

Coal Mine

It was the boy's first summer in the coal mines; Andras would be ten years old in July. He didn't like the mines. They frightened him and he wouldn't be there at all if wasn't for the strength and steadfastness of his father and older brother with whom he worked. Andras especially didn't like being there alone in the dark, like he was now. It was the worst of times and as he scraped and shoveled the coal he could feel the coercing walls and the foreboding darkness in his soul. Dread heightened his senses keeping him ever watchful and alert and that was a good thing because he heard the crack, a subtle but sinister sound. He had heard it before; recognized it instantly as coal snapping under pressure just before a ceiling fall and he dove for shelter against the mine tunnel wall. A thick heavy slab of black anthracite coal peeled down from the roof near the coal car rails in the back. It fell crashing and breaking against the floor the full length of the dig. In an instant Andras was buried. He felt pain in his legs and the weight on his chest made it hard to breath. Panic gripped him immediately and he began flailing his arm to get air and the coal from his face and to free himself. The best he could do was to push a little coal from his face and chest. Stabbing, crushing pain penetrating his legs smashed under the heavy slab of coal. The boy screamed, wailed, cried and sobbed uncontrollably for his father as he lay there in terror; alone, ... trapped in the dark.

Andras was Hungarian and lived in the small town of Veke. When he was five years old his mother died suddenly of pneumonia and shortly thereafter his younger sister, Anna, of an unknown cause. Andras and his older brother Janos were all that was left and they bonded together to protect themselves against the outside world. That bond became impenetrable when they were shipped off with a family friend to Bremen, Germany and subsequently to America in the hold of the German Steamship Lahn.

The older brother Janos was a tall boy the opposite of Andras who was small. They were opposites in many ways. Janos was mild mannered, kind to a fault and extremely conscientious and enduring. Andras was brash, independent and outgoing exhibiting the toughness characteristics of the little guy. Despite the differences or maybe because of them, they were knotted together as brothers. One time the brothers were crossing the Elizabeth Bridge over the Ohio River. Three guys from Wylie stopped them and started picking on Janos; they pushed him and hit him and why not, he was just another immigrant. Janos didn't fight back, he endured it all. Meanwhile nobody paid attention to Andras, he was just too small. So Andras picked up the wagon the three Wylie kids had been pulling; it was a store bought wagon of varnished oak with red wheels and some name painted on the side. Andras hoisted it up onto the bridge railing, pushed it over the side and watched as it splashed into the Ohio River. They all took notice now and looked down at the wagon floating in the water, then turned on Andras and started pummeling him. In that single moment Janos surged with fury, a demon possessed him now and he cracked two of those kids upside their heads with all his strength. Andras kept biting one on his hand till they all ran away. Nobody was going to pick on Janos's little brother. That brotherly bond was strong enough to make them an unbeatable one.

Their father, Janos Marincsak was a tall handsome man of great strength who could work like a horse all the day long. He projected strong character and assuredness and his

bursts of anger struck with intimidating force. The boys hadn't known him very long; he had been away working in America since before they were born. They first met just a few years ago when the steamship Lahn docked in New York. Their Father was that stranger awaiting them on the dock. Despite their limited time together their Father's apparent strength, kindness and interest in seeing them happy caused both Janos and Andras to latch on to the man and he truly became their father. He loved little children especially his own. On Sundays he built them swings and slides, took them on walks and rowboat expeditions on the Ohio River. However, coal mining was a hard dangerous business with no slacking off; you were paid for each ton of coal you dug with your own pick and shovel. You worked twelve hour days six days a week, rising in the morning before dawn and returning after dark. Their Father came home at night tired to the bone and when free on Sundays, he always had to be outside in the open air and sunshine. He did the best he could, but there was too little time for family.

Andras said he was trapped for half a day in the mine and I'm sure it felt that way. However, miners live in the ground; they feel, hear, taste and smell the earth; they know when things are wrong and then risk their lives for their brethren. Surely his Dad and brother came back from the weigh station in a flash, it wasn't that far, but all Andras remembers is screaming and crying until someone put a light in his face.

At home his new Mother nurtured and cared for him; first washing the legs clean and picking bits of black coal from the oozing flesh as the boy moaned and his mother cried. The simple cuts on the calf were salved and bound in white strips of bed sheet. Large wounds got covered with a poultice and a gentle hand tried to to sooth the consummate pain in his legs. Somehow nothing was broken just torn, cut and bruised flesh. His biggest wound however was to his psyche. The boy squirmed and cringed as the coal mine memories spurted back into his head, it was still terrifying. Claustrophobic fears enveloped him, nothing could be close not even the precious brother with whom he usually slept, so the bed was moved to the middle of the room. Nights were the worst, awakening snapped him back into the mine again, flailing and struggling to escape; movement shot grueling pain through his legs. Mom slept the night in that rickety old kitchen chair put next to his bed to calm his fears should he awake. Coal mine terror tormented him for weeks but Andras was young and healed quickly. Andras learned to managed and control it, but vestiges of that fear of the coal mine stuck with him for the rest of his life. All the while, the man who saved him, pulled him out of the mine and brought him home, the Father he had come to love and respect, praised him as a real coal miner; the very last thing he ever wanted to be. Andras knew he had been more than lucky that day and vowed to never go into a coal mine again.

Things were different in 1906, kids grew up fast and a lot was expected of them. It wasn't uncommon for kids to be working by the time they were ten or twelve years old. Just like teens and parents nowadays adolescent transition to independent adult life was full of stress and difficulty. The transition period came earlier in 1906 and things changed very swiftly for Janos and Andras. No one knew, not even their Father, how harshly he would react to his children challenging his authority. He had always had a problem with his temper but never imagined how quickly and easily it would be sparked by his sons.

Physically Andras recovered quickly from his ordeal and was on his feet before the summer was out and it wasn't long before his Father wanted him back working in the mine. Andras refused, but his Father dragged him down there anyway. The fright and apprehension were too great for the boy and as soon as his Father's back was turned, Andras ran off. After it happened a few times, out came his Father's belt and Andras received a good thrashing. A couple more beatings followed before his Father gave up on the boy and ostracized him. The feelings were mutual, Andras was anxious to avoid his Father too. The Father whom he had come to love and admired and with whom he bonded to had suddenly turned savagely brutish. The abrupt relationship change was yet another barb on the dart assaulting the boy's emotions. Janos became his bulwark and his foundation, shielding him from most contact and abuse. On Sundays they would go to the river or nearby woods just to avoid their father. Sometimes after church they hid out in St. Vincent's Arch-Abby, said they had been praying and maybe they were.

Avoidance could have worked for Andras except that his brother Janos became embroiled in the conflict. Like Andras, Janos wouldn't go back to the mine after that summer and now he too was to get a thrashing for his refusal. The conflict physically pitted both boys against their Father and he was more than up to the challenge. Janos ran for the door and his father followed grabbing him by the shirt despite Andras hanging on his leg trying to tackle him. Andras got thrown out the door and it latched behind him. Janos was tied to the big chair. Then his Father opened the door, yanked Andras back inside and took the strap to him after which he did the same to his older brother still tied to the chair. Janos continued suffering immense abuse from his Father for years. It boggles the mind to understand how or why he tolerated it. Andras left home just as he turned fourteen and never lived there again. He had lost a Father and abhorred the abuse of his brother Janos. He now came to hate the man; they never reconciled and were estranged the rest of their lives.

Andras found a job sweeping up metal chips thrown off from the lathes in a small machine shop in the nearby town of Derry. Within a year he was operating the carriage planer, that is until he became too aggressive and broke the planning tool sending it flying through the shop side wall. He bounced from job to job but stayed in the area where his family lived. He avoided his Father but saw his brother Janos and his step Mother frequently and began getting acquainted with his younger siblings. Still each visit was agony; he couldn't understand Janos staying and suffering that awful continuous abuse. He encouraged him to leave and on occasion Janos stayed a short time with Andras, but he always went back.

Away from home Andras lived a new independent life. Normally he hung out with American boys and didn't want to be known as Hungarian. He anglicized his name changing it from Marincsak to Marinshaw but that wasn't enough, he changed Andras to Alfred and added a middle name too. It felt good being called Alfred Marinshaw, or Al; it was very American. Although still a kid his machinist skills developed and his compensation increased, Al lavished his money on his Mother and siblings, but especially on his brother Janos. It was small stuff, good shoes for Janos, an electric motor adaptation for the washing machine agitator and so on. They were all big hits especially the washer; his Mother didn't have to hand crank the laundry any more. Janos encouraged him to take up music and he discovered he had talent. He taught himself to play several instruments but his favorite was the banjo. Al achieved some popularity as an instrumentalist in a local McKeesport band and considered a musical career. Then the army drafted him and that changed all those plans. They trained him as a machine gunner and sent him off to Europe to fight the First World War. However, Al missed out on the war; they signed the Armistice as he was crossing the Atlantic, so the ship turned around and he went home for discharge. Al liked the army, reenlisted and spent another eighteen months in school at Wright Patterson Field.

Al returned to Pennsylvania an army veteran ready to attack the world again. Instead there was yet another tragedy, Janos had been killed in a freak railroad accident. All his achievements meant nothing now; his emotions regressed toward the coal mine again and he sank into depression. He locked himself away in mourning. Shades down, door locked, he lay in bed devastated racked by the pain in his heart, the worst pain of his life. Janos had always been the most important person in his life. They relied on one another for substance and emotional support. It was Janos who got him through all the devastation of his early life. Al suffered in silence until the boarding house lady beat on his door, food in hand and demanded he eat. Her persistence jarred him loose from depression and he dragged himself back to life again; just as he had always done. Al began collecting Janos's few remaining possessions. He got hold of a couple photographs of Janos, had them enlarged, framed and hung in his room. He memorialized his brother, anglicized his name and helped create a particular reverence for him in the family. To this day he is known as "Our John". Memorialization never freed Al of his brotherly ties but it did allow him to attack life once again. For starters, Al went to the family and convinced them to anglicize their names as he had done and they agreed; even his Father went along. He pursued certification as a machinist and joined the Machinist Union at Westinghouse. After stepping up to a better job at General Electric, Al obtained employment there for some of his younger brothers as they came of age.

A nice pretty young lady found Al, they married, had two children and moved to Washington, DC in the middle of the depression. Secure government jobs during the depression was the giant plum that attracted Al and his younger brothers Frank and Steve. Once established there, Al helped both of them relocate and obtain federal employment. Although Al later suffered through a difficult divorce, he raised both his children and they turned out reasonably well.

Many years later when I was eleven or twelve, I sat across the kitchen table from my Grandmother watching her work contentedly preparing the daily baked goods. I helped out getting the butter from the fridge, pouring the milk or just listened to her chatter and tell stories of her early life in the old country. I liked the stories and happily listening as she talked; now wishing I had paid closer attention so that I could remember more of the things she told me; but mostly I sat there in the kitchen just waiting for a couple slices of Grandma's Cinnamon-Nut-Roll. It was so good that to this day it makes my mouth water just thinking of the taste. Once in a while we talked of other things: I recall a discussion of my aspirations and what I would do when I got older. I remember telling Grandma, "I think I will be a coalminer when I grow up". Like lightning striking her, the electricity crackling through her body sent her right arm swinging across the table as she screamed "You will not". She struck me hard fully across the cheek leaving a bright red handprint its periphery outlined in white baking flour. "You will not", she muttered again. It was the only time that my Grandma ever struck me.

Now as I reflect on the life of my Father, Alfred Marinshaw, I wonder how could a person go through such a tragic violent childhood, suffer so many losses, hardships and disappointments and still live a good and reasonably successful happy life? How could he immediately snap back time and again from emotional devastation and envelop life with such vigor? How could he run into the mouth of the tiger to sustain and help his family so personally when that had been his disaster zone? I am humbled by what I found and by my Father's approach to life. He almost never talked about his early life. His tragedy, duress and pain were no big deal for him, they were just things that happened. They were things to be dealt with in their time then set aside so you could get back to normal. He was a strong admirable man.

Over a hundred years later as I think of my father's times and myself, I am filled with nostalgia and emotion. I realize that as I drive the countries highways and occasionally come to a tunnel, I drive right through. However, it is not without an ever so teensy bit of apprehension stirring somewhere back in my innards. I also raised my four boys to be good upstanding people and occasionally corrected them with a swat on the hand or bottom. I only spanked one of them that one time and I felt guilty as soon as I started. To this day I still regret having done it. And there is my touch of claustrophobia. Now with strange realization, I see in myself certain vestiges of the coal mine that are ever so far reaching and enduring.

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