

The
Mine

By

Tom Ryan

The Mine

Lightning forked across the sky, thunder boomed in the distance echoing around the valley, rain came down in sheets, essentially blinding the bus driver to the road ahead. But the driver of this bus had been driving this route all his life and did not need to see the way ahead to know where he was going. On a day with clear skies and the sun shining you would be able to see the whole valley. You would be able to see the old gravel road travelled by the bus from the top of the valley to the entrance of the mine at the bottom. You would see the forest at the top of the valley which gradually thins away until it is replaced by green fields that lead all the way down to the lake which sits at the bottom of the valley. A towering range of mountains lines the perimeter of the valley, often casting dark shadows across the land. The rain continued to pelt the rickety old bus; it was crippled from its many long years of service as the transportation for bringing the men down to the mine.

The bus jerked to a stop outside Marks house, if you could call it that, it was nothing more than a shack, it looked as though it had been pieced together, made with many different materials found throughout the valley, there were sections of corrugated metal, held together only by bits of rope, there was one section made of un-plastered concrete blocks which were being worn away by the vicious thunder storms which often struck the valley, finally there was the front face of the house this was made of wood which looked rough as though the logs had just been chopped down and put together but it also looked strong, it looked like it would take more than a bit of wind and rain to knock it down. This front section had of course been crafted by Mark's father; he had poured many hours into making it and had wanted to do the rest of the house but had passed before he had had the chance. The bus driver let out a holler, only just audible over the storm, for Mark to hurry up.

Mark appeared out of the doorway, on the outside he looked calm and ready for the challenge that lay down the mine, however if you looked closer you would see the fear in his sea green eyes and his hands shaking in anticipation. Mark was a tall well built 16 year old boy who has spent all his life

living in complete poverty; he has lived off the land all his life with his mother and up until 6 months ago his father who had died in the lake at the end of the valley. Mark had blond hair cut ragged just short of his shoulders, he was strong for his age but he had to be to survive off the land, especially since his father's death he had had to toughen up as he now had to provide everything for his mother and 5 year old sister. Marks was wearing nothing but a ragged shirt and a pair of trousers about 8 inches too short which were held up by nothing but a bit of rope, he had nothing on his feet but a pair of thin canvas shoes. Marks looked rooted to the spot but the thought of providing for his family pushed him towards and into the bus.

As Mark stepped into the bus he saw some of the miners, then the rest, he was shocked by the way they looked and were dressed and was even more shocked when he realised that some of them were his age and his friends no more than a year or two ago. The men were all caked in soot and dust, it was one of many things they all had in common, the other was a hunched back, and all of them were sitting hunched forward from all the hours spent down the mine in cramped conditions. The miner directly in front of Mark used to be a good friend of his and was no more than 2 years older, although to look at him now he looked 20 years older. He had the same general outfit as Mark however his was layered in soot so every time the bus jerked or there was a big bump in the road a layer of soot would fall from his cloths, Mark glanced into his eyes expecting the twinkle that had once resided there only to be met by an emotionless, lifeless stare. After this Mark knew it would be pointless to try and make conversation as this man would have nothing to say. It was now clear to Mark what the mine did to people, but he would not be taken easily, his father had resisted and now he would too.

The bus continued to make its way down the valley to the lake and the mine. However at that time Marks mind was in a different place, it was on a day much like this one on which his father died. The rain had been pouring down for hours and the wind howling, they had run out of food, Mark had volunteered to go out and try and find a rabbit in the grassland, however his father had told him not to bother and that he would go down to the lake and try and catch some fish. It was several hours later when a friend of his father had arrived at the door saying that he had run into his father on the way to go

fishing and had joined him. Mark often struggled to recollect what happened next as at the time he had been full of grief and denial. But today he could recall it all perfectly, his dad's friend had described the two men fishing in the water about 20m out from the shore and then a monstrous wave had risen from nowhere sucking everything towards it, both men had been pulled from their feet, only the friend had managed to grab hold of a huge rock sticking out of the ground, his father was never seen again.

But thinking of the lake and his father and with all his emotions in turmoil caused Mark to recall another time with his father, a better time. It had been one of those glorious days when his father wasn't down the mine, they had spent the morning in the forest cutting down several gigantic trees, out of which they made a raft and about 2 months worth of firewood. But it was the raft which made the memory important to Mark, because later that day with the sun out and a warm breeze blowing through the valley, they had gone out onto the lake and spent hours sitting on the raft fishing and messing around, throwing each other off and swimming in the lake. This was one of Mark's favourite memories of his father and it brought tears to his eyes as he thought about it, he could feel them rolling down his cheeks and dripping from his chin but he did nothing about them as he was making himself and his dad a promise that he would never submit to the mine that he would never let it get the better of him.

Before Mark had a chance to think any more on his promise to his father he felt the bus jerk to a stop, it was felt distant like he was somewhere else but it brought him back to reality, he looked up expecting someone else's house only to see the lake up close and in turmoil, with waves 20 ft tall and taller and spray coming off in all directions, this is what it must have been like for his father he thought as they were told to get off the bus. They were led over to a shed, one of the few buildings which marked the entrance to the mine, here they were told to grab their equipment and then get to the carts. Mark found it hard to get gear that fitted or suited him and found that none of the others were bothered to help him. However after a bit of a struggle he managed to get one which sort of fit after altering the straps a lot. The gear was a series of straps and buckles designed so that you could hold as many tools as possible in it, it was also designed so that you could be suspended by a cable if you

needed to get at the ceiling of one of the tunnels. He was also given an ill fitting helmet, nothing could be done about the size of this, and finally he was given a pick axe and sent to a different building.

Mark realised where he was once he stepped inside the building. He saw the mine carts and knew he was at the entrance of the mine itself. He saw the others being loaded into carts and disappearing slowly into the blackness of the tunnels. The fear of the unknown began to build in Mark again and then his name was called, just before he was consumed by fear. He was told that he had nothing to do at all but keep his head down. He was told to get in and did so reluctantly. Next thing he knew he was rolling away from the entrance and the light and down into the blackness, he rounded a corner not expecting any change only to find himself going almost straight down at over 100km per hour. He had never felt exhilaration like this before or else he was too scared then to remember it. As he shot down the tunnel he could feel the wind rushing through his hair but he could also sense something else, that there was less space in the tunnel, he then felt himself beginning to slow down and then with a jolt he stopped.

A light shone down onto him, he's almost completely blinded by it and was only able to take in the outlines of the figures around him. Mark then realised that this must be the team that he will be working with. His eyes gradually adjusted to the glare of the torch and the figures began to look more like men until he can eventually make out what each one looks like, although with the soot, darkness and his eyes still adjusting Mark found it hard to tell the men apart. One man then stepped forward and introduced himself "right kid, my name is Frank, I'm the leader of team 12, your new team," he looked over Mark with the torch in hand and said with a tone of resentment "you've got a good build, strong, you look like you had an active childhood, who was your father."

Mark looked up and saw that the reason for his resentment was his body was thin or had likely grown thin and frail from years down the mine, he said "My father's name was Liam, he ...,"

"Wait," Frank interrupted him "your father was the Liam, making you the Mark," his demeanour had changed entirely "your father used to be in this

team, I was so sorry to hear about what happened, he always talked about you, and to look at you now, your everything he described and more, welcome to the team Mark,” he then shone the torch on the other 8 men, “Mark this is the team, there’s Alan, Jack, Pat, Jim, Paul, Harry, Sean and James, you’ll be working with these men for most of your time down here unless of course you or one of us gets transferred,” Mark could see that this was not his only thought he knew he was thinking about the possibility of serious injury which often occurred down the mine or even another death like his father’s.

Frank then shone the light on the rest of the cave, “this is where we’ll be working pretty much all the time unless something come up,” the cave was different from what Mark had expected, to start it had a low ceiling not so low that the men had to crouch but they did have to stoop making it very hard to swing a pickaxe and increasing the large number of things which would damage your back, but where the cave wasn’t tall it was very wide with nooks and crannies and separate chambers off at different angles, one thing mark noticed was the blackness of it all not from the coal but from the coal dust, it lay everywhere, Mark already found himself covered in blackness, but Mark could still make out shapes of boulders of solid rock and stalactites and stalagmites.

Mark was then directed over to one corner of the area they were in and told to start digging and he did, for hours gradually picking up pace but then slowing down again from exhaustion, hunger and worst of all thirst, he had begun to notice a growing thirst and a difficulty in breathing after the first hour or so and it had only gotten worse, he soon realised that it was all soot and dust he was breathing in, but worse than all of this was when the cart arrived every hour or so, to be loaded with the coal they had been digging up, even after the first load his back was left aching. After several more hours of this type of hard work he saw a light approaching from up the tunnel, he expected to see the cart so he put down his gear and got ready to begin loading the cart, however the light kept growing and no cart appeared, the flames then exploded round the corner consuming the entire tunnel, the fireball rocketed down the tunnel and Mark only just got out of the way, in behind a giant boulder of solid rock and into one of the smaller, separate chambers however he had no time in which to warn the others and as the oxygen in the air was burned up by the fire, he slumped into unconsciousness.

Mark awoke to carnage and only pain where he should have felt his left arm, but his arm was not gone he soon realised, it had however been very badly burnt. This, Mark soon saw, was not the worst injury there, he saw several dead for a start none of whom he could recognise normally, even less then however he was fairly certain that one of them was Frank, he recognised the tall build and frailty of his arms which had always been more pronounced by his height. He continued to look around and discovered two more with missing limbs and badly burned faces even still Mark could tell that they were still alive, however he also knew that very little could be done to help them in the long run and had thoughts of killing them to put them out of their misery and he knew what misery it was as even his small burn in comparison to the others was killing him it was only the need to see who was still alive that kept him going. And soon he found them, they were all in a worse condition than he was which made him feel very guilty as he felt he should have been able to call to them, but after a quick conversation and a long apology from Mark which was ignored by the men who told Mark nothing was his fault, Mark began to see sense. Mark then had a look at the cave itself for the first time really, since the explosion and realised that it had changed, there were little fires burning everywhere providing light to see the cave, however it had change drastically, the original tunnel had closed up, however one of the smaller holes in the wall which Mark had noticed earlier had been blown wide open revealing an entire new set of tunnels, and after a very quick conversation about their options it was decided that the best and really the only thing they could do was to explore the new tunnels.

The new tunnels were different to the old set Mark didn't even know how to describe it they just felt different, they were smoother and taller than any of the ones in the old section however they were also quite thin only 2 of the miners could walk side by side in them, not that this stopped the men, if anything it encouraged them the sight of the smoothness meant water which most likely meant way out, there were two ways they could go so they decide on right with no logic other than that it went down, so they hoped to find an exit at the bottom only to hit a dead end after two turns in the tunnel, so they turned around after a severe moral blow and continued back to the start point and then up the other tunnel, however they then ran into another problem, they ended up at an intersection where there were 6 different paths, they

decided rather than split up they would search in a full group and so they set off down each tunnel in turn, except to where the ground turned upwards in a steep slope.

The men very quickly realised that all of the tunnels were dead ends except one which lead to a large low ceilinged chamber which they decided was most likely closest to the surface and made the decision to dig themselves out with no success, so they decided to go for the one closest to the surface and try to dig themselves out. They dug for hours first hitting only solid rock, however gradually the rock began to loosen and fall apart into larger rocks which began to break into stones which changed to gravel mixed with earth, they then hit sand which confused the men, the sand started to fall away all by itself and a stream of water suddenly appeared, the men were all frozen with fear staring at the stream of water when suddenly the ceiling above them explode, but not with fire with water.

The men were sent flying backwards down the tunnel and even though they fell only for a few seconds before they hit the bottom, it seemed like an eternity for Mark, he used the time to think on his mother and sister who he was leaving behind to fend for themselves with no one to provide for them or to protect them, he thought of all the things they never did that he and his father had done; get food, water, wood for the fire, repair the house, work in the mine to provide more food and most importantly be there to protect them if anything happened. He then turn his thoughts to his father and the memories they had to together, especially on the lake which was now emptying itself onto him. He then thought on the promise he had made not to let the mine get to him and as he thought about it he realised that he had kept his promise and was going to drown in the same waters of the same lake as his father had drowned in, however he did not get to drown like his father like father or think any more on it because as he was being sent flying down the tunnels by the waters of the lake a huge spike of jagged rock impaled him through his neck and the final thing he saw was the other men fly past pushed on by the torrent, the water finally stop flowing, a gaping hole in the lake and the light fade as he slowly died.