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## **Miner's Lung**

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Argo Mine tour guides spend half their time on the job trying to convince you the working conditions at the mine were safe and the rest of the time trying to convince you it's haunted. We attend their Top-of-the-Hour Tour while living a few yards away. My mother complements our guide, Mac, on the silver horseshoe over the entrance and he tells her his ex wife left it behind. *She was always into the ghost stories about the place. Though our own home was haunted, that's what she said when we separated. "Bad energy."* He uses his fingers as air quotes and continues to chew tobacco, spitting only when he thinks we aren't looking, tells us the average lifespan for a miner after retirement was five years. *If it wasn't the lungs, it was tumors. Usually the lungs Pneumoconiosis/Silicosis, a slow filling of the lungs caused by inhaling crushed rock and minerals. Or Miner's Lung they used to call it.* I become accustomed to involuntarily holding my breath while I sleep.

There's a boardhouse in Georgetown that used to act as a brothel for the miners. *Another town secret well kept.* Sometime between her college graduation and my father, my mother dates the cook. There's still a picture of her in the back of the cards room. All wooden panels and syrup sticking to the bottoms of table tops like used gum. That's where she tells us she learned how to play poker properly, her father's winning chip in hand. Her hair is greasy, presumably from too many fried eggs or *full of flapjacks*. Her arm craning to cover her eyes, pregnant bulge pressed against red sidewalk chalk. My brother and I stare back at the image, wondering if she'd mailed the copy our father used to keep in his wallet. The pale wall of the first house they bought together in frame. *Is that with you or with me?*

My mother's first engagement ring was a gold band that featured no diamond. Sometime later, after my father cuts her orchid in half with our kitchen scissors, she'll throw it down the garbage disposal. Later, when buying a pack of Marlboro cigarettes, she'll ask me for pocket change and wished she had sold it instead. Later, we'll lose the house and my father won't be around to see it. Later, she'll say the gold ring must have been cursed because gold only brings disaster and my brother will shout at her that there's no such thing as luck. Later, we'll move spitting distance away from the Argo Gold Mine and she'll refuse to see the irony. We will never live further than a few blocks away from a graveyard because, like orchids, my mother believes they're lucky. By sixteen, I will have long stopped stuffing my pockets with four leaf clovers and being afraid of my mother's ghost stories. I will sit behind the driver's seat in a minivan crowded with other soaked students and sand. Going to the beach in the rain: unlucky. An upperclassman will whisper to me about how she used to treat holding her breath whenever a graveyard came into view like a game as a kid. A tradition my mother had somehow missed. In the back seat, I'll feel small and resist the brief compulsion to text her about my discovery.

*The video you are about to see was produced in 1938 by the U.S. Department of Labor as part of its efforts to prevent Silicosis. I have seen the ad before but never in a classroom surrounded by so many students. Above all the report emphasizes that if these control measures are adopted and applied, silicosis can be prevented. Students brush snow off the bottom of their shoes and I watch the concrete outside become spotted through the window. The trade calls these tools jack hammers, the workers call them widow makers. White clouds blur the faces of men continuing to drill behind the narration. Look at this worker, he is incompetent, sick, cannot do*

*another days work. They must let him go.* The first time I watched it was on my brother's recommendation. He sent me the link along with the caption: *Don't show Mom.* The camera slides to the sick worker named John Steele receiving his final paycheck. I can no longer see any concrete peaking through. *John is more fortunate than thousands of others suffering from Silicosis.* The ad assures us. *He has found work elsewhere. Working at a tombstone shed.* The camera pans to him drilling again, this time by hand *But he is still exposed to the enemy.* By the end of the video everything zooms out and the name on the tomb is strategically revealed to us, *John Steele.* Knowing exactly where you'll be buried: bad luck. I scroll through old photos of silicosis X Rays on Google Image and wonder if my mother has a tradition for knowing what year the end of your headstone will read.

My mother sees my freshman dorm room once when dropping me off. She doesn't point out the lucky seven in my room number or at my window facing a main road. Instead she asks how I feel after yet another MRI. *No news is good news.* I nod, run my right thumb across my left index finger and exhale *Tumor growth in an extremity is uncommon for someone your age:* unlucky. We used to all get checked together. She would sit us down in plastic chairs and have us wait for her to be done first. I would try to picture what she looked like in an attempt to stay still for the machine. Wrapped in paper scrubs, her wrists bare of silver bracelets and her skin pale beneath hospital light. One in three of us being at risk: *not bad odds.*

My brother never liked my when my mother would act on her compilations. Each Sunday for years, my mother's sleeves collect dried candle wax and singe markings from reaching over church candles across town as my brother trailed behind her, blowing out her prayers. Sometime in elementary school our insurance doesn't cover braces and my mother insists it's fine. *Crooked teeth are lucky in so many cultures.* By seventeen, my brother replaces the majority of his front teeth with fake straight ones. Mine are still crooked, protrude outwards and overlap, crowding into the center. The day after his thirteenth birthday, my mother even goes as far as to offer him her lucky lighter as a belated present. He tosses it into an early spring snowbank and I am left to retrieve it myself. *You know she only pawned it off because it's out of fluid right? It's garbage, even she knows it.* I keep it in the pocket of my winter coat for the next four years before chucking it myself.

In eighth grade art, we learn to draw the mine. The projector old and clouded like the mirrors my mother still hordes in her basement. A woman at the front of the room instructs us to select a stump of charcoal. For an hour or so we try to trace the shakey abstract lines projected in front of us. Nothing is in focus, there's no picture really. Just lines, some more defined than others. Wiping charcoal from our pointer fingers, we wait for her next instruction. She tells us what we see next won't be a different image, just the same one rotated. She tilts the knob on the side of the projector forward slowly, allowing the next slide to reveal itself at its own pace. It takes some time for our eyes to adjust to the light of the screen after staring down at our work for so long. When they do, a human figure is outlined white in contrast against the black opening of a tunnel. He's standing yards away from the camera, and his face is washed out by clouds of dirt. His entire body seems to be made of dust, leaping towards the lights attached to cranes overhead. Taking pictures of yourself alone: unlucky, steals a piece of your soul. She tells us to rotate our papers, lining our sketches to the screen. When we do, it becomes grossly obvious what we've been sketching. The abstract lines come together and the man reveals himself again.