

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. I was only eight though the law in Pennsylvania said 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 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. But 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, even the church they worshiped 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. These 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 had turned twelve years of age that autumn in 1900. My sister Mary Rose was seven. We lived in one of the company owned houses in the patch village 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 Glum banks were the Italians. And there were Scotch and Welsh and Slovaks.

The company owned houses were poorly built. They were of thin clapboard. The houses 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,



and 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, the Lawson breaker dominated our lives. It was only iron and timbers but had the presence of a living thing. Both physical and spiritual.

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 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 the dust got in your 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 steaming 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.



And 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 cooking 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 always sounded as we were going down the road through the village. And as the sun was coming up, it 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. Coming out of the shadows there were a lot of men and a lot of boys. Their boots on the gravel. The rattle of their lunch tins. But still so quiet. Each with his morning time and his thoughts and his own mind warm from sleep. With his flesh fighting back the cold air. Out of the kettle and past the clum banks. 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 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. With the smell of wet timbers and coal dust. With the first sounds of heavy cables straining and the breaker starting to wake. With the sounds of gears and belts turning and the crusher moving as the breaker began to breathe. Up the darkness of the stairs and climbing across the chutes to take our places as the river of coal started to flow.

And 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 before starting down the gangway to their work place. 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. Five full cars for a man to make full coal. And the mule drivers took the cars back up the gangway where the cables brought them out of the mine and up to the top of the breaker where 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.

