted into the background of her emotions. More often now a sense of peace came to her and her thoughts turned to this baby growing inside her.

The loss of her firstborn shadowed her enthusiasm and fueled her fears for this pregnancy, but gradually the depth of those sensations lessened their grip on her. The pleasure of gestation rose up in her like life itself flowering from the softening ground no longer frozen and warming more each day. She and this child she carried had reached an equilibrium where the presence no longer was alien, no longer an intrusion to adapt to, but now was a part of her she nurtured comfortably, gladly.

She smiled at the thought of Johnny's enthusiasm becoming her own. Not to the degree he radiated assurance, certainty, that vision of how things would be and why it would be so - that it was their destiny to grow a family and build their good fortune in this land of opportunity. There were feelings that came to her now born of the warmth and comfort his belief vested in her, as though in her better moods she allowed his sunny outlook to brighten her days, as well.

They were sitting around the kitchen table late one evening after supper. It was a round table of quarter-sawn oak with claw feet. Johnny ran his hand over the surface, said, "A piece of furniture like this don't seem like all that much to some, but to me it's something solid. Was all me and Laz could do to carry it in here. I like that. Solid. Like you know it'll still be here when you get back."

"Back from where? Johnny, sometimes I do not know what you're talking about," Connie said, playfully, giving him that "sometimes you talk crazy" look, but with a gentle smile.

“From wherever you have to go. That’s where. I go off to work and when I get home, this table is standing here rock solid, just like I left it.”

“I didn’t know better, I’d be thinking you’re talking about me, like you’re hoping I’ll be solid as this table you’re so sweet on.”

“Maybe so. You sure got the claws anyways.”

They looked at each other and began to laugh. It was a joy for him to hear Connie laughing. It had been a long time since he’d heard that sound, seen her face glowing with good humor.

“It’s like that picture there,” he said, gesturing toward the photograph of Connie’s mother, Carolina, on the shelf near the window. “There she is carrying them pails of water up on the hillside where the damn wind blows so hard sometimes you wonder if everything is gonna blow away. The sheds, the house, even your mom.”

“Now you are talking crazy.”

“What I mean is that I love your mom for the same reason I like this table here. She’s solid. Good for her word. You can count on her to be there. Like when I showed up with the car to go riding. I got to believe she never expected that to happen, but she said show up after church and I did. Can’t imagine what she was thinking but I kept my end and she kept hers. I admired that.”

“I can tell you what she was thinking. We looked at you leading them mules up the creek bed, pulling your car over them rocks, she looked at me and said, ‘That boy is crazy,’ and just went back in the house.”

“She knew I was serious, crazy or not. Probably crossed her mind that I was solid, too. Comes a moment when we size things up for can we count on them or not. Are they gonna be there when the wind quits blowing? That’s what we want to know.”

“Now you’re talking like one of them greeting cards, Johnny, like a poet or something. You never fail to amaze me with the places you go

in your mind. I might not be as smart as you but somehow I think all this talk about solid is about us. Am I right?"

"Well, now, you could say so. We're sitting here at this table in this beautiful home of ours with a good job and some money in the bank and we're not much past being newlyweds when you think about it. We're making ourselves a real solid life together when something awful happens."

Connie's mood visibly darkened, but John pushed on.

"That storm comes into our lives out of nowheres and it sure as hell knocked us down." He looked at her, caught her eyes, the tears welling there, said, "Knocked us both down. Hard. But we got up, Connie. We got back to making that life we wanted."

He took her hand, gave her that dazzling smile of his, said, "Remember how we felt after Ludlow? How hopeless it seemed. Like where could we go, what could we do? How could we get out of that place and make something better? And here we are. We're making something solid together, you and me, and I'm betting we're gonna be even stronger as we go along.

"Little Anna is always gonna be our first born, and she's always first in our hearts, how we remember her and honor her. She's gonna be a help in loving this baby here and the ones that come next. We know how special each of them lives can be. We won't ever forget her, Connie, if that's what worries you. But we keep going, keep building this family. That's the best way we can pay her our respect."

Connie sat back in her chair, her arms resting on her belly, feeling the baby within her move and the baby they lost so near in her heart. In their heart, hers and Johnny's. She felt a tremendous sense of relief, a peace of mind come over her, a contentment with all the troubles and the hopes that coalesced at this moment. She felt, too, that perpetual wonder at the spirit, even the wisdom, of this husband of hers.

They held hands, seated together at that solid table, and held each other's gaze with a renewed warmth and intimacy that had been

subsumed by Anna’s death. There was a moment then when everything around them and their very lives were suspended in a process of reflection and realignment, a preparation for this new child to come and the rebirth of their own aspirations.

The peace they felt was sublime. Connie had the sensation of drifting, like being in a dream, as though all of her cares lifted into the air and she floated buoyantly alongside them. Then, without warning, the ground far below her seemed to shake, her carefreeness evaporated, and a thunderous explosion rocked the town of Dawson.

Mine Explosion - credit: etc.usf.edu

Explosion

John Forza was into his jacket, his boots, his hardhat and out the door in an instant. “Stay here,” he said as he rushed away, “try to rest. I’ll be back.”

Like him, a flood of his fellow workers headed toward the mine. They knew it was the shot crew that had set off the explosion. No one else worked this late. Every night after the crews quit, they set the changes and dislodged the coal to be loaded and carried out by cart the next day. But their work when they fired the shots didn’t make these kinds of blasts either. Something went wrong.

When it did, whenever it happened, whatever it might be, every miner among them came running. Survival sometimes was a matter of minutes, of how long it was before rescuers arrived, how soon a gas mask was strapped on your face or a pile of dirt and rock lifted off your body. Every miner knew in those moments it could be them that needed help, the life saved or lost could as easily be theirs.

Johnny saw smoke was coming from the Number 1 mine. Should be nobody was in there. The shot fire crew set their changes and came back out to the cabin, where an electrical system detonated the explosives one blast at a time. Then they reentered the mine to check their work before signing off for the night. Whatever went wrong here, nobody should be hurt. Just damage to the mine is all it should be.

The crew boss was organizing the men. Tom and Laz were there when John arrived. They handed him a mask, said, “We’re gonna need oxygen to check it out. Blew out the fans in One and Six both. See what caved in if anything so we know where to get started tomorrow. Helluva blast it was.”

They hadn’t gone a quarter mile into the shaft when they found four men dead on the ground. Shot firers. They weren’t supposed to be there. It was against procedures. The rules told them how it should be done. But here they were. Dead and gone.

“That’s Al Reed,” Tom said, pointing at one of the men who was bent at an odd angle against the foot of a timber. “Jesus, him and Ellen have four kids.” “Yeah,” John said, “Stan there’s got three himself. Had three that is. Terrible thing, seein’ him like this.”

When the scope of the accident was tallied, there were five dead, the four shot firers and a guy who was still in the mine when the explosion came for reasons no one could explain. There was a lot of speculation about it for days thereafter.

“We know how the shot guys went wrong. Nearly every night for weeks they eased back in there before they were supposed to. You know it well as I do. Trying to get a jump on that last check out.”

“True that, Johnny.” Laz said. “But we got to feel for ‘em. They set them changes and blow the seams loose for us, and, yeah, they’re supposed to wait outside until them charges blow before they size up the results. So what? They ease back into the tunnel just to get it done faster. Get a head start so they get home at a decent hour ‘stead of the middle of the night. No way they expected there to be a short in that switch. Set ‘em all off at once. Blew the hell out of the four of them.”

He shook his head, side to side, shrugged and sighed, said, “Least they died quick.”

“But what about that other fellow?” John said. “Found him over in Six but the blast got him, too. Didn’t know him myself but what was he doing there? Either he never signed out so’s they shoulda known he was still in there, or what? He signed out and then went back in for some reason?”

“Third possibility,” Laz said, “and maybe either or both of what you say is true, but they never checked the sign-out log so nobody was the wiser.”

Johnny shook his head. “That’s no good. They got to check. Otherwise none of us is safe as we think we are. That’s why everybody follows them rules. It’s a good system and everyone of us that I know of does it the way it’s set up. So’s we’re safe.”

Laz put his hand on Johnny’s shoulder, said, “The thing that happens with even the good systems is they sometimes work so well the overseers stop checking on them. Come to take it for granted it’s working like it’s supposed to and everyone is doing it the way they’re supposed to. They don’t notice when a few get to skirting the rules.”

“Until this,” John said, “something like this happens. They’ll take notice now. Five new widows, eleven kids without a father, and a round of funerals to come. Money, too, the company owes the widows. Was their switch that shorted, whether them men were a little early in there or not. Jesus the Christ, this is good for nobody.”

Calculations

“I keep thinking on it, Johnny,” Connie said. “This mining life is just too dangerous. It upsets me something awful. Here I am, carrying this baby, thinking what it’s like for Sharon and the rest.

"Send your husband off to work and before the day’s done, you find yourself a widow. Stanley gone and she’s all by herself with three kids to raise and soon enough no place to live either because the company needs the house for the next man up.

“It’s a good life, I know. I know what you say. This house, the town, the company treats us good. It’s pretty hard to beat, some would say. But it’s good until all of a sudden it ain’t and what then?

"We need to give it some more thought, Johnny. I just think it’s too dangerous to keep doing it.”

John let her talk. She needed to get it off her chest. Every miner's wife had the same concerns. It is dangerous work, even the best of it like here at Dawson. Too many men dead and gone, too many widows, kids without a father.

That's the way the business is. You do the best you can, plan it careful and play by the rules, still a matter of when your number's up, your luck runs out, you come up dead and your woman has to play that hand all by herself for the rest of time. The kids too if you got 'em. Just bad luck.

"It's a risk we take, Connie. That's why the pay's so good - because the work is dangerous. But look at it like this: it's been nearly seven years since a man died in these mines. Hundreds of us working every day and by god it was just a short in the damn switch that killed them that died the other night. I'm not saying it ain't a terrible thing because it is but it's pretty damned good odds when you look at it that way."

"I keep thinking what I would do if it was you, Johnny, you that didn't come home. Them would be the only odds that matter to me. What would I do, me and a baby? Where would we go. How would we get by? I keep thinking on it, Johnny, and the answer don't come."

"Well, let's not curse the luck by talking on it but you know the company makes a good settlement with the widows. Three thousand dollars plus extra for each child. Nothin's gonna take away the loss, sure, but that money is enough to get settled elsewhere, get a start on something new. Maybe a new man even."

Connie rolled her eyes, looked at him intently, said, "When you put it that way, three thousand dollars and a brand new husband does put it in a better light."

She smiled at him, put a hand on his arm, said, "There's nothing funny about it, John. I shouldn't be joking. Them women have a hard row to hoe ahead of them and we both know it. I wouldn't want to be in their place no matter how much settlement."

Death was a constant presence in the lives of miners and their families, the ones who died from explosions, cave-ins, toxic gases, all those ways of dying, and all the fear those among the living carried each and every day for when their time might come.

Some like Johnny went about it with a fatalistic attitude. If it was gonna happen, there was nothing you might do to stop it. It was your turn. Until then, you keep going, doing what you do, pry a living from the rock in those caves deep in the mountain and be glad you have the work for all it brings you and yours.

Fear it or not, you can't change your fate. So make the best of it for you and your family as long as you can. Things might turn out bad, but then again maybe they won't and that's where John kept his focus. It's good until it ain't and every day you wake up it's still good.

For Connie, though, life was of a different sort. Her outlook was colored of a deeper hue than Johnny's, moodier, less rosy.

Losing her first child only darkened the ways she saw this life of hers, the certainty she felt that her people faced insurmountable odds in trying for a foothold, something to grab onto, a place that could support the full weight they brought to a world crowded with endless numbers of others just like them and each of them milling about, looking for room, something of their own.

It was theirs to struggle, she knew for certain, but she suspected too that theirs was not to succeed. Rather, it was to try and try again, an effort of sheer will and pluck and obstinance without expectation and for no discernible reason except that it was their nature honed from the lifetimes of generations before them who strived and failed and strived some more to accomplish nothing but little, expendable lives and anyhow what else was there to do but suffer it?

She looked at her husband, smoking a cigarette and reading the paper, comfortable in his easy chair in this home more luxurious than anything either of them ever imagined let alone called their own, and for as long as the work held, the mine produced, for as long as John

Forza could climb out of bed each morning and do the work, this home was theirs.

Connie sat in her rocker across the room from her husband with her hands joined beneath her burgeoning belly and she tried to be thankful for all they had, she tried to give thanks for this life they shared and the new life she would birth.

She tried her best to look at their lives and all they had as her husband did, with that same appreciation, and yet she couldn't shake the thought of her friend Sharon newly widowed and her children left fatherless and soon enough to be without a home. She felt the child within her move and knew that soon enough a baby would join them and that too would only add to her concerns.

She thought her thoughts, felt her feelings, and could only say again, "I keep thinking on it, Johnny, and what I think is that this mining life is just too dangerous, us being with a family coming and all.

"Here I was just feeling good for the first time …" and she paused, swallowed, said, "well, the first time in a long time and then this. More death. More sorrow. I have to say we need to think on it some more. Are you listening to me, Johnny? We have to think on it some more."

It's A Boy - credit: eBay

Birthing

Connie went into labor and John took her to the hospital. Like last time, he paced the waiting room, sat down, opened a magazine, stared at the pages without seeing what was printed there, got up and paced some more. He smoked half a pack of cigarettes in no time flat and paced some more again.

This time it was going to be good. No trouble this go ‘round. A healthy baby who’d grow up the eldest of several brothers and sisters. That’s the way he always imagined it and when Anna died, his heart hurt, his spirit was shaken, but he knew for certain they’d try again and get the family started over like it should be.

And they did. It was beginning right now, a new start, a family taking shape, a future forming and playing out over all the years to come, them left to him and his children and their children, that long line of successors to what he and Connie created and she is in the throes of birthing.

John Forza felt good. Strong. Proud. He felt that this is exactly the way life is meant to be and they were doing it. He and Connie, poor kids of immigrants who were making their version of the American Dream come alive. It was all a guy could hope for.

What he hoped for most, of course, was a son, which is what Connie birthed. “It’s a boy!” the nurse said as she led him into the room where his wife, looking exhausted but somehow at the same time very proud, held the bundled baby to her chest. He was sucking vigorously, a good sign, the nurse commented. “See how healthy! You’ll have no trouble with this one.”

Did she know? Johnny wondered at her remark. Was Anna’s death widely known here in town, at least among the medical community? Were her words gratuitous, merely the practiced comfort offered parents? Connie seemed not to have heard and John really didn’t care. He could see for himself the child was relishing these first minutes of life after birth and everything in John’s way of believing told him this child would survive where their first had not. Things were going to be just fine.

Connie hovered like a blanket over the boy those first few weeks. It was months really before she began to relax at all and even then she kept a close eye on his every move, looking for any sign he might falter, fall ill, bring about another outcome like Anna’s. She knew it was more than she could survive, that his end should it come suddenly, unexpected like his sister’s, would be her end as well.

His first cold completely unnerved her. She was sleepless for the few days it ran its coarse. Every sniffle, sneeze, cough, called to mind her worst memories of parenting. The loss of a piece of yourself, like an amputation, an irredeemable part of your own flesh and blood taken from you and consigned to the earth. Back to the earth, as the priest had said, but arguably - and argue she would ferociously - taken before its time.

Young George - named after John’s father - weathered the storm, and many storms of childhood thereafter, and had Connie known the future she might have relaxed a little sooner than she did and a little

more, too. It was hard to let go of her fear of loss, another loss, and it took a long time before she was able, mostly able, to find as much pleasure as pain in the process of raising a child, this child now and others to come.

Northern New Mexico - credit: Alfo Medeiros

And Again

The days rolled by, John at the mine, Connie with the baby. George to her great relief was a healthy, happy boy with a good appetite and the energy to run her ragged, once he began to crawl.

As the child grew, her anxiety lessened and like her husband she began to settle into the pleasures of their life together. Evenings as a family were a great joy. Soon enough, she was pregnant again and John was immensely pleased.

She still mentioned her fear for John’s safety in the mine, but less often now and mostly when something made her cranky. Connie always had an edge to her, as long as John had known her, but it was leavened by that flashing charm she turned on at unexpected moments when her mood lifted and good humor took hold of her. Never for long, it was,

but when it came, her eyes shining with a sly wit and a beautiful smile lighting her face, she was dazzling.

The cold weather began earlier in the Sangre de Cristos, around the Thanksgiving holiday this season, and the snow fell. On the outskirts of Dawson, where they often walked together in the early evening, John carrying his son and Connie with a relaxed pace about her after the days mostly house bound, the view at dusk where the sky darkened and the first stars of evening appeared was comforting for both of them.

These mountains were their home, here in Dawson and stretching all the way to the north past Trinidad and Walsenburg on the other side of the state line. This piece of land was where they were born and where they grew up, and where now they were making a family. They liked to think in the way they conducted themselves, the way they led their lives, that they reflected the same rugged character of the country and the sere beauty that was its nature.

The Christmas season came and went, a time of vibrant community in Dawson, where the mostly Catholic people of the town reveled in the pageantry and good fellowship. Gifts, mostly canned goods, candies, the occasional handmade sweater or scarf for special friends, were widely exchanged among neighbors and co-workers. For people who worked hard and knew little more than lives spent making a living to support their growing families, celebration meant all the more for the rarity it was.

The first week of February John took ill. He was an amazingly healthy man for whom even a cold seldom took hold. His owed his good health, he claimed, to a ritual he followed each day of rinsing his freshly brushed teeth with mouthwash, which he then swallowed in a single gulp. “Never sick a day in my life,” he’d report.

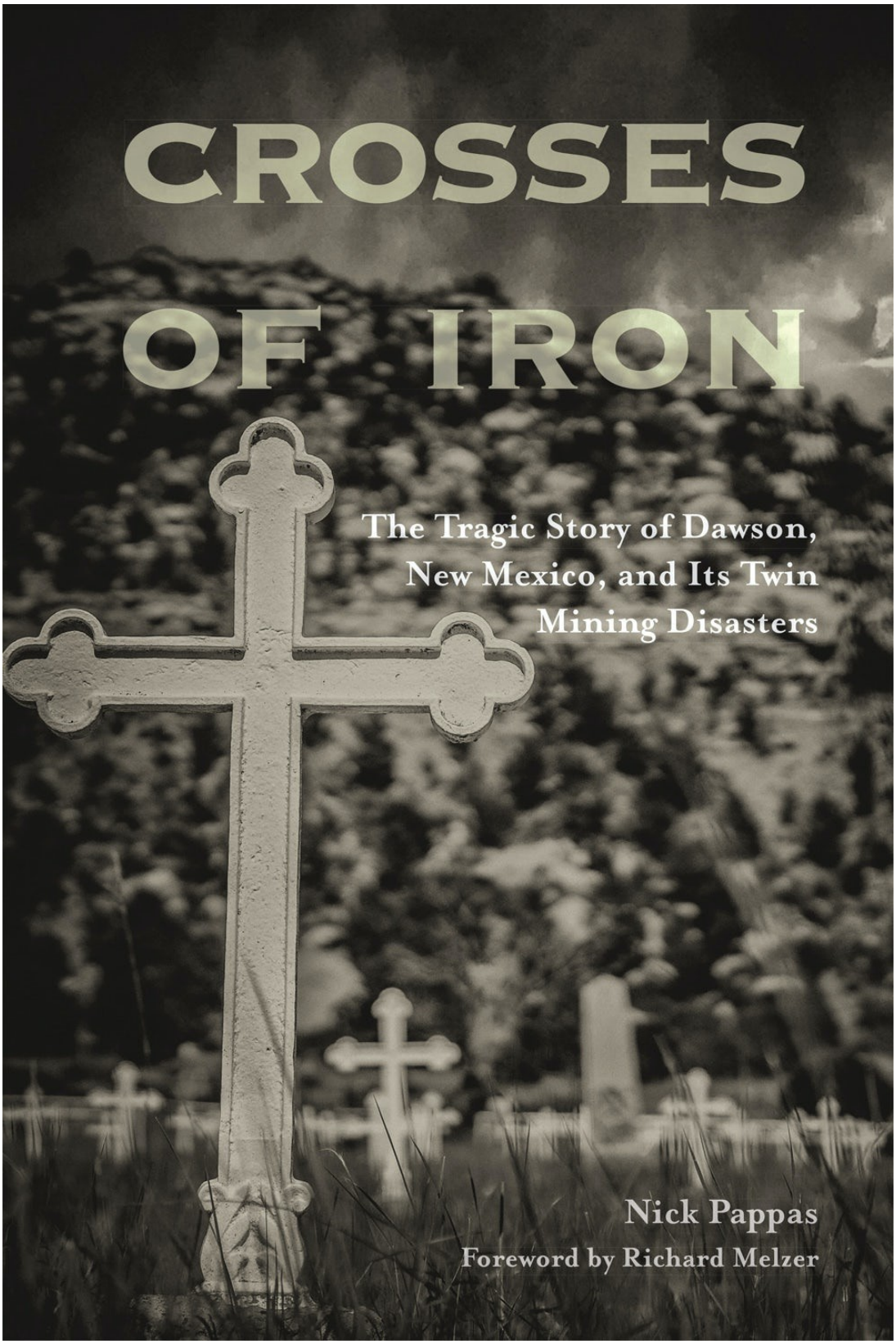
But this week he was sick and Connie told him, “Stay away from the baby, stay away from your pregnant wife, and stay home from work.” He abided the first two directives but went to work each day, as always. And each day he was a little sicker.

The eighth day of February the straw boss took one look at him and told him to go home. “Don’t want to spread that flu of yours to the other men. That’s something we do not need.”

John made a show of being unhappy to miss a day’s work and the pay that goes with it, but privately he was relieved. For someone who hardly ever sneezed, let alone took to bed, he was sick as a dog.

He made his way home, nodded ever so slightly when Connie indicated from across the room he was finally showing some sense, climbed into bed and feverishly fell fast asleep.

He’d been in a deep sleep for nearly six hours when a massive explosion rocked the town and spun John Forza out of his bed, with his head throbbing and a sense of the panic erupting outside his bedroom window as people began rushing toward the mine.



credit to Nick Pappas for Details of the Dawson Mining Disasters

The Scale of a Tragedy Repeated

February 8, 1923. One hundred twenty men died that day. Lazlo, Tom Tuga, and most of the others John Forza worked with all these years, the men he stood beside in the caves deep in the earth, shared a beer with in the bars, worshipped along side at church on Sundays, joined them and their families at picnics on a summer evening.

All of them dead. Gone. Burned beyond recognition, shredded by the blast, most all of them, and some of those who briefly survived the explosion dead of the noxious gas that filled the mine when the fans shut down. A pall came over the town's survivors, deep grief to the wives and their children, and a stunned recognition of calamitous failure to the mine's owners, the Phelps-Dodge Corporation.

For the second time in ten years, in what was said to be among the very best run, safest coal mines in the country, the exemplary operation of an enlightened mining company, an explosion of suspiciously dry coal dust resulted in another of the very deadliest accidents in American mining history. In two separate disasters that were eerily similar, nearly 400 men died, their wives widowed, children left fatherless.

Despite his illness, John joined the rescue operation desperately searching for any survivors, clearing the numerous places the roof fell, carrying out the dead. All of them working themselves to exhaustion knew the effort was ceremonial, a show of respect for their colleagues. It was obvious from the beginning that no one was likely to have survived. Still they worked frantically until everyone was accounted for.

Two men in fact walked out of the carnage and lived to tell about it. They were the only ones of 122 men who went to work that day that returned alive. The rest were buried, what was left of them, in what became a seemingly endless series of funeral services and the specter of their keening witnesses, all the families freshly shattered.

The cemetery was a familiar place to Connie. She visited it sometimes several times a week, never less than weekly. While John was at work, she often spent an hour or more tidying Anna's grave,

planting fresh flowers, often just sitting at the headstone, holding the tiny stone hand of the infant statue where it rested in the seashell above the inscription on the marker. There were times she was certain she felt the hand grow warmer as she held it, the little fingers almost seeming to return her caress as tears welled in her eyes and her heart revisited that heaviness she struggled ever since her daughter's death to overcome.

Now the cemetery was a busy place. So many of her neighbors, others she knew on sight, and some strangers still, gathered at the fresh graves of their husbands, often with their children in tow. Among them only Carla had visited with Connie, welcomed her into her home, shared her grief, her concerns, her fears for a suddenly uncertain future. "At least I have family in Trinidad," she said, knowing that Connie understood it was not a place she wanted to return, not under these circumstances, not as a widow with two children and no means of support.

The town was in some sort of suspended animation. The restaurants and bars were mostly empty, the opera house and the movie theater temporarily closed, the shops quiet, the Mercantile a cavernous, sparsely attended space. Even the mines were left unworked except for the continued cleanup. Only the churches and the mortuary were active. It was as if nothing moved except the clusters of families walking to and from the graveyard, the few horse-drawn hearses re-trodding the path.

The company was in negotiations with the widows, trying to reach agreement for the terms of compensation, the cash settlement for their loss and the time they would be allowed to remain in their homes, to visit the deceased, to mourn, to wrestle with their fears before inevitably they would have to move out, find somewhere to begin again. The mining would continue and new men hired to do the work who would need homes for their families. Life at Dawson would go on.

In Memoriam - Dawson Cemetery - credit: ahepa21.org

A Way to be Apart

Connie was gestating and John went back to work. The decision had been made: once the baby was born, the four of them were leaving Dawson, quitting the mining, walking away forever from this luxurious life in a hospitable company town with too many fatal consequences.

It was only after the decision was made, one Connie suggested repeatedly as her family grew and so too the foreboding sense of danger John's work brought her days; after the disaster that took 120 lives, their friends and colleagues and others they barely knew who together were nearly the entire male population of Dawson, a town now mostly of widows and fatherless children lingering in their grief until the nearing time when they must give up their homes to the newly hired miners who replace the dead and gone; after a calamity of a scale not even John with his perpetual optimism and resolute nature could ignore, when he finally agreed with Connie to quit mining and find work above ground; it was only then that Connie realized they would be leaving Anna.

“Could we take her with us, Johnny?” she asked, her voice weak with the resignation she knew she must accept even before the answer came, “is there any way?”

“It’s a terrible thing to disturb the dead,” Johnny said to her. “Rest in peace means just that. We would never consider such a thing.”

He looked at her with surprise that softened to compassion, putting his arms around her, holding her as she shed quiet tears, and said softly, “We’ll never forget her, Connie. She’s always first in our hearts. But this is her resting place like it is for all them others. We keep them all in our thoughts and prayers, but we can’t take ‘em with us when it’s time to move on, not even Anna. It wouldn’t be right.”

They both felt a deep trepidation as they went about fulfilling the plan they made. There was a sense of tempting fate, going back into the maw of the beast that had been determined too dangerous to abide, yet abide it they must until the baby was born of the company’s generous heath care, until John could stockpile enough cash to cover their transition to an unknown future, until they were settled once again, this family of four, in new and safer circumstances.

Connie birthed the baby, another boy, on the 19th of April. James he was named and George took to him immediately. He wasn’t sure what to make of the little red-headed brother but he was curious and had a good time poking and prodding the blanket-wrapped bundle on his mother’s lap.

John put in long hours pulling record amounts of coal from the mines and piling up the cash. Then he gave his two weeks’ notice and they began packing. Connie and the boys would stay with her folks in Trinidad while John went ahead to Denver looking for work and a place for them to live.

They didn’t own all that much but it filled the trailer John hooked up to his car. He covered it carefully with a tarp tied down against the elements and went back inside to savor this last night they would spend in the house they’d called home for years now, this place of so much pleasure and a very large measure of sorrow.

Connie was just coming home with the boys from a last visit to the cemetery, where she shed tears for her lost daughter while baby Jim lay bundled in the grass and George ran his stumbling gait from one headstone to another, touching a tentative hand to each cold stone before rushing off to another.

The hand of the baby statue suspended in a seashell she'd held often and intimately she held once more. It was so familiar how it felt in her hand, such a part of the deep connection to her daughter that eased her long period of grieving and finally gave her a modicum of peace, of a loss accepted if perpetually regretted, of a weight lifted, lightened, but never removed. Tomorrow morning at sun up the family was leaving Dawson and leaving little Anna behind.

For Connie it was unimaginable she'd never again feel this fragile stone hand grow warm in hers as she held it, never again sense that distinct connection between her deceased daughter and her own distraught soul. She was going to leave Dawson, go with her husband and her children to somewhere safer and more secure, but how she wondered in a moment of confusion could that be what she demanded when it meant she'd never again hold this little stone hand that had given her such comfort, this physical manifestation of the soul that remained of her decaying child gone so soon.

She looked at the baby lying in the grass, at his older brother stumbling to the ground and getting up again to run with pleasure in this place of the dead, where so many fresh graves still were settling. She looked at the iron crosses the company had installed, one for each of the nearly 400 men who died in the twin disasters of ten years past and four months past, and she looked at the headstone of her daughter.

It was so different from the rest, rightfully so she thought because the others mostly marked the graves of men, adult men, lost tragically of course and deeply mourned, but at least for a while, for many years, they had lived their lives before passing. Little Anna had barely known life before she died.

Connie reached into her bag, the one that carried diapers, a bottle, baby powder and took from it a hammer. She looked around the quiet

graveyard, at her children, the long stretch of crosses gleaming in the sunset, and smiled.

She struck the lower arm of the stature a solid blow and held the hand firmly in her grasp as it came loose. She raised it to her face, held it tight against her cheek, touched it to her lips for a long, tender moment, and placed it in her pocket near her womb from where Anna issued.

She stood, gathered the baby, called to George, and headed home. Johnny was in the kitchen pouring himself a beer when the three of them arrived. “There you are,” he said to them, lifting George in his arms and kissing the top of his head. He took the baby from Connie’s arms, kissed him on the forehead, and gave his wife a gentle kiss on the cheek. He knew where they had been. He understood.

He looked at his family, at the nearly empty house, at the trailer in the driveway out the window, and said, “Well, then, I guess we’re just about ready to go. Get us a good night’s rest and we’ll be on our way.”

Connie ignored his quizzical look when she handed him the hammer and said, “Don’t be forgetting this.”

Afterword

John Forza found work in the transportation business in Denver shortly after he arrived there and with his strong work ethic, engaging personality, and optimistic outlook, he quickly rose to a management position, which he held until his retirement.

He and his young family rented a small home for several years until they were able to buy a place of their own. In the interim, Connie gave birth to a daughter, Dorothy, and later a son, Robert. Each of their four surviving children grew up and started families of their own, which brought forth numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

None of them ever worked in the mines, although Connie's younger brother, Frank, mined coal all his life and lost his son, Gene, in that very mine. Many of the children and their children years later, long after the mines at Dawson had closed in the Fifties, would gather every other year with all the rest of the people somehow tied to the now abandoned town in a bi-annual reunion ceremony that continues to this day.

George, John and Connie's eldest child, preceded them in death, dying of diabetes-related illness in his late thirties. His wife and four young children mourned his passing but carried on successfully with their lives. Jim, Dorothy, and Bob all outlived their parents, as children are supposed to do.

John and Connie were married for more than 75 years. He passed away in his mid-nineties and she at 102, having lived in three centuries during her time on earth. John always maintained his exuberance and Connie her taciturn demeanor.

"How're you doing, Grandma?" you'd ask her and she'd always answer, "Not so good, honey. I'm not sure I'm gonna make it much longer." But then a slight smile would crease her face and a little girl glint of humor would sparkle in her eyes before she looked away.

Where she kept the little stone hand from Anna’s grave was known only to her for nearly all her life, but when she was buried all those years later, it was interred with her, wrapped in her aged hands.

The End