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# MEN IN MINES

Steve Carr

The teacups on the shelf rattle as the train goes by. Les looks up from the newspaper he's reading at the kitchen table and watches the delicate cups vibrate against each other. They were left to him when his mother passed away a few years ago. One of them has a small chip on its small handle, and the blue glaze on all of them has faded slightly. He resents that the only thing he inherited from her was something fragile. After the train passes, the cups are silent. He returns to reading the newspaper.

Darren comes into the kitchen. Because he is very tall, he instinctively ducks as he walks under the door frame.

"What you doing, Pop?" he asks.

Les doesn't look up from the newspaper. "What does it look like?"

Darren goes to the stove and puts his hand on the side of the coffee pot. It's cold. He picks it up and listens to the sloshing of liquid. Sitting it back on the burner he turns on the fire. He leans against the sink and watches the flames lick the bottom of the pot.

"I start back to work at the mine on Monday," he says. "The doctor says my broken wrist is all healed."

"That's what I heard," Les says, turning the page of the paper.

"I'll be able to pay back the money I owe you in a few weeks," Darren says. "I'd like to get my own place first."

Les says nothing.

Darren raises his hand and looks at his fingers. Coal has tattooed his fingers black. His left thumbnail is purple from being hit with a mallet. He hit it on purpose.

\*

Debra rolls over in bed and stares out the window at the hazy blue sky. A warm breeze flowing through the slightly raised window brushes her pale face. She opens her mouth and drinks in the breeze and feels the baby kick inside her. She hears her other three children playing in the living room. Pangs of guilt reverberate through her. She doesn't want to take care of them, at least not today.

As her mother Matty comes into the bedroom she says, "It's stuffy in here."

Matty raises the window and stands in front of it for a moment, letting the breeze toy with the thin cotton of her blouse. When she turns she sees Debra staring at her.

"Are you going to get out of bed?" Matty asks.

"Eventually," Debra says.

Matty leaves the window and at the dresser picks up Debra's wood hairbrush. She runs it through her loosely hanging gray hair, then tosses it onto the bed.

"You can't stay in bed all the time," she says. "What's done is done."

Debra kicks the sheet covering the lower part of her body. The brush falls from the bed onto the hardwood floor. The sound of it is like that of a tree limb snapping.

"I fed the children breakfast and lunch," Matty says. "Your father won't tolerate me not being home to fix his dinner."

Debra is suddenly aware of the ticking of the clock on the stand next to the bed. It's 1:30. She puts her arm across her eyes. Shutting it all out, even for just one day, is all she wants. When she hears her mother leave the room, she uncovers her eyes and stares at the crack in the ceiling.

\*

Black water drips down from the roof of the mine. Clarence lowers the hose, turns it off, and shakes his head. The steel helmet he's wearing slips back from his

forehead. With the coal dust settled and the floor of the mine slick and spotted with shallow puddles, he lays the hose on the ground and tugs on it three times and watches as the hose is pulled away, like a retreating snake. He lifts the goggles from his eyes, pulls the mask down from his mouth and nose, and takes in a deep breath. His clothes are soaked. He removes his shirt and twists it in his big hands, draining it of dirty water. The coolness of the mine causes goose bumps to form on his exposed skin. He tucks his shirt into the waistband at the back of his pants and leans against a wall. He closes his eyes. He tries to get the image of prison bars out of his mind.

\*

Les stands on his front porch, raises the air rifle to his chest, and takes aim. He pulls the trigger and smiles as the robin falls from the telephone wire onto the street. He lowers the rifle.

“Stop shooting the birds,” Sarah yells from her porch across the street.

Les raises his right hand and shows her his extended middle finger, then opens the screen door and goes in the house. He leans the rifle against the wall by the door. In the living room he sits on the sofa, picks up the remote, and turns on the television. After turning to several stations, he turns down the sound and leans back and puts his bare feet on the coffee table.

Matty comes in from the kitchen. “Didn’t you hear me calling?” she asks.

He shuts off the television. He stares at her as if she’s a stranger.

“Sarah said you’ve been shooting birds again,” Matty says.

“So?” he says.

“I didn’t even get the groceries out of the car and she came storming across the street,” Matty says. “The only time she doesn’t need her walker is when she’s coming to complain about something you’ve done.”

Les turns the sound on the television to very loud. He’s no longer looking at her.

Matty goes back into the kitchen. A ripped brown bag full of groceries is propping the screen door open. As she picks up the groceries and cradles them in her arm,

she hears a train. Standing and kicking the empty bag out onto the deck, she closes the door just as an engine pulling several empty coal cars passes by.

Putting the groceries on the table, she goes to the birdcage in the corner. It's hanging from a hook on a pole. Inside, her yellow canary, Libby, is sitting on a wooden bar preening its feathers. Libby stopped singing a few months before. Matty makes several clicking sounds with her tongue, trying to get the bird's attention. It does no good. Before turning away, Matty sees her face in the mirror in the cage.

Matty puts her hand to her fingertips to her face and watching her reflection, traces the wrinkles on her cheeks.

She can't remember a time when her face didn't look old.

\*

The ants inside the glass enclosure don't react as Darren taps his fingers on it. At least some of the ants are always in movement, running through the small tunnels in the packed sand. On top of the sand there is a toy plastic silo and a photograph of a farm is taped to the back panel of glass.

He sits on the floor and reaches beneath the bed and pulls out a shoebox. He takes the lid off the box and sorts through the hundreds of nude pictures of men cut from magazines. He unzips his pants.

\*

Clarence emerges from the mine in an elevator packed with other miners. He squints as his eyes meet the bright sunlight. As he crosses the parking lot to his truck, Jason Dibbs rests his hand on his shoulder.

"You up for a beer at Goldies?" Jason Dibbs asks.

Clarence doesn't hesitate. "Sounds good," he says.

He has known Jason Dibbs since grade school. Jason has always been called by his full name, not just Jason. Clarence gets into his truck, puts the key in the ignition, and turns it. He looks over at Jason Dibbs in his truck and gives him the thumbs up. He speeds out of the lot, his back tires spitting gravel as he turns onto the road.

Goldie's is on the edge of town. It was once a gas station, garage, and small auto parts warehouse. A billboard of a miner pushing a wheelbarrow filled with gold stands near the road. The front of the building has been painted with large gold nuggets. Clarence pulls into the parking lot and parks where the air pump used to be. He reaches the door of Goldie's just as Jason Dibbs pulls into the lot. Opening the door, he's met with the smells of beer and the remnants of automobile oil. Hay and peanut shells carpet the floor. It's crowded and noisy. He finds two stools at the bar by the time Jason Dibbs comes in. Tacked on the wall behind the bar are hundreds of photographs taken of miners in the mines.

Before coming to the bar, Jason Dibbs stops at the jukebox and puts coins in the slot. As he sits next to Clarence he says, "Found something before our time, but appropriate."

"What?" Clarence asks.

"Meatloaf's 'Bat out of Hell,'" Jason Dibbs says.

"Hell yeah," Clarence says as he slams his palm down on the bar. "Hit us up, barkeep."

\*

Sitting in the worn overstuffed chair in the living room, Debra reads the paragraph in the novel for the third time. The words are like candy cotton that melts in her brain. She shifts uncomfortably and tries to contain her rage. Her swollen ankles are propped up on an ottoman. Bunting is sticking out of the top. Through the front plate glass window she can see bugs swarming about the lit streetlights. The house is quiet.

When Clarence opens the front door and stumbles in, she wants to jump from the chair and strike him with both fists. She throws the novel across the room. It knocks a small empty goldfish bowl from a stand. The bowl breaks into pieces as it hits the floor.

"Where have you been?" she says, holding back the urge to scream.

Weaving from side to side he goes to the sofa and plops down. "Goldie's," he says.

The aroma of beer carries from him to Debra.

“It’s one thirty in the morning,” she says. “What if it was time?”

“Time for what?” he slurs..

Debra points to her swollen abdomen. “Time for me to have this baby boy.”

“I’m sorry,” he mumbles.

“After causing that accident here you are drunk again. You never learn,” she says.

Debra slowly stands. “My parents want to go to the cemetery tomorrow. It’ll be your last chance to go with us for the next three years and I want to go.” She goes into the bedroom and locks the door.

Clarence lies down and rolls onto his side, facing the back of the sofa. He puts his arms up over his head as he begins to sob.

\*

As the first rays of morning sun comes through the plastic curtains, Darren opens his eyes and looks around. Nothing in the room has changed since he was in high school. The five unpacked cardboard boxes stacked in the corner are the only addition. They are filled with his belongings. The light blue wallpaper with the small locomotives is faded and peeling. His high school diploma is in a black frame and hangs on the wall above his dresser. On one wall there are several family photos in cheap gold frames. He stands behind and towers over the others in the pictures. On a shelf above the dresser is a silver plastic trophy he won in a spelling bee in tenth grade. His name isn’t on the trophy. It simply has the words “First Place” printed in gold on its black base.

He kicks off the sheet that is covering him and sits on the edge of the bed. His skin has turned gray from the years spent working in the mine. He presses his finger into the white skin of his thigh just to be sure it’s only his imagination. He goes to the ant farm and removes the top. As he urinates into it, he watches his pee flood the tunnels.

\*

Les grips the steering wheel exactly at the 9 and 3 o'clock position. The landscape along both sides of the road is hilly and covered with dying grass. The few houses on either side are old and weather beaten. Single large oak trees stand like sentinels every few miles.

Matty is holding her black patent leather purse in her lap. She repeatedly snaps and unsnaps the gold buckle at its top. She's wearing her best summer dress. It's light purple with small bright red rosebuds printed on the pleated skirt. There is a dark purple belt around her waist. The wind coming in through the open window makes the collar dance around her neck.

"You okay back there, Debra?" she asks, without turning her head.

"I'm fine, Mom," Debra says. She's seated between her husband and brother. "Just slow down a bit when you get to the railroad tracks, Dad," she says. "The bumping is uncomfortable."

Darren and Clarence look out their open windows.

At the railroad tracks Les speeds up. The car bounces up and down.

Turning off the main road onto a gravel road, Les slows the car. Maple trees line both sides of the road. He stops the car a few feet from an iron gate. Darren gets out and unhooks the chain around the post and swings the gate open. There is no sign indicating they are entering a cemetery. Les drives through and continues for a hundred yards and stops the car. Headstones stick up out of the tall grass.

Darren closes the gate and walks slowly to the car. He kicks at the gravel. His large shoes quickly cover with dust.

"Here we are," Matty says merrily, as if they are about to go into an amusement park. As she gets out of the car she says to her husband, "You getting out? They're your parents."

Les stares straight ahead, his hands on the steering wheel as if he's still driving.

Matty closes her door and begins walking among the headstones.

Darren opens the back door and helps Debra climb out. He closes the door and the two of them follow after Matty.



Without turning, Les says, "When they coming for you?"

"Tomorrow morning, first thing," Clarence says.

"You scared?" Les says.

"Shitless," Clarence says.

Watching his family through the dirty windshield, Les says, "Just think of it as being in a mine where you can't get out of for three years."

\*

Matty pulls clumps of grass from the front of a headstone shaped like the biblical tablet of the Ten Commandments. On one section of the tablet is the name Marion Haskell. On the other is the name Ezra Haskell. Beneath their birth and death dates is the inscription, "In holes of the earth and of the rocks. Job 30:6."

Darren and Debra walk up behind Matty.

"We should come out here more often to take care of their grave site," Matty says.

"Why?" Darren says. "Dad doesn't care what happens to it."

Matty runs her hand across her forehead, smudging it with dirt. "His father was a hard man. The only time his father was happy was when he was down in the mines."

"They're a lot alike," Debra says. "I don't think I've seen Dad smile once since his retirement."

"Mining is in the Haskell blood," Matty says. "It goes back several generations."

\*

In the middle of the night Debra rolls onto her side, facing Clarence. She places her hand on his bare chest and feels the beating of his heart. He turns his head, gazes at her.

“How you going to get along while I’m in prison?” he asks.

“I’m stronger than you think,” she says. “Maybe while you’re in there you can learn to stay sober.”

He stares up at the ceiling. “Maybe.”

\*

Les is at the table when Darren comes into the kitchen. He’s sipping coffee from one of his mother’s teacups.

“You’re up early, Pops,” Darren says.

“Woke up thinking I had to be somewhere,” Les says. “You ready for work?”

“Yep, I guess so,” Darren says. “Why are you drinking out of Grandma’s tea cups?”

“Why not?” Les says.

Darren goes to the stove and picks up the coffee pot, gingerly touches its side. He takes one of the teacups and pours coffee into it. A wisp of steam wafts up from the liquid. He gulps it down. He places the empty teacup in the sink.

“Later, Pops,” Darren says as he leaves.

“Remember to keep your head down,” Les says.

\*

Darren is crowded in with other men on the elevator as it descends into the mine. He can see the tops of their helmets. He holds his breath as if diving underwater. The electric lights in the mine shaft replace the light of day.

\*

Matty is on the front porch. She sees Sarah coming out of her house using her walker and waves to her. The mine’s emergency siren begins to blare.

Les looks up from his newspaper.

STEVE CARR, who lives in Richmond, Va., began his writing career as a military journalist and has had over a hundred short stories published internationally in print and online magazines, literary journals and anthologies. His plays have been produced in several states. He was a 2017 Pushcart Prize nominee. He is on [Facebook](#) and Twitter [@carrsteven960](#).