

Black Ankle Road

He put in the cassette, hit record, and leaned back in my other rocker.

“I recall the headlines plain as yesterday: PRESIDENT HARDING DIES SUDDENLY; STROKE OF APOPLEXY AT 730 PM; CALVIN COOLRIDGE IS PRESIDENT.

“Damn, I said as I reached for coins to buy a soda and crackers at a county store, before heading to the gold mine near Franklin Mountain. ‘What’s apoplexy?’ ‘Never know’, said a miner behind me as the girl handed out drinks and snacks. I swigged A & W Root Beer as Paul, driving his Ford Model A, stopped and I hopped into the cab. Paul poured some Pennzoil into the engine, rolled a cigarette, and cranked up his pickup. He was another miner.”

‘Hope Uncle Ed won’t have us dig our graves.’

“At the mine, I grabbed a shovel and pick and entered the shaft lit by candles. I lit mine, snugged it in my canvas mining cap which Uncle Ed had provided. Damn dangerous work. Always a risk from collapsing tunnels, poor air, and accidents hauling rocks. Worst, fatal explosions happened due to miners’ lamps igniting methane gas. I also carried an oil-wick lamp to spot gold traces. Uncle Ed was too cheap to provide Electric Miners’ Cap Lamps, although he promised he’d buy some if the miners collected enough gold to cut costs. This was rural North Carolina, you know.

I smoked Camels, unfiltered, when I could afford them. Miners had a custom whenever one opened the pack, he’d offer it to his buddies. Someone would say ‘Butt me’ and we’d take a smoke break. I always remember those red-hot tips in the shaft.

Late August this Thursday—another cloudless day, sweltering, and hot enough it’d about wilt tobacco. A hundred feet down, not as hot. I was picking and shoveling the rocks, clay and dirt into wheelbarrows. A few young bucks toted them to dump into a large bin, attached them to ropes, which mules pulled to the surface. Hell, we might get a few cents per ton. I figured I’d sweat a bucket full by quitting time, and chewed on a few Slim-Jims, but held off Cracker Jacks until lunch. I was always hungry. I had only one pair of shoes which I stored at my bunk at the camp. Most everyone worked barefoot except bosses. The damp black soil stained our bare feet over our ankles, looking like that tar baby in Uncle Remus stories, which my daddy read when we was little by candlelight.

My dad was decent, never no dewdropper, worked when work was to be had, never drank

until weekends. He bought hooch from a friend's still. Mama joined him some and they'd sip peaceful like. Dad wasn't mean like a lot of them when they drank bootleg. Jeb, a kid I knew across the ridge, told me how his dad blistered his butt with a razor strap, and how he'd hear his mom cry in the dark. My dad'd got real quiet after sipping down a glass, would stare off in space as he rocked on the porch, before sending us young uns off to bed. Sunday mornings mama, dad, and my two sisters walked two miles to church, no money for a car back then. When I turned sixteen, dad died of some lung disease after wasting away for about a year. Being the oldest, I left home with canvas-covered footlocker, worked at mines wherever I could, and sent mama money.

I was plenty strapped in my time, but I'd get drunk up weekends and bout spent all my wages as the years dragged on. Favored panther piss if I could get it. I'd be wasted over many a night but managed to drag up the next morning for work, eyes looking like two cherries in a bowl of milk. Never went on a bender and lost work, though."

He rocked a moment on the porch. Ashtrays brimmed with crushed butts and his right index fingers were nicotine stained. His face had more furrows than his garden.

"This Thursday evening, I and them miners climbed on the back of a foreman's truck and Jason drove us toward Steeds; we was to restock on food and other supplies. Locals called us 'black-anklers' but shopkeepers didn't mind our money. There were only three of us in the bed; the others packed into wagons. The truck kicked up dust clouds from the dirt road, and Jason drove like there was no tomorrow. I held on and prayed like I did the day before my dad died in the bedroom. Hated God after that. On a curve about a quarter mile out of Steeds, he gunned the pedal and the truck listed—we slammed to one side and the damn thing went off road, down a slope and rolled a few times. I flew like a crow, bounced off a pine tree and all went black.

I woke in the pitch of night on a train with all sorts of people—some dressed highbrow, some in rags. I looked around and couldn't count the passenger cars behind us. We was behind the engine in our car, no windows, and saw some dark figure shoveling coal into the roaring furnace. The engineer turned his head. In a brimstone lamp his face was soot smeared, evil looks. He grinned like a mule eating briars. The boiler shimmered, shot flames, and we zoomed faster and faster, got hotter and hotter. Everyone yelled to stop the train, but the engineer just waved and flipped us the bird. The train flashed on. Mind you, all was dark. He yelled, 'You paid full

fare and now you'll pay your due.' He slammed the brakes and we screeched to a stop. 'Welcome to paradise', he yelled with a shrieking laugh.

Dark creatures prodded us off with burning rods. Everywhere it was so hot it singed my shirt and dungarees, burned my face like splattering grits. Couldn't see nothing, black as a mine shaft. We staggered like blind men. It smelled horrible—like a mixture of sulfur, rotting roadkill, sour milk thousands of times worse. I screamed in such pain like I was plunged in boiling molasses. The foul odors never stopped. All around me was people yelling, screaming, cursing. Never heard nothing like it before or since. Pitch black! I tried to run on spongy ground as hot as tar melting on an asphalt road at August noon, until I felt someone snatch my wrists and pull me upward. I woke next to a tree at dusk. A cool breeze blew. I saw the other miners scattered about and Jason climbed out the door window. The truck was on the side. The other men stirred. It was a miracle we had only scrapes and bruises, though one man broke his wrist and never could use it no more. I felt a goose-egg on my brow, a bloody lip and a chipped front tooth. We staggered up to the road and hitched a ride to Steeds.”

The reporter paused to put in another cassette.

“That's about it. Never drank a drop of white liquor since, been some sixty years. Joined a church and got serious about the Lord and the Word. You saved?”

Clearing his throat, the reporter said “Well, this isn't about me, It's about you.”

“Cannot remember those verses dad used to read about some train, but I swear, I think I rode on it.”