

WRITE  ON!

Short Story Contest

Miner's Gold

by Elisabeth S.

A Short Story

MINER'S GOLD



Dublin, Ireland

1846

“Time to leave, Collin,” mother said to me as she placed my baby sister on her hip. I followed her into the crowd rushing for the boat, all hoping for new beginnings.

My father grasped my clammy hand and guided me up the gangway, handing the captain our tickets. I skipped alongside Da as he strolled to the bow’s railing and motioned to the blue water stretched out as far as the eye could see. “Out there,” he boomed in his deep, powerful voice, “is a land where there is no famine, a land where every man is created equal... a land of opportunity.”

CHAPTER 1

DENIM OVERALLS

Eight years later

My little sister danced around in feverish excitement as mother placed a small, round ginger cake in front of me. At nine, my sister, Bridget, was shorter than most kids her age; she had pale skin and green eyes, always searching for an adventure of sorts. Father got out his banjo and my family gathered around me singing “Lá Breithe.” I closed my eyes and savored this moment; Da had skipped a full day’s wages just for me.

“There’s a gift for you, lad,” my father noted after the birthday song had ended. Da then produced a small parcel wrapped in brown paper from behind his back and handed it to me. My imagination ran wild; what could it be? Maybe it was a new sketchbook, or a box of taffy from the corner confectionary shop.

My hopes were quickly dashed as soon as I started to unravel the gift. It was a pair of denim overalls. My heart leapt to my throat and I sank into my chair, wanting to disappear. Overalls only meant one thing and one thing only: the mines. Tears welled up inside of me, but I stayed strong and made myself smile. I wanted to show mother I was capable of being a young man, providing for the family.

“Meet me tomorrow morning at Dawson’s Coal Mine. You’re fourteen now; it’s time you do some honest work around here,” my father said sternly. “Yes Da,” I replied. Glancing around, I spotted mother crying softly, the droplets glistening in the morning sun. “Don’t be sad Ma, I’ll make you mighty proud,” I exclaimed, hoping to cheer her up. She smiled sadly and walked swiftly to her room. The muffled sobs echoed through the house, sobering the mood.

Early the next morning, I was woken up by a rat-a-tat on my bedroom door. “Breakfast’s ready,” my mother announced in her soft lilt. Reluctantly slipping on my new overalls, I didn’t sense the morning tranquility, and for once, the birds’ melodies seemed melancholy. I shuffled

into the kitchen and mother put on her usual, cheerful smile, but her puffy eyes revealed her facade.

I was already ten minutes late. After quickly eating my fry-up, I kissed mother goodbye and began the mile-long trek to Dawson's, dinner pail in hand. At the early hour, the light was thin, the air crisp and clean. I passed the small town square, the crumbling buildings huddled around the base of the mine like cowardly children.

Da met me at the entrance, his face stern. His auburn hair seemed to become even redder. I had always envied his rugged-like features. Whatever father was, I seemed to be the opposite. I was scrawny and and awkward, with black hair and dull brown eyes. Not like my father, whose eyes were so blue it seemed like it was the sky who had painted them.

"I'm sorry sir, I won't be late next time, honest." "Better not be," father growled. "Next time, I want you here before the crack of dawn. Don't care if you..." As father lectured, the bell rang, signaling the start of today's shift. I lit my lamp and followed him to the rickety elevator that would take us into the depths of the mine.

The lift creaked and groaned as it made its way downward, the light fading until the dark swallowed us up. The dull, flickering lights from our lamps were the only relief from the unrelenting gloom. I felt like I was being devoured by the earth as I made my way into its abyss. The elevator jerked to a stop and everyone shuffled out, their weathered faces bearing no emotion.

Da led me through the maze of shafts and train tracks, all leading further into the unknown. The thick coal dust scratched at my throat like an angry cat, and burned my eyes. Father didn't seem to mind the dreadful dust; he had gotten use to it. My eyes started to tear up, for the dust was too much to bear. "Get use to it, you're such a milksop," father yelled behind his back, the harsh words echoing through the tunnel.

When we had reached our assigned shaft, father handed me a spade and we got to work. My back ached as I shoveled coal into an endless convoy of carts. The dust seemed to burn holes into my lungs as I gasped for another breath. Throughout my remaining work hours, my

muscles shook pitifully, my hope dulled, my ambition dampened.

The days blurred together into miserable weeks. My mind seemed to become numb to the fatigue. But I shoveled on, to make mother and father proud.

CHAPTER 2

A VISION

One night as I lay in bed, I overheard fragments of a tense conversation as it drifted through my bedroom door. “I don’t think we should just sit back, wring our hands and talk about the way things used to be,” I heard father whisper. “I believe we should strike.” That irrational word sat on the room like a damp blanket, casting silence throughout the house. Even the crickets outside seemed to pause their high pitched calls. Striking as immigrants meant deportation, or worse.

I tossed and turned in bed, the words replaying in my head over and over. “Go to sleep Col, you’re waking me up,” my sister mumbled from the bed next to me, her face still on her pillow. *She’s right*, I thought, *go to sleep, it’s nothing to worry about*. I closed my eyes and allowed myself to doze off.

“Collin,” a voice whispered, “tomorrow.” The voice started to speak again, but agonizing screams drowned out the remaining words.

My eyes fluttered open and warm daylight flooded in. Birds chirped their morning songs, and the usual breakfast aroma floated around the bedroom. *It was a dream*, I told myself, *just a dream*. I slipped out of bed and into my now-shabby overalls, careful not to wake Bridget.

As I prepared to leave the house, I spotted father’s coffee thermos sitting on the kitchen counter, so I stole a small sip. The liquid burned my tongue and throat. It didn’t taste like father’s usual coffee; it tasted like the alcohol Da used to drink back in Ireland. After we immigrated here, escaping the stress and poverty back home, Da vowed he would never take a drop of poitín again. I planned to tell mother, but then I thought better of it. If father found out I had told on him, I would be scrubbing the kitchen floor with a toothbrush.

As I made my way to the mine, I strolled past the local newspaper stand. Large headlines screamed, “Explosion in Cymmer Colliery Mine! 114 killed.” I shuddered, imagining being

trapped, crushed by rocks, the shaft caving in around me.

“Collin,” a voice behind me called, disturbing my unsettling thoughts. Whipping around, I realized it was one of my father’s workmates, and I relaxed. “Tragic, eh? Glad that didn’t happen to us, mate!” he exclaimed with a slight, nervous chuckle. I smiled weakly, not understanding why a disaster like that was at all amusing. “Shall we?” Albert said as he motioned to the mine in the distance. It was an ugly thing; weathered and the wood torn, battered by the summer storms. It stood out like a sore thumb compared to our picturesque home town, only a stone’s throw away. The village was mostly run by the women; wives of the laborers.

When we reached the mine, father was waiting for me as usual. “You’re so thin, you look like a girl,” father criticized. “Toughen up.” Dejected, I shuffled off to the elevator, keeping a good distance from Da. He always seemed to find something wrong with me: from daydreaming to flinching at the sound of thunder, he always clearly showed his disapproval.

Silence loomed as the workers shuffled into the elevator. They were taciturn except for the occasional hacking cough that the hollows in the mine would then repeat eerily, sending Bruce, one of my frightful workmates, into another blood-curdling legend. “Oh, pity the dead men,” he would boom, “for every utterance sent into the earth shakes their very bones, sending them closer to their fate.” Of course, no one ever believed him, but his horrifying stories would still consign us to a fitful sleep each night. I blocked out his voice, the whispers from my dream beginning to echo in my head. “*Collin, tomorrow,*” it whispered, “*tomorrow.*”

CHAPTER 3

IN THE FACE OF DANGER

F ollowing Da, I noticed how he heartily greeted each of the workers. *Why don't I get an affectionate "Good morning" from father when I wake up?* I thought. *What's wrong with me?*

We reached our tunnel and I began toiling away. Dig, heave, dump. The monotonous movements dulled my brain; dig, heave, dump. Minutes turned to hours, and perspiration trickled down my forehead like little rivers. After quite some time, I took a small break and sat down, a large pile of coal as my chair. Da bent down, picked up a small rock from the ground and placed it in his pocket; hardly enough coal for our fire back home. "*Collin,*" a voice whispered. "Yes, father," I replied. "Didn't call you," he mumbled. "*Tomorrow,*" the voice

whispered again as faint as a breeze. The dream; it was haunting me again.

I stood up and starting my shoveling once more, hoping to erase the tormenting whispers. Just then, the earth shuddered under my feet like a helpless ship on an angry sea. The shaft trembled and dirt fell around us, choking the air. “An earthquake. Follow me!” father hollered, dashing towards the emergency ladder. “Da!” I cried as I helplessly watched him sprint into the dust, disappearing.

An anguished scream followed, and I ran as fast as I could in the direction of the sound. Streams of workers stumbled out from each of the tunnels, terror painted on their faces; where was father? Just as I thought I had taken a wrong turn, I spotted him sprawled on the ground, his leg crushed by a timber support beam.

I frantically scanned for anyone who could help, but they had abandoned us. “Go my son, I’ll be fine,” father urged. If I fled now, I would have a chance to survive, but if I did, father would be left trapped. But I couldn’t bring myself to leave Da here; if we can’t both escape, we’ll die trying. I stumbled my way towards

father, rocks plummeting around us. By now the ground was quaking so severely I could barely stand. “Please go,” Da pleaded once again, but he realized his petitions were useless; I was determined to save him.

Clutching the burdensome beam, I managed to hoist it up a mere few centimeters. A rock struck me in the head, but I blocked out the pain and lifted with all the energy I had left in me. Father let out a triumphant shout as he wriggled his leg free. He embraced me and I collapsed into his arms, my world growing blank. I felt strong hands lift me up, and a distant sound whispering praises.

CHAPTER 4

GOLDEN LOVE

A familiar voice beside me called my name. I opened my eyes and pain pulsed through my body, but I didn't care; I was alive. Examining my surroundings, I noticed the walls were whitewashed, the room colorless. Women in crisp, white dresses scurried around like busy worker ants, tending to the needy patients.

The voice called me again. Turning my head, I realized it was father, his caring eyes staring tentatively at me. He was laying in the adjacent hospital bed, his leg in a sling. Noticing I was awake, a nurse shuffled over and checked my temperature. A man called her name, and she hurried to his aid, leaving father and me alone.

"Proud of you son," Da exclaimed, "you saved my life." Taken aback, I looked at him fondly and smiled. "You're a real man now, and a hero," father beamed, his arm stretching across to stroke

my head. Something about Da appeared different now; maybe it was the softness in his eyes, or the fact that he was crying for the first time.

“I love you, I’ve always loved you. I just didn’t want your life to be like the one I’ve lived,” he said, sighing sadly. “I regret not quitting the mine sooner. I knew that wolf, Dawson, was going to get someone killed - one puff on that mine and it’d come crumbling down,” father lamented. “It’s closed now, though, for the good of everyone. Don’t know what to do... start a new life, I guess?” I nodded, an opportunity to start afresh. This time, to fulfill what we had dreamed from the start.

“And this,” Da declared, “might just help us.” He opened his clenched fist, revealing a small, glimmering rock; gold. I paused, shocked, my gaze fixed on the precious metal. We looked at each other and laughed heartily for the first time in many years.

Maybe the future was shining brightly on us, an unexpected ray of sunshine. We really had found gold; gold in ourselves. A beloved

relationship with father, the most prized treasure of all.