

Breaker at Dawn

A Novel

Paul Sullivan

Royal Fireworks Press
Unionville, New York

*For Dolores Mannain
and more than twenty years of friendship*



This book is a novel. It is a work of fiction. Names, characters, locations, and events either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or places or events is entirely coincidental.



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ISBN: 978-0-88092-705-5

Publisher: Dr. T.M. Kemnitz
Editor: Jennifer Ault
Book and Cover Designer: Kerri Ann Ruhl
Cover Art: Christopher Tice

Printed and bound in Unionville, New York, on acid-free paper
using vegetable-based inks at the Royal Fireworks facility.

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Chapter 1

I was eight years old when I started working up in the coal breaker. That was in Pittston, just before the Twin Shaft disaster. The law in Pennsylvania said that I had to be twelve to work up in the breaker room and fourteen to work down in the mine, but my birth date had never been registered. My father got a certificate from a mine inspector in Pittston and filled in my age as twelve, and for twenty cents he got a notary public to stamp it. That was all I needed, and the company never questioned it. It was the same with a lot of us boys.

We moved away from Pittston after the tragedy at Twin Shaft, migrating from one colliery to another until we came to Lawson. Father said that moving was the way my mother had of dealing with things—that she couldn't stay in Pittston after Tom Murray was killed. He didn't say that to Mother, but he explained it to me. My mother never spoke about it, and I never heard my father say anything more. We just moved.

I was sorry to leave my friends. I started with the Pittston boys, and because I was so small, the older boys helped me through the first months, keeping a watch over me and

guiding me along, keeping me out of harm's way, showing me what to do and what not to do. And the breaker boss there wasn't so bad. He was demanding but never cruel. Not like Tenpenny, the boss at Lawson, who was both demanding and naturally cruel.

A man by the name of Chester Lawson owned the colliery. He owned the company houses the miners lived in, the store where they bought their goods, and even the church they worshipped in. He was a wealthy man, but he didn't own the coal they took out of the mine. The coal was owned by a group of men in New York City. Those men controlled most of the mineral rights and railroads in eastern Pennsylvania. Chester Lawson had only acquired the right to mine the coal, and his colliery was built on that agreement.

I turned twelve that autumn of 1900. My sister Mary Rose was seven. We lived in one of the company-owned houses in the patch village that sat in the long shadow of the breaker. The place where we lived was called "the kettle" because the road sank down in the center of it. The road was built over an old part of the mine, and the earth had settled and was still settling. Others said it was called "the kettle" because we Irish lived there. But it was the only place we could find to live. And even there, according to my mother, we paid the colliery a rent that amounted to thievery—a rent that was deducted from my father's wages.

There were a dozen languages spoken in the patch village. Above the kettle was the place where the Germans lived. The Polish were to the left, and along the narrow road

to the clum banks were the Italians. And there were Scotch and Welsh and Slovaks.

The company-owned houses were poorly built. They were of thin clapboard. They faced one another across the dirt road, with about a dozen on each side. There was a yard in the back with a line for hanging clothes and space enough for a small garden. In some of the yards, people kept chickens. A few raised pigeons. But we had none of those, though Mother said she would tell me when to turn the earth for a garden. Every two families shared an outhouse. There was one water pump in the kettle that served all of us.

The black dust from the coal breaker settled on everything in the village. It lay on the roofs of the houses, on the road, in the gardens, and, before a rain, even on the leaves of the trees. And with a rain, it washed from the gutters to form black streams over the ground and black ponds in the low places.

The coal breaker was about six stories high, and like a church in some villages, it dominated our lives. It was only iron and timbers, but it had the presence of a living thing, both physically and spiritually.

As the coal cars came up out of the mine, they were pulled over narrow tracks to the top of the breaker by heavy cables. There the cars were dumped, and the coal went into the crusher and the shaker before it ran down the chutes for sorting. The Lawson Colliery worked a twelve-hour shift. Only on Sundays was the breaker quiet. For six days a week it had a life of its own.

High up in the breaker room, it was dark and noisy as the crusher rolled, the breaker shook, and a fine dust fell from the rafters. The same dust coated the windows with a thin film, and it got in our nose and throat and eyes. When the coal came out of the shaking machine, it rattled down the iron chutes where we boys waited. There were about thirty of us sitting on heavy pine planks that lay across the chutes. It was our job to pick out the refuse as the coal flowed under us in a black river. The rock and slate we tossed into another chute, where it went out to the clum banks that rose up like mountains against the patch village. The clean coal rushed on down to the bottom of the breaker, where it was loaded into waiting railcars.

We worked all day in the same position. They didn't allow us to wear gloves. With gloves we couldn't feel the rock from the coal, and often with the dust we couldn't see clearly. In the beginning, the sulfur off the coal caused my fingers to swell and bleed and my skin to crack open. The older boys said it would be okay after a few weeks. At night my mother rubbed goose grease over my hands, and after a time my fingers hardened. They are hard still, and black now, as the coal has worked deep into my skin.

I hated rolling out of a warm bed on those cold mornings. Even as I got older, that never changed. Often I would lie quietly, pretending to be asleep. My father would come and wake me before dawn. He would call to me gently, "Paddy? It's time to be up and doing." And I could smell coffee brewing as I dressed.

We would eat quietly in the warm kitchen, with Mother drifting between the table and the stove, filling our cups with coffee, making up the tin lunch pails we would carry with us. That was the warm time—the best time, watching Mother and sleepy Mary Rose and Father sipping his coffee. But it lasted only moments. Then we took the lunch pails waiting by the door and Mother’s all-important embraces and joined the others on the road.

At Lawson, the breaker whistle would sound as we were going down the road through the village. The rising sun outlined the breaker on the horizon and brought a rose-colored dawn to the bleakness of the place.

Others joined us—men and boys, the men going to the mine, the boys to the breaker. They came out of the shadows, their boots crunching on the gravel, their lunch tins rattling, but still so quiet, each with his mind warm from sleep but his flesh fighting back the cold air. Out of the kettle and past the clum banks they came, through icy pools of water and black snow—Irish and Italian, Polish and German, all of us to the dark mouth of the mine or the grim steps of the breaker, with the faces of the women watching as we passed by the yellow light of doorways.

“You’re a man now, Paddy O’Grady,” one of the men would encourage me as I turned away toward the breaker.

“Aye. That he is,” my father would agree as he turned toward the mouth of the mine. And going away, he would give a wave of his hand and a nod of his head, but I was too cold and sleepy to reply. I just went on, bumping into the

other boys as we entered the darkness of the breaker house and climbed the narrow stairs, with the wood creaking under our boots, the smell of wet timbers and coal dust, the first sounds of heavy cables straining and the breaker starting to wake, the gears and belts turning and the crusher moving as the breaker began to breathe. Up the darkness of the stairs we went, climbing across the chutes to take our places as the river of coal started to flow.

Far below, my father and the other men were already riding the man-trip cars deep into the belly of the mine, dropping vertically a thousand feet, then finding their way with carbide lamps to hang their tags on the pegboard outside the office of the fire boss. Then they started down the gangway to their workplace, with the water dripping from the rock above and the rats hurrying away before them.

Father said that when a man is that far down, he can feel the pressure of the earth—the weight of it above him. “You are always knowing how frail a creature you are,” he told me. “It has hold of you, and it tells you.”

A thousand feet down, my father and the others blasted out the coal and filled the cars. It took five cars for a man to make full coal. The mule drivers took the cars back up the gangway, where cables brought them out of the mine and up to the top of the breaker. There they were dumped into the crusher.

My mind would still be asleep when the coal started to flow under me, but I would wake quickly with the first crack of Tenpenny’s long stick. And all of the warmth I had would be gone.

Chapter 2

Many mornings after we went off to work, Mary Rose would join some of the other children at the clum banks to collect coal. Even though the earth below us was full of it and the men painfully dug it out each day, the company said that we had to buy the coal to heat our homes and cook our food with. So the women and children would often gather what they could, climbing up the banks to fill their sacks and baskets, crawling over the rubble for each little piece of coal.

The colliery had its own police, and even though the banks were nothing but refuse from the workings of the mine, there were fines to be paid by those caught taking coal. But for most families, it was worth the risk, for many had so little that a few pieces of coal amounted to a lot.

Usually, when the Coal and Iron Police came upon a group of women and children working the clum banks, they simply confiscated all of their baskets and sacks and wagons. It was common knowledge that the company police sold the coal to local businesses or took it home for their own use, but those who were caught collecting it were in no position to complain.

The clum banks were a dangerous place, and there were areas Mary Rose was told never to go. Some of the slopes were high and steep. The rock was loose. If the larger rocks started to slide, they would bring down an entire hill of rubble. And once a slide started, there was nothing to stop it. The older hills were far more settled and the safest to work. On the newer banks, the stone would shift easily, but the most coal to be found was on the new banks.

That first summer in Lawson, we built a wagon for Mary Rose. I don't remember where my father got the wheels for it; I only remember him coming home with them. Sometime later, we found an old crate and some iron rod to make the axles. We made the bottom stronger by adding solid oak planks. Mary Rose could pull it on her own as long as she didn't overload it with coal. In the early mornings, she would follow the others to the clum banks. Then she would return home for breakfast and hurry off to school.

Mary Rose went to the company-owned school in the village. The school was free; the company paid for the teacher, though each student had to buy his or her own books and supplies. Most families had little money to spend on such things, but Mother always made certain that Mary Rose had what she needed. All of the students had to crowd into one room, and most shared a desk with another student. Many of the immigrant children didn't speak English, and all of the classes were mixed into one. But Mary Rose seemed to like the reading and writing and all that came with it, and I always knew that she was going to be educated like our mother.

Mother could read and write. She would read stories and poetry, and she often read aloud. Father pretended not to like the poetry, but I would see him listening.

My father said that Irish women like reading and learning, and that was good, but men had more pressing things to do. Still, I remember Father saving to buy Mother a book of poems at the company store—saving as if it were the most important thing in the world. And I remember the blush on Mother’s face as she accepted the book, and I saw the quick flash of her eyes as she scolded him for spending the money—a whole dollar and twenty cents.

“Have you lost your senses Egan O’Grady?” she had asked him. But she handled that little book as if it were a sacred thing.

My father said that Mother was more Irish than he, but I knew she wasn’t as true Irish as Father was.

My father was born in Belfast in the north of Ireland and came to America as a young man. Mother’s family had come to America during the Irish famine in 1848. They settled in Easton, Pennsylvania. Mother was born there twenty-three years later. So in my mind, Father was more Irish than Mother, but Father insisted the opposite. “The sound of her talk is American,” he’d say, “but her heart is Irish.”

I didn’t go to school after I started working up in the breaker. Mother wasn’t happy about it, but we badly needed the money. My father said he was proud of me, and he told me how he, too, had started out very young to help his family. “It’s the way things are when you’re poor,” he said. “But

that doesn't mean you can't have dignity. And, you might be knowing, you're just as good as any other, educated or not."

I didn't like school anyway. Learning never held my interest. Mother taught me how to write my name and put some words on paper, but the spelling was always a struggle for me. Father taught me some arithmetic, and I found that simpler. Father thought it was important. "When you make full coal," he told me, "you'd better hope you know the man who weighs the cars, If you don't know the man, you had better know the numbers."

So I did learn some numbers, but that was about all the education I ever got. At the time, I thought it was all I would ever need.

I had almost four years in the breakers when we moved to the Lawson Colliery. I was educated to that and was already considered an older boy. My hands were rough and calloused and my arms strong. I could hold my own with all but a few.

I knew the day would come when I would go down in the mine like my father, but there was still a lot to learn. It was different underground. I heard the men talk. There were a dozen jobs, and each took time to know. And you had to learn each one well before you went to the next. You had to get respect for what you were doing and trust from the men around you. Mining was a craft, the men said, that had to be mastered. When you mastered it, you earned the right to be called a miner—and not before. "I don't trust a man who hasn't learned from the bottom up," my father told me.

Even my father started out as a helper. He worked for three years with an old man who had been mining all his life. The old man's name was Thomas Murray, and like my father, he was from Belfast. Father always referred to him as "Old Tom." Father carried tools, laid track, cleared rock falls, and set timbers. He bailed water and shoveled the coal into the cars. He was two years as a helper before Old Tom allowed him to handle explosives for the first time. I remember hearing Father tell how he had drilled into a coal seam and packed in the black powder, how he had set the squib and struck a match, and it was smoldering evenly when he and the old man moved away to take cover. But after watching the squib hiss and smoke and burn away, nothing happened. And after a long wait, still nothing happened. Old Tom looked at Father curiously.

My father just shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe the bloody powder got wet," he said. Then, just as he stood up, the powder went off, bringing down the coal and Father with it.

He wasn't hurt badly—as he would tell it, just bruised and knocked about some. He even finished out the day, working with the old man until they got full coal. But it was almost another year before Old Tom let Father work with explosives again.

That's how my father started down in the mine. That same year, he and my mother were married and moved up to Pittston.

There's a beautiful old willow tree where the waters of the Lehigh River enter the canal at Easton, Pennsylvania. It's a majestic tree that was there when my mother was a young girl, and it's there now, shading the path between the lock and the river. I'm told that it marks the place where my mother met my father.

When my father came from Belfast, the first job he took was with the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company. He worked on the coal chutes at Mauch Chunk, where the canal barges were loaded. "With as rough a bunch of characters as a man could know," Father enjoyed telling us. But Mother seldom allowed Father to finish any of his stories about Mauch Chunk, so Father would go on to tell about the summer he met my mother, telling it with a smile, as if it were his favorite story anyway.

"From time to time I made the trip down the canal to Easton," he always started. "The girl was only seventeen, with the bluest of blue eyes, and her hair gold. She gave me the look." Then he would lean forward, and with a whisper to his voice, he'd say, "That's how we got to know each other—that look, like she wasn't looking. But really she was."

Not far into the story, Mother would argue that she never did anything of the kind—that young Egan O'Grady was one of that wild bunch that came uninvited to the church picnic, and he'd followed her about like a puppy all that day and all through that summer. She'd only married him to be done with his pestering.

It was to my father's advantage, so the story goes, that my grandfather Doheny liked him, for when he came calling, there was little that impressed my grandmother, Rose Doheny, a difficult woman. She had something better in mind for the youngest of her two daughters. The rough-cut Irish boy waiting impatiently on the porch was a long way from what she had hoped for. But to her credit, she said nothing negative, even though it was a disappointment to her when my father announced that he had taken a job in the mines.

"I met a man from Belfast," Father had said. "A Tom Murray—an old fellow who knows the way and will teach me to be a miner."

Grandmother Rose worried about what quality of life that would offer her Lily. "Why a miner?" she had asked.

"A man must have a trade," my father had said, "and I have none. And there is work in the mines now—more work than a man can do."

So that autumn, Lily Doheny became Lily O'Grady, and again my grandmother tried not to be negative as she saw her daughter off to Pittston.

In my mother's family there were no miners. When the family came from Ireland, they had found work on the canals—the Lehigh, the Delaware, and the Raritan Canals—the waterways that carried coal and other goods to the eastern markets. The family settled in Easton, and for a number of years, my grandfather, John Doheny, worked the barges on those waterways with my grandmother Rose

by his side. Grandfather later took the job of locktender on the Lehigh Canal and moved into the locktender's house. My mother Lily and my Aunt Nellie were both born in that house. Mother and Aunt Nellie were extremely close in their youth, and I've heard it said that in their teens, they were the loveliest girls in Easton. When my mother spoke of those years, she did so with delight, the joy of remembering filling her voice and putting a gleam in her blue eyes.

But my mother spoke sadly of a later time, when Grandmother Rose fell into a long illness and could no longer do the everyday things she enjoyed so much. The slow loss of Grandmother Rose put a heavy burden on my grandfather. Grandmother Rose died in the spring of 1895, and my grandfather followed her only two weeks later. They are buried in a small cemetery where the canal boats pass.

I've heard my father say that it's an Irish thing, that kind of sad ending—a bit like the songs we often sing. But my mother says it's a love story—the story of my grandparents, of two people facing life together and giving their best to the very end of it.

I think my grandmother believed that the one success in her life was my Aunt Nellie. She never spoke a negative word about my mother's marriage to my father, but she showed her heart only a few days after the wedding when she used all of her savings to send my Aunt Nellie away to a school in Philadelphia—"to a fine school for girls and as far from the canals and coal fields as I can get her," she'd said.

Grandmother Rose hoped for a more comfortable life for Nellie, and she got her wish. In her last year of school, Nellie met a young man who was studying law. They were married in a large wedding in Philadelphia.

Aunt Nellie and her husband Albert came to visit us when we were still living in Pittston. Aunt Nellie was a beautiful woman. I remember her almost crushing me with a hug, and I remember that she smelled like sweet vanilla. She wore the finest clothes and a hat with a big bow. She never stopped talking—going on about Philadelphia, the house they lived in, and her friends.

Aunt Nellie's husband Albert was a big man. He wore a fine suit, and in his pocket was a watch at the end of a long chain. He sat in a chair with his legs crossed and spent a lot of time looking at that watch like he was never sure what time it was. He was impatient, but he was also friendly. When he talked, he threw his voice out across the room like he was talking to a whole crowd, and when he laughed, it was in that same loud voice. My father laughed with him, but it wasn't my father's real laugh. It was easy to see how different they were.

Aunt Nellie and Uncle Albert spent a full day with us—a whole afternoon. And that was the only time I ever saw Aunt Nellie and Uncle Albert, though my mother read many of Aunt Nellie's letters aloud to us. And always Aunt Nellie went on about her big house and her friends and Uncle Albert's law practice.

I once heard Father say to Mother, “I would be content in life if I could give you half of what your sister Nellie has.”

My mother replied, “But then I would have only half of what I am now blessed with.” She gave Father a kiss on the cheek and added, “I won’t accept less than what I have, Egan O’Grady.” And with that I knew that it would never be mentioned again. My mother had a way of making things final.