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# HISTORICAL NETS

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English

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by  
Jenny Washburne  
May 2021

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Accepted by:  
Prof. Keith Morris, Committee Chair  
Prof. Nicholas Brown  
Dr. Andrew Lemons

## ABSTRACT

This creative thesis consists of two historical fiction short stories and a critical essay discussing the merits and challenges of writing historical fiction. The essay ties together the main themes of the short stories, both set in the early 1900s American west, and discusses how an author's choice in character, plot, and setting may interact with a historical perspective to capture something that transcends time. As the critical component of the thesis, the essay also explores the techniques of well-known fiction writers who use history in their storytelling, drawing together time and place in ways unique to the genre. The two short stories included with the thesis intend to illustrate some of these techniques and demonstrate growth and competency in the form.

## DEDICATION

*“To God be the glory, great things He hath done...”- Fanny Crosby*

For my one-of-a-kind family: each of my generous grandparents, my parents Tom and Lynne, and my siblings Ellyn, Anna, Josiah, and Gideon; whose solid faith, persistent encouragement, and never-failing common sense are an inspiration and wonderful gift.

And for all my dear Phamily, my longtime friends and coworkers at Philmont Scout Ranch, New Mexico, where I've spent so many summers: this work would not have been possible without you. Keep changing lives! Special thanks to Jake Torkelson, Patrick Navin, and Matt Hauser, who graciously read through even those earliest story drafts and provided much-needed expertise, from historical railroad facts to plot suggestions and everything in between.

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## HISTORICAL NETS

One late afternoon in the hard-baked canyons of New Mexico, my scramble up the side of the canyon wall ended in front of an Anasazi petroglyph. The mark, scratched into a sandstone surface tinted red by past wildfires, was circular in shape with numerous dents in it—several of them painstakingly carved into the rock, and several others blasted there by a bored cowboy’s bullets centuries later. The memory of this place stays with me as a unique intersection of cultures, nature, and time: a visible representation of a story, and the fascinating way cultures, times, and places fit together to make history. For, just as the concepts of people, time, and place layer together and affect our understanding of history, these aspects overlap in stories as well, in what we know as characters, plot, and setting. Perhaps one of the most helpful genres of literature for understanding these layers is that of historical fiction, in which authors must constantly make choices as to what kinds of historical details should be included in the telling of a story set in the past, and how. Of course, in any genre there is more to writing stories than simply arranging facts. And to complicate matters, unlike in other branches of fiction such as science fiction or fairy tales, historical fiction uses the known past for its setting, and thus to some extent the reader will have some sort of preconceived notion about even a fictional character. The question remains: how does an author effectively use historical details to depict the story in mind? If there is a line between blurring fiction and historic fact that cannot be crossed, where does it occur?

The debate about where to draw the line in historical fiction must start early—as long as humans have been telling stories, they have been telling stories set in their past, with creative characters showing up in all sorts of historical events. Where is the line between fact and fiction in *The Odyssey*? As Emanuel Mickel points out, even those who document the facts of historical events in our own age are tied to their own subjectivities, never free to capture the details exactly how they occurred (58). Why people throughout the ages choose certain historical events and certain people (fictional or fictionalized) to write about is not a question to be tackled here, but it is enough to know that people have always been interested in telling stories about the past. And as the 21<sup>st</sup> century rolls around with genres like “neo-historical fiction” or “historiographical metafiction,” it is clear that they will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

As Maria Margaronis points out, writers of historical fiction often come to the craft with very different goals in mind. What people say about the past is often linked to what is happening in their own present time, and in recent years, this lens has taken center stage. This view of historical fiction sees the genre as a creative way to interpret past events according to our current knowledge: neo-historical fiction and historiographic metafiction both seek to complicate the way that the past is remembered or conceptualized by people today (Rodwell 167). This genre is perhaps best exemplified by Justina Ireland, who combined zombies, slavery, and modern political and social justice undertones into a fantastical alternate history in *Dread Nation*. Neo-historical fiction can be described as fiction that reimagines the past in a way that intentionally deviates from known historical facts, but which an author may feel represents something about the time

period to modern readers, or which modern readers may find especially relevant to their own time period (Rodwell 166-167).

The complications of writing neo-historical or historiographical fiction are revealed in the realization that, just as we in current years see our past a certain way, so will future generations view our own time in ways we cannot fully anticipate. Writing historical fiction with the goal of using the past to speak directly to people in our own present time runs the risk of having a book that is just that—only accessible to people of our own time. In coming years, novels in this genre may find themselves almost anachronistic: not because of the time in which they were set, but the time in which they were written. For example: will future readers resonate with the fictional, ironic slogan “Make America Safe Again” in *Dread Nation*? Will a book with such a strong, specifically-2020s-era message still be relatable to a 2050 audience?

Of course, an author need not stray far from known historical sources to accomplish their goals of imagining the past to be accessible and effective to a modern audience, as author Toni Morrison demonstrates in her book *Beloved*. Of her work, Morrison writes, “The crucial distinction for me is not the difference between fact and fiction, but the distinction between fact and truth. Because facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot” (Morrison, qtd. in Margaronis 157). Morrison takes the heavy historical themes of slavery and, by exercising creative liberties with known people and facts, but relying heavily on the historical record of what we do know about those horrors, creates truths that still resonate profoundly with people today. As Morrison demonstrates, a historical fiction writer does not have to stick with themes that are

currently trending in order to produce insightful, thought-provoking fiction that will remain compelling in years to come.

The way Toni Morrison views truth and facts in *Beloved* would fall into the more traditional way of viewing the role of historical fiction. This view sees the genre as a way to explore human concepts, using historical settings to bring out certain aspects of human nature across the years. In the 1920s, before his murder by the Nazis, Walter Benjamin wrote in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” that understanding the past is invaluable to producing an inspiring future. Scholar Patrick Hutton describes Benjamin’s poetic view of history by explaining that Benjamin encouraged people to view history as a “porous surface.” He writes, “Look into these holes and one will see the past open to us in new ways, like heliotropes meeting the gaze of the sun” (Hutton 206). It could be said that historical fiction stories act as a way to mine the holes in Benjamin’s porous surface. By isolating history into memories and pockets of individual experience in the form of stories, history may become, if still not ever entirely graspable, at least more affecting.

Traditionally, placing characters in a setting with historical nuances has allowed the historical fiction author to explore the relationship between past events and modern thought in a variety of ways. Many short story writers choose to use internal conflict as a climactic plot device or “moment of change” in their stories. They seek to place each story as a snapshot in time, capturing a certain tension or decision that must be made, influenced by each characters’ distinctive circumstances, both natural and cultural.

Capturing a snapshot of time for a story is a challenge that all writers face, but for the short story writer, the process of choosing scenes to work with can be difficult.

Unlike a novel writer, who may include an entire series of events leading up to and away from the pivotal climax moment, the short story author has little space and must choose carefully the brief series of events that the story will consist of. Thus, often the structure of a short story looks very different than that of a novel. According to Edgar Allen Poe, a good writer “combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect” (Poe, qtd in Pasco 417) and in a short story, the span of events is necessarily limited. In a similar vein, C.S. Lewis writes in his essay, “On Stories,” that a story’s plot should exist to serve the main idea, or theme, of a narrative. He writes, “To be stories at all they must be series of events: but it must be understood that this series—the *plot*, as we call it—is only really a net whereby to catch something else. The real theme may be, and perhaps usually is, something that has no sequence in it, something other than a process and much more like a state or quality” (Lewis 25). The net of a short story writer, as it were, must be more tightly knit than that of a novel writer, who might have three hundred pages to develop themes which must in a short story appear in the space of only thirty. Still, it is the challenge for all writers to find the useful balance of plot and theme in their works, whether short or long, and the characters and setting are simply additions to that net, fleshing it out, allowing the reader to grasp even for a moment this sense of Poe’s “preconceived effect,” (417) or Lewis’s sought-after “state or quality” (25).

The setting and characters of historical fiction works are unique in that to fit the genre, they must be based in the author’s understanding of past situations. Of course, in historical fiction or in modern fiction, it is not a new device to use changes in the natural world, whether documented or invented, to highlight changes in characters’ decisions,

provide symbolism and artistic metaphors for what is happening in the story's plot, or simply give a setting that helps set the mood of the story. The moors in "The Hound of the Baskervilles" (Doyle), the dustbowl in *Grapes of Wrath* (Steinback), the American west in *The Watchful Gods* (Van Tilburg Clark), the ocean in "Old Man and the Sea" (Hemingway), and of course the storm in "The Storm" (Chopin) are all just a few examples of how weather and the natural world can have a large impact on a story and its characters, regardless of the time each story was set in. Rick Bass also excels in bringing the natural world into his stories, and Aldo Leopold focuses on natural events almost exclusively in the story-driven essays of "The Sand County Almanac."

However, in historical fiction, at least an attempt of factual knowledge of past events is essential for creating characters who have come to a decision point (or climax) based on their historical surroundings. Many short-story authors play with this concept, such as Alice Munro in her story "The View From Castle Rock," George Saunders in "Pastoralia," and Bobby Ann Mason in "Shiloh." While set in different places and at different times, each of these stories highlight the way the past is related to the present—and vice versa.

In "The View from Castle Rock," Munro chooses a well-known event in history (the journey from the Old World to the New) and focuses on the effects the trip has on several different characters. The story is in past tense, but the final paragraph's leap from past to present tense brings the historical events to the front of a modern reader's mind, placing the characters in the rear-view mirror, so to speak, and thus changing the readers' conception of the story by bringing in a new aspect of its relevance to the present time.

Likewise, Saunders' characters also are influenced by their historical context, setting up the ironic setting of the story: in the process of impersonating cave people, Neil and Janet become involved in a messy HR situation that is anything but what would have actually involved two historical cave dwellers. The juxtaposition of the "co-worker reviews" with their daily routine as semi-verbal cave people brings home the ill effects the HR drama has on their lives, especially Janet's, once she is fired. What Bobby Ann Mason does in "Shiloh" is similar: the story is set in a modern time, but the protagonist draws conclusions from past events (the Civil War) which influence the way he sees his own time, and how he reacts to it. For all three of these stories, it is clear that the feelings, actions, and decisions of the characters rely heavily on historical context.

While historical fiction allows an author to focus in depth on historical events and their influence on people, past and present, one can easily argue that in any form of literature, a character's decisions and actions are dependent on their time-period, specific place, and culture. Of course, depending on the genre, the "world" each character inhabits may look different. For example, fantasy writers like C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien show us the importance of placing characters in cultures and times within a fictional world of their own devising. Yet even a fantasy writer will admit that history and culture are inseparable from a character-driven plot. Perhaps one of the most famous examples of a culturally-driven fantasy world is Tolkien's Middle Earth. Tolkien tended to think of his fiction as an already-existing history to be explored, complete with languages and its own mythology. His characters are continually faced with decisions that drive the plot of the book, with each character motivated by his/her individual past experiences and cultural

influences. As Gandalf remarks in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, “All we have to do is decide what to do with the time that is given us” (Tolkien 50), and those words stand as a sort of prophecy for what is to come in the next two books of the saga.

Tolkien’s decision-based stories are only one of many examples of fiction which draw from historical (real or imagined) events to influence what will happen in the tale. This should be unsurprising. After all, in our “real” present world, culture and past experience drive us as people in everything we do. As the well-known phrase goes, people are “products of their time.” How humans view the world depends entirely upon experiences we have had, things we have learned, and whatever is happening in our communities at any given time. Different generations value different things. Fads and infatuations come and go, and what might be a heavily debated topic of one decade could leave only faint traces in the next. On the other hand, the themes of history are seen to reoccur constantly, and the ambiguous implications of this fact lend themselves well to speculation in fiction. Peoples’ circumstances change constantly—but does the nature of people themselves really change? As writer Justin O’Donnel remarks in *Publisher’s Weekly*, “...history isn’t really about the past. It’s about human nature. We use the genre as a lens to see ourselves in a different age” (O’Donnel). The repetitive nature of history ideally situates it for speaking to a modern audience, as general themes reoccur from year to year. What could a World War I veteran working on a railroad illustrate about loss or hope? What could two young brothers working for a copper mine reflect about courage or trust? What could a lonely Austrian immigrant reveal about rootlessness or perseverance?

No matter what time period they were written in or what time period they are set in, stories have the ability to encourage readers to think about things in a different way, to have an impact on an individual's current time and place. Even Tolkien, who disliked allegories immensely, admitted as much. Tolkien remarked once that all stories are inherently allegorical to some extent: because all stories reflect "real life," they will always have a grain of recurring historical themes, what he refers to as universal truth, embedded in them. In a letter to a friend, Tolkien wrote, "In a larger sense, it is I suppose impossible to write any 'story' that is not allegorical in proportion as it 'comes to life'; since each of us is an allegory, embodying in a particular tale and clothed in the garments of time and place, universal truth and everlasting life" (Tolkien, *Letters*). Here Tolkien echoes many other writers' sentiments on the mysterious ability of what we might call "classic" stories to affect readers in different ways throughout the years.

All stories may inherently be reflections of "real" life's relationships, conflicts, and decisions as they are related to that time's current circumstances, but well-researched historical fiction provides a uniquely deep well to draw from compared to many other genres of fiction. The realities of decision-making in crisis, the effects that culture and history have on people, and what they choose to do in whatever time they are given will hold true throughout the years, as long as the story of the world continues to be told. Petroglyphs, forest fires, and bullet pings will continue to form layers on the cliffs as long as anyone is around to take note of them. And in taking note, perhaps we find something else, something bigger. In C.S. Lewis' essay "On Stories," he writes that "Art, indeed, may be expected to do what life cannot do: but so it has done. The bird has escaped us.

But it was at least entangled in the net for several chapters” (28). Whether it is a world of one particular author’s invention or a world that exists as a past version of our own, the relationship between characters, their culture, and their environment in art is crucial to developing the plot and playing with the relationship between past and present: a niche that historical fiction is well-suited to fill.

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C.A. 1923

Every day, the lazy clouds that browsed over the western plains of New Mexico shuffled up to the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, finding their way over the slopes of Old Baldy Mountain out over the range to the plains. Most of the canyonsides below were thick with trees, swathes of dark emerald pines interrupted with splashes of shimmery, pale green aspens; branched cottonwoods and looming, shadowy firs. Several canyons were bare, their bony sandstone jutting out like the hips of a newly sheared sheep.

From one of these bare canyons, one afternoon a lone dark cloud of smoke rose up to meet the puffy white ones above. It was the smoke from a steam engine, also making her way east toward the plains. The engine was so blackened with sawdust, coal dust, tree sap, and oil that her number was hardly visible anymore, but her load of five flat cars showed she was still able to get the job done. And what a job! Four of the flat cars were already piled high with iron rails, each weighing well over a hundred pounds. Behind her, bent over the tracks and working furiously, eight men added to her load, steadily removing the railroad. The two in front moved quickly ahead of the group tearing up spikes. Next came two men with prybars, pulling up the joint bars that joined the rails. The last four worked in two teams, lifting the freed iron rails and carrying them to the last flatcar on the tracks ahead. A heave, and the rail was up. The men had been doing this for several days now, and their movements were so rhythmic they could have been mistaken for part of the engine themselves.

The men on the line could have kept working while the engine moved up to give them more space, but by unspoken agreement, they always all took a pause to straighten and stretch. Then the brakes came on.

Martin lowered his prybar for a second and wiped the sweat off his forehead. Pretty soon, he thought, they'd stop for the evening. As soon as this last car was full, they could rest while it trundled off to Cimarron, and while it was gone, they could see about cooking a late dinner. For what seemed to be the thousandth time that day, Martin stooped and jammed his prybar between the nearest rail and the plate that connected it to the next. Then he brought the end down, forcing the joint plate to shift. Martin reset the end back under the plate, more to the left, and this time the plate popped loose. In one motion, Martin bent and tossed the joint bar into a large bucket nearby. In front of him, Willard sent a spike over his shoulder into the same bucket. The rhythm was familiar and steady as breathing itself.

Tomorrow, Martin thought, he and Louis would be changing places with Giacomo and Will, and they'd take over hauling rails while Abram and Frank moved to joint plates. Abram preferred it that way—rather than have each man stick with one job, he switched them up so as to give each one a bit of a break. Martin wondered how many more days they had on this line. At the rate they were going, he bet they could be all the way to the Ponil Canyon split in just a few more days.

He wondered how long it would take to unload this pile of rails down at Cimarron. Someone said there was a winch down there to help unload, but Martin had yet to see it, himself. There was talk of getting a winch of some sort up the canyon here, to

help them load the rails onto the flat car, but Martin doubted that was going to happen. If it was, it had better come up soon. The team worked from sunup till sundown, and they didn't have that much track left to remove. Up the canyon to the northwest, only scattered ties were left to show where a fully functioning railroad had been just a few days earlier. At one time, there had even been a telegraph office in this canyon. But that was all over; the railroad was moving on, likely to a canyon further south. Mr. Schomburg and his company had pulled just about all the logs he could from this one. Stripped of their cover, the hills looked strangely bare now, their little dips and valleys made savagely visible, like trenches dug into the hillsides. Not very good trenches—a good trench needed a good barrier in front of it. But what was he thinking? Martin shook his head as if to clear it, moved his hand vaguely, as if the memories were no more than persistent flies.

Martin suddenly realized he could not move forward because there was still a spike in the next joint plate. He straightened up and mopped off his forehead with his grimy forearm. What was that kid in front of him waiting for? He was slowing down the whole line. “Willard!” Martin called ahead. His voice sounded harsh in his own ears, and he licked his dry lips. “What’re you playing at?”

Will threw a glance over his shoulder but didn't answer. He sure was a scrawny little fellow. His face screwed up with effort as he yanked the clawbar with all his might. In fact, he was practically sitting on the clawbar to make it move downwards. When he sat down, the ragged legs of his pants hiked up above his ankles. Will was no railroad man. He was barely fifteen years old, and a scrawny fifteen, at that—he should be in a

family barn somewhere greasing wagons, not out here with a bunch of drifter men, hefting up railroad ties.

Martin stepped forward and took the tool out of Will's hands. In one motion he forced it down. There went the spike. Willard found it and threw it at the bucket but missed and almost hit Giacomo instead. Giac managed to dodge it, but he gave Willard a dirty look as he picked up the wayward spike. Martin handed Willard the clawbar and stumped back to his joint plate without a word, only a glare aimed in Will's direction. Martin noticed Abram's glance of disapproval towards himself as he returned to his place, but he didn't care.

He lodged his prybar under the next joint and heaved it down. Up came the plate with a crack. Willard was the youngest, newest hire on their team. Since he'd showed up four days ago, he had said little about what had brought him there, only that he was from Dawson and needed the work. That much the others could have guessed. Dawson was no place for a kid to grow up and make it in the world. Abram must've had pity for someone so young, though Martin couldn't think of any work for Will that could be more ill-suited than this. Martin glanced over and saw him struggling with the clawbar once again, mouth open with the effort, throwing his whole body into moving the bar and dislodging another spike. His back was wet with sweat, and the scraggles of blond hair under his hat stuck to his forehead.

Martin sent the next joint plate flying a little harder than he needed to. He could appreciate the boy wanting to find work outside of Dawson, and the team did operate better with a full eight members, but surely Abram could've found someone a little more

useful. They had a job to do, here. It was hard enough for Will to pull spikes; Martin dreaded thinking about what was going to happen when they all switched places tomorrow. None of the others had talked about it, yet, that Martin had heard anyway. But that was not unusual. Martin threw the next joint plate. Everyone was civil enough, but as long as everyone did their job, there simply wasn't much to say. What a kid like Will was doing here was none of their business. Come to think of it, he didn't know much about how any of the men on this team had ended up here.

"Break!" came a shout from up ahead. At once, all the men turned away from the rails. The engineer stuck his head out of the train's window and waved. "Town run!" Lou and Giac waved back, rather halfheartedly through the cloud of black smoke that was now billowing out to meet them. The others had already dropped their tools and were heading for the nearest shade, a lone juniper so twisted and gnarled that the lumberman sent to fell it must have taken one look and ran.

Willard got to the shade first and collapsed on his back, spread-eagled on the pine needles at the base of the tree. The older men joined him, a few of them dragging their feet over Will's legs as if they were no more than the tree roots he lay on. Will tucked his knees to his chin quickly. The men sat down around him in the shade of the little tree, most removing their hats to let the breeze cool their sweaty hair. Martin took a long drink from his canteen and looked at the sky. Clear today, just a few clouds on the late-afternoon breeze... except for one dot, a faint line of brown against the blue. Flying against the wind, fifty degrees. Martin felt his heart beating in his throat even as he took in a deep breath and chided himself. Just a hawk.

Hearing the others stirring, Martin glanced around camp. Frank was collecting sticks for their fire tonight. Abram and Louis were digging around in the supply chest, pulling out cook gear. And Will? Martin turned slightly and saw him staring into the branches of the tree overhead, absently plucking at his suspender strap. Martin wondered what he could possibly be thinking about.

“Do the insides of anthills get wet when it rains?” Will spoke up, unconsciously answering Martin’s thought. He had an uncanny way of doing that, Martin thought to himself. And an uncanny way of having the dumbest thoughts of anybody he’d ever known. Martin didn’t bother to say anything. He gathered his tired legs under himself and prepared to stand up, but just as he leaned forward, he paused. Sounding clear and lonesome over the canyon was the unmistakable toot of the locomotive’s whistle. One long sound, one short—the signal indicating that the brakes needed to be checked. Will was already up and trotting down to the tracks to have a better look.

“It’s already past the first bend,” Martin said, but Will either failed to hear him or took no notice. With a shrug, Martin stood up and turned to the other men. “Sounds like a bit of brake trouble. Wonder if the brakes went into emergency.”

“As long as nothin’ spilled out, it don’t matter,” Louis shrugged.

Frank peered down the canyon, his arms full of sticks. “Bet that first flat is acting up again. It’ll end up in the scrap if it jumps the rails like it did last week.”

“I think it’s stopped!” they heard Will’s excited voice from fifty yards away. Martin glanced after him and saw the young boy scampering towards the canyon wall opposite them.

“Hey!” he called. “Where d’you think you’re going to?”

“It’s stopped!” Will shouted again over his shoulder as he began to scramble up the canyon wall.

“It’s just the brakes. They’ll get it fixed. It-” Martin didn’t bother to finish. The train had been having brake trouble for the last two weeks. For the sake of protocol the engineer always signaled the trouble with the whistle, but it was usually fixed in a matter of minutes. There wasn’t anything the rail crew could do about it, anyway; it was the engineer and the brake man’s job to fiddle with that sort of thing.

“That darn kid,” Martin muttered to himself. “He should be helping set up camp.” Hearing Abram’s customary tuneless whistle, Martin turned around and saw their boss walking up from the creek, carrying their dinner pot full of water.

“Sounds like some brake trouble,” Abram said absently, cutting off the whistling and setting down the cooking pot near Louis. He looked around once. “Where’s Will?”

Nobody answered. Each of them could plainly see the scrawny form making its way up the canyon wall. Louis gestured vaguely in that direction and continued bending over the fire.

Abram shrugged. “Might as well see what’s up, if he wants to. Anyway, the climb might be good for him.” He paused for a second. Across the tracks and up the hill, Willard’s form slipped and slid a few feet before he tried a new path up the slope. Abram turned to Martin and added, “But he shouldn’t go alone. Why don’t you go up with him, Martin?”

The last thing Martin wanted to do was chase that darn kid up the steep side of a canyon for no reason, but Abram's voice had that tone peculiar to someone using the form of a question to give a direct order, and Martin wasn't in the mood to argue. With a sigh, Martin pulled himself to his feet. Grudgingly, he walked down to the canyon floor, avoiding stepping in the anthills that dotted the bottom of the canyon like huge inverted pawprints in the grass. Red ants scurried up and down the conical tops, busy as anything. Martin's boots crunched in the dry grass, and little crickets bounced up and away from each step. It only took Martin a moment to find a low spot in the little creek and step across. Then he adjusted his hat, took in a long breath of annoyance, and started up the side of the canyon.

Every now and then little rocks came clattering down past Martin as he toiled along up the hill. The sandy soil shifted under his feet and he dodged small cacti as he went. "Little scamp," he thought. When he took a large step and grabbed at a small scrub-oak, the whole woody stem came out of the ground, roots and all. Martin threw it behind him and scabbled at the dirt for a new handhold, grumbling under his breath. Just up the hill he saw a set of big sandstone rocks, and that seemed to be where Willard was heading for a lookout point. From his position Martin could see the canyon floor far below, but as yet there was no sign of the stopped locomotive.

Finally, Martin saw Will pause up ahead, turning to look down the canyon, and Martin took the opportunity to catch his breath and look at the rocks over and around him. They were strangely familiar both in shape and in feel. The sandstone up here was worn smooth, the rocks rounded and lumpy. Many of them had pockets in them. When

Martin was a boy, he had played among rocks not unlike these. Martin ran a hand over the lip in the stone nearest to him, remembering. Back in West Virginia, he and his brothers had pretended they were in a land of giants, the rocks their bleached skulls. Then he was small enough to fit inside the empty eye-sockets. Sometimes he and his brothers would hide and leap out at each other in a game of ambush. Martin pursed his lips. That was all a long time ago. Before the War, before the games became real, and there could be no more games, not with his brothers. Then, Martin hadn't been much younger than Willard.

Martin glanced over at the youngster and saw him peering into one of the sandstone pockets just ahead. His shirt was untucked and his suspender straps were hanging at his sides, but Will didn't seem to notice. Hurriedly, Martin stepped up the slope behind him to look over his shoulder, curious to see what had captured Will's attention-- maybe a bird's nest or an old bear's den-- maybe a little too eager to find distraction from his own thoughts.

To Martin's surprise, however, in the pocket were not traces of passing animals but instead of passing humans: written letters, black tar letters smattered on the sandy smooth sides, spelling out several garbled messages. One was clearly written in Spanish, and Martin wasn't sure of its meaning. The largest and blackest of the marks was easy to read: "1910," it said. Will stood looking on for a few more seconds, then disappeared, already scrambling among the rocks to peer into several more pockets. He was gone only a minute before Martin heard his voice from around the corner calling, "Hey! There's more!"

Martin picked his way down and slightly to the left until he found Will again, standing this time next to a much larger pocket in the stone. A faint ring of red along the top edge showed where someone's campfire had been. The place was small but looked like a friendly sort of place to take shelter; Martin guessed it hadn't been long since a passing cowboy had camped there. A cowboy named "Shorty," by the looks of the marks on the rock.

Will seemed to have forgotten all about the locomotive. He crouched inside the overhang peering at the letters painted on the side. They were made of the same black tar-like substance as they had seen in the previous pocket. "1918," Will read aloud.

"Not that long ago," Martin remarked, sitting down next to him but facing the other direction, towards the open canyon. He could see a surprisingly long way from up here. He couldn't quite see the locomotive, but he could see the smoke steadily rising from where she sat. "They maybe were still logging these parts at that time."

"What about before?" Will queried. Martin glanced at his face. Something seemed different about his voice.

"Before what?"

"The logging." Will turned away from him to face the canyon spread out below. "In 1910. Like that mark said." He tried his best to gather up some spit and spat it off to the side with a vengeance, though it didn't go far.

Martin leaned his head back against the stone. "Puttin' in this darn railroad, I reckon. That was before the War," he muttered. He let his gaze wander down the bare sides of the canyon. Every now and then a tree was left, a reject left over from the

logging, but for the most part the hill was bare. Just sage and some cacti wearily clinging among the rocks, holding on against the breeze. What would the canyon look like, in future years? Would the trees come back—*could* the trees come back, given some years? Martin shifted his weight. Where would he be, where would the world be in ten, twenty years? The canyon was strangely quiet, now, in those few precious last minutes before twilight, with the sun almost gone, sinking into a pool of blood-red clouds. Ribbons of pink and pale yellow lined the hills, and far above, in the deep rich blue, there was one star.

Will tried to spit again, but only made it a foot further. In that uncanny way, he again unconsciously answered Martin's thoughts. "In a hundred years, I'll bet you there'll be a dozen suckers right in this very spot, putting that darn railroad back in," he said. He was looking down at the remnants, the ties strewn along the bottom of the canyon like a line of broken broom straws.

"Wouldn't be a bit surprised," Martin muttered.

Will traced the outline of one of the Spanish words with his finger. "1918," he said. "That's when my Pa came back from the War. And started minin'." Somehow, his voice seemed too careless. Martin looked at him, but Will wouldn't meet his eyes.

Started mining. Martin needed no more information to guess what Will was implying. Back in February, when Martin had been working in town, he'd heard about the Dawson mine explosion. Killed over 100 men—fewer than the previous Dawson disaster they all talked about, back before the War, but the surrounding towns all heard about the event. Martin hadn't given it much thought at the time. The death toll had seemed small

enough to him, with the numbers he was used to hearing. But numbers don't tell you much about the kind of men they were, the lives they lived, the lives they wished they had lived, the sons they left behind. Martin didn't know a lot about Willard, but he understood that much, at least. "Hard times," he said aloud, his voice gruff.

Will picked up a rock and threw it, as far and as hard as he could. They both watched it sail out of sight, into the deepening shadows. Neither of them heard when it fell. "Seems like every time's a hard time, if you ask me," Will said.

"True 'nuff. Every time's bound to its own trouble."

"Not so much trouble that it can't get worse," muttered Will, looking down at his hands.

"That's true," muttered Martin, looking away at something he couldn't see. "Sometimes, no matter what you do, things just happen." He rubbed his forehead; suddenly he felt tired. "And then they're over. And you're just left to wonder, why?" Martin shifted his weight and went on, more to himself than to Will. "And you wonder, was there something more you could've done? But sometimes, there was nothing you could do, except what you did. And the worst still happens, and after it, worse still."

For a long moment, the canyon was quiet. Martin was staring ahead, and his breath seemed to come faster as the memories came, too, all in a rush, with smoke, barbed wire, and bright explosions, and numbers, numbers, numbers, more than he could ever contain. The canyon seemed to disappear into shadows under the sky. Martin saw the dirt and the faces, the eyes of every man he'd passed in the trenches. He saw the dirt

flying, and the rats scurrying, the tips of his waterlogged boots dragging, as he'd kept walking.

And yet. The breeze stirred the scrub oak near his head, and the soft rattling leaves brought him back to the present. Martin heard rather than felt himself letting out a long breath. He saw the smoke from the locomotive, down below, and it was just like the smoke from the train that had carried him west, to a new place, a new start. The problem was, there was nothing new about this place.

Martin stared across the valley, to the far side, and he knew there was a canyon there too, and canyons beyond that. But they were different canyons. Canyons without smoke. Canyons full of trees, full-grown; full of future, even hope. These were no desolate trenches—these were the beginnings of the Rockies, the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, firm and solid against every fading sky.

One star far above blinked, flared, went out. How long they'd been sitting there, Martin suddenly realized he had no idea. He felt Will looking at him, and when he glanced up, he saw his young face, the wide, troubled eyes; and they were familiar, he'd seen that kind of look before, mirrored in every face in the trenches the day they had arrived, before it all started. And even as he looked away, Martin knew he'd seen it other places, too, seen it in every passing puddle, lake, and window. Martin shook his head, but he felt like he should say something. "Kid," he said, "you really can never know what will be coming next. Just when you think you've found it out, you find out you haven't, you know?" Martin shifted his position on the rock. "Things can change mighty fast, it's true. But if they can change for the worst, they can change for the better. Can't they?"

“That’s what they say.” Will sighed. He was looking away, off the canyon wall. “But just ‘cause they can, don’t mean they will. And most of the time, they don’t.”

For a few seconds, there was only the sound of both their quiet breathing. Then Martin pursed his lips. “Even when they don’t,” he said, “there’s naught to do but keep going on.” He glanced at Will. “You didn’t give yourself life any more than a man gives himself a job, son. It’s not yours to give up, you know?”

“I guess.” Will leaned back against the sandstone almost gingerly, as if he expected it to give way. “And I don’t want to quit. I just hate mines. And coal. And trains.”

“And spikes?”

“Yes! And spikes!” Will’s voice rose. He leaned forward again and tucked his long legs up underneath himself. “I can’t hardly pull spikes— how am I supposed to lift rails? I don’t know why Mr. Abram even took me on.”

Martin hesitated. “Well,” he said, partly still lost in his own thoughts, partly unsure of how to respond.

Will put his face in his hands, resting his elbows on his knees. “I can’t quit,” he said. “I can’t go back. But I don’t even know how I got here. And what’s the point of it all. And what am I going to do tomorrow?” He laid his hands down next to him, palm up, and even in the dim light, Martin could see the blisters.

Almost without noticing, Martin felt his own palms, tough and calloused. They hadn’t always been that way. When he wiped his hands on his pants, his fingers caught on the cotton. Martin looked out over the canyon. The remains of the railroad looked

awfully small, from up here. “I reckon,” Martin said at last, “I reckon you’ll be pulling spikes.”

Will lifted his head. “What?” Then, slowly, as understanding dawned, “You’ll take the rails tomorrow?”

Martin leaned back against the stone. “Provided you do your share. We can’t pull up a railroad without someone to tear out those spikes.”

For a while, no one said anything. Then Will finally said, “The train’s moving again.” He pointed to the smoke making its way east.

“So it is.” It was getting dark, the smoke was hard to see, but Martin could make out the dark patch as it blocked out the stars. All the stars were appearing in full, now; Martin could begin to trace their familiar patterns. He glanced back at Shorty’s mark on the rock, and wondered if he had looked at these stars, and who else before him, ten years before, twenty years before that. And this time he wondered who might look at them in a hundred years, too.

Willard slid off the sandstone, slipped his suspenders back up over his scrawny shoulders, and stretched. “It better be about time for supper by now,” he said, his mind already on other things.

Martin stood up for an answer. Together they started off down the canyon wall. Despite the darkness, the hike down seemed faster than the climb up. Carefully, they picked their way among the rocks and scraggly scrub oak until they reached the canyon floor once again. Across the creek and over to camp they went, the tall grass catching

around their knees. A breeze curled down the floor of the canyon, the last sigh of the evening edged with the spicy tint of sage and dried grass.

A few of the men looked up when they came into camp, but nobody said anything. As Will and Martin sat down together near the fire, and started into the leftovers from dinner, perhaps Abram stirred slightly; but that was only to lay back more comfortably, cross his ankles, and look up at the stars over the North Ponil Canyon.

## HUMOUR DI DIO

c.a. 1910

One June day in the New Mexico Territory, two young men were hauling burros up and down from the top of a mountain with no trees. Nobody could say for sure why no trees grew on the peak. It hadn't been logged. There were no trees there to start with. Perhaps it was something in the strangely green, copper-rich rocks on top that kept the trees from taking root. Maybe it was all the gold mines that showed up every spring like prairie dog holes scattered on the slopes. Whatever the reason, the top of the mountain was bare and rocky, and its name was, fittingly, Baldy Mountain, or Old Baldy. Tall and steep-sided, it towered above all the surrounding mountains like a rounded bare shoulder, belonging to just one of the many sleeping giants of the southern Rockies.

Sixteen-year-old Filippo couldn't help but wonder if the treeless top of Old Baldy wasn't due to the mine tunnel currently being blasted through the mountain. Even as he walked down the eastern slope, he could hear distant rumbling from somewhere deep within. Every now and then he felt a slight shakiness in his knees, too, but it was hard for him to tell if that was from the mountain's trembling or from fatigue as he made his way down the steep trail. Behind Filippo plodded six burros, each with a pack saddle loaded to the brim with copper ore. Filippo's younger brother Alex brought up the rear, keeping up as best he could. The pack animals seemed to mind the steep trek less than their human companions did, despite the weight they carried. The lead burro kept shoving Filippo with its nose, as if to ask why they weren't moving faster.

The burros were still getting used to Filippo, their new handler, who had only minimal experience with pack animals in the first place. Or mountains, for that matter.

Filippo felt a pang of both awe and dread knowing that this was only the first of many trips he'd be taking up and down the steep side of Old Baldy, up to the Mystic copper mine on top. The men of Baldy Town, the mining settlement about halfway up the mountain, had already pulled tons of copper from the peak, and every summer they resumed the tedious task of dragging it down and shipping it to Colorado. *Humour di Dio*, his father had said—the humor of God, to put a deposit of copper way up on the peak of a mountain. It was impossible to get a tram line up there like they had for the gold mines down closer to Baldy Town. But the impossible never stopped a miner.

Filippo almost lost his footing but caught himself on a small tree trunk as he passed. This trail was steep—too steep. An unwanted thought occurred to him, not for the first time that day, that this path through the trees did not look like a trail at all. But that was nonsense. Of course it was a trail. He was sixteen years old, old enough to find his way in the woods. What would Papá say, if he got lost only a few miles from town? And what would the other men in town think? Filippo brushed a mop of thick black hair out of his eyes and peered forward at the path ahead. No need to think about that. Of course they'd get back soon. Still, moving this copper was the biggest job he'd ever had. If he could make it in good time; if he could keep Alex from messing anything up; if he could just show Papá and the other men that he could do it, then... Then what? The familiar, aching emptiness filled his chest even as he tried to ignore it, would never admit that it was longing. All winter long, since Filippo and Alex had arrived in the fall with Papá, Filippo had to listen to the stream of haughty comments from the gringos and even some of the Mexicans in town. Italian spig... Son of a dago... young wop... Filippo felt the

familiar burn of anger rising along with the unpleasant memories, and he struggled to swallow it all down again, choosing instead to indulge in thinking of nasty Italian phrases for several gringos in particular back in town. *¡Asinos!* Now he understood more why the old burro handler had quit and moved on. Maybe the men had given Flip the job solely because he came from Italy, or maybe because he was new, because he had yet to prove himself, the way Papá had done a year ago. Or maybe he'd just been the only man handy at the time—maybe. Well, he'd show them. He'd get these burros back on time, or die in the attempt.

The problem was, the trail was terrible. The path from the mine was supposed to be marked with tree blazes all the way down to Baldy Town, but here the trees were sparse, just stragglers from past logging operations, and sometimes it was a good minute from one blaze to the next. And anyway, some of the trees had old blazes on them, and some of the blazes could be mistaken for antler rubs, and it was enough to drive Filippo crazy. He knew the side of the mountain was filled with claims, prospects, and mines, some abandoned, some still in use. If they got off the trail, there was no telling where they'd end up. Filippo wasn't particularly worried about getting back to town eventually—he knew they'd be able to find their way if they just continued down; once in the valley it would be clearer which way to go. But that all would take time, too much time. They couldn't be late, have the whole town looking out for them, to laugh when they finally stumbled in. Who made this old trail, anyway? Filippo doubted Alex could have done any worse. He squinted at the ground, wishing he'd never lost track of the hoofprints from their journey up the slope that morning.

They shouldn't have spent so much time on the summit of Baldy. But the miners had been slow to load the train, and Filippo had been sore from the trek already. The air felt sharp, too, up on the peak, thin and cold, like there wasn't enough of it up there. Filippo rubbed his arms a little. The copper ore was heavy and cumbersome. At first, he'd been staggered by Baldy's height: standing on the mountain felt like the top of the world. The plains spread away from Baldy like the sea, miles immeasurable. He could've stood there looking all day. But the miners worked quickly. All too soon the ore was loaded. The miners had returned to their tunnels in the mountain, and Filippo and Alex had started off down the scree-covered slope, wind buffeting their ears, feet sliding at every step, and Flip's sense of awe had slipped away, too. Now they'd been walking for at least two hours, and Flip knew they should be closer to town than they were. Darn trees! Surely another blaze would appear soon. He would spot it any minute. Filippo glanced over his shoulder. Alex couldn't be of any help, of course. It wasn't his fault, but that's the way it was. Alex had funny eyes that were almost crossed, and he could only see things when they were up close, and even then, not very well. You might as well walk blindfolded backwards and just hope to run into the trail than send Alex to look for it.

Filippo knew it bothered Alex to be so useless at everything, and usually he tried not to mention it. But this afternoon he was in no mood to be gentle. As usual, Alex was back there moseying along, in his own world. Filippo looked over his shoulder again in frustration. Did he not realize what was at stake here? "Alex," he called. "Pick up the pace, can't you?" Before Alex could answer, Filippo heard another rumble, louder this time. He suddenly realized there was a good chance it wasn't coming from the mountain,

but rather, behind it. How stupid of him to mistake it for dynamite. It had been thunder all along—and proof that they’d better get a move on before the storm arrived. They were going too slow! “Alex,” Filippo called, in a tone as if he’d just won an argument. “You hear that?”

“Yes. The wind is picking up, too.”

Filippo looked at the trees and realized his brother was right. He rubbed his forehead briefly. Trail or no trail, the side of a mountain was no place to be in a lightning storm. This was a treacherous country. Papá and the miners said so; everyone out here avoided the slopes at all costs when the rains came. That was the problem with these darn mountains. You never could see the storms coming until you could look straight up and see the dark clouds, and by that time, it was too late, the storm was already on top of you. Back in Italy, you’d see the storm clouds from miles away; you had plenty of warning. Filippo glanced behind him at the lead burro, heavy load lurching from side to side in time with each footfall, and he pursed his lips.

Ten-year-old Alex walked at the shoulder of the last burro in the train, making sure to pick up his toes as he walked so that he wouldn’t trip over any rocks. He’d learned that trick from his grandpa, back in Italy, on one of their long, pleasant walks together, when Nonno could still walk. Nonno had been dead two years now. But those years before he’d gone, and before Papá had made the trip to America, those years had been great fun. He and Nonno would amble down country lanes, and Nonno would tell him things. How to tell east and west from the sun on your face, and how the butterflies

looked that day, where the wind came from, and how a sailboat worked, the names of fish, and ways to cook them. Nonno had always been very fond of fish. And olives; he loved a good Italian olive from the coast. Alex wondered what Nonno would've thought of America, and of the New Mexico Territory, now that Alex and Flip had come back to live with Papá. He might've liked the fish that Alex and Flip had found in the streams near their new home in Baldy Town, but he would've been disappointed in the lack of olives.

Alex whistled a little. The notes seemed dark, somehow, and the air felt excited, but still. A storm was coming; he could smell it, and that distant thunder was getting closer and closer. He expected to get wet any minute now. These spring mountain storms could really sneak up on a person. Back in their new home, in Baldy Town, sometimes he didn't even hear the thunder until the laundry was getting wet, raindrops pattering loudly on the tin roofs.

Alex wondered how much further they had on this trail before they got home. Seemed like they'd been walking a long time since they'd come down into the trees, away from the fierce wind on top of the mountain. The sun had been bright up there, and the sky so blue, yet so cold. Flip said there was snow, but Alex hadn't seen it. Flip said to stand with the burros and wait, so Alex did, while the others loaded the train with the ore. The miners said the spring storms would come most afternoons, that they'd better get down before that happened, so they'd hurried. Finally, off they'd gone, and they'd been on the move ever since: straight down, it seemed.

Alex had never felt his legs trembling like this before, and he wondered if they were getting anywhere near close. Maybe he could ride on one of these burros—he didn't weigh that much. Oh well, they'd get home eventually. Filippo knew the way. He always did. Papá said Alex should go with Filippo, to help keep the burros in line, but Alex knew he'd been really sent along just to be kept out of the way. There wasn't a lot he could do very well in town, not very fast, anyway. He often helped make fences, but it always took him a long time, not like Flip. Filippo could do anything. He was sixteen, and very strong. Papá was proud of Flip. Alex buried his fingers into the burro's soft fur, noticing how the hide moved over the burro's shoulder muscles as they bunched and stretched with every step. Alex's hand slipped to his own side, feeling his ribs through his thin cotton shirt, and the strange wonderful rhythm of something alive inside, that no one could see.

Filippo saw they were coming to a section of those funny thin trees with the white papery bark and frowned. "Aspens," their father had called them, "quakies," the mining men said. Aspen quaky trees had the strange ability to keep whatever nicks and scratches were given to them, often magnifying the marks as the tree grew. Fun to draw pictures on. But by far, the absolute worst trees for marking trails. And now that they were back in the shelter of the trees, the view off the mountain was obstructed, too. Filippo kicked a rock out of his way savagely. Was everything against him, today?

As if in answer, he heard the rustle of aspen leaves overhead. The wind was picking up. For a second, Filippo could hear the rain spattering among the leaves before it

reached them below. Then the wind picked up and the sky seemed to open as all at once the rain came down. The raindrops seemed to bounce against the ground, and when they hit Filippo's shoulders, they hurt. He could see little white things bouncing off the burros' backs.

"Ow!" Alex said from the back of the line. "Flip, it's hailing!"

"I know! It's all right," Filippo shouted back at his brother. "It's only-" but Filippo never finished his sentence.

The brightest light that he had ever seen flashed directly in front of them for an instant, followed by a heart-rumbling, cracking roar like a giant axe had split the sky. The burros jumped, the lead burro struggling to break free from Filippo's grip. Filippo had to fight the urge to drop to the ground covering his ears. He clung to the lead rope with all his might. "Whoa, there, whoa," he soothed the lead burro, stepping in front of it and holding to the halter with both hands. Dimly he became aware of the rain, again, and his hearing slowly returned. His heart racing, Filippo turned to look down the row of burros, still processing the fact that it was lightning, and that they were all incredibly lucky it hadn't struck any closer. His hair was standing all on end.

"Flip!"

He heard Alex's terrified voice from the back of the line. "I'm here!" he called quickly. "We're all right. It was only lightning. It struck a tree, just down the trail. Those miners weren't joking." He looked through the veil of pouring rain at the smoking tree only twenty yards away, and at the same time realized that there was no semblance of a trail whatsoever in front of them. Absently he put his hand up and patted his hair down.

“Everything’s fine,” he said to Alex. The lead burro shook its head, water scattering in all directions from its long floppy ears, and Filippo cleared his throat. “We can’t stay here,” he called back to Alex. “We’ve got to keep going and get back to town with these burros. Come on.”

A fir tree might provide dry shelter from the hail, but Filippo did not want to risk straying far to find one. He wiped the water from his eyes impatiently. They’d better just keep going downhill. “Come on. It’s just water,” he said, wincing as an especially large hailstone bounced off his ear. Of all the times to forget to bring his hat! He tugged at the rope and the burros obediently began to walk, but they went with their heads down, hunched and unhappy.

For several minutes they plodded through the trees. Cold rainwater trickled down the burros’ sides in small rivulets, and down the boys’ backs, too, cold and wet between their shoulder blades. Alex could feel the hail piling up, crunching under his feet. The air felt so cold. He wished he had a warm fur coat like a burro; even if it was wet. Then the burro train stopped moving. “What is it?” Alex called ahead hopefully. Were they that close to town, after all?

“It’s... a mine tunnel.” Filippo’s voice was incredulous. “And the burros want to go in.”

“Is it open?” Alex asked, trying to hide the sound of his teeth chattering. “Can we go in? Just till it stops raining?” he added.

Could they? Filippo looked at the mine shaft. It was old, he could tell, long out of use. For one thing, the old ore cart rails on the ground were half buried in mud, and plants

were growing on the edge of the darkness. Lichen lined the topmost wooden beam like a faint green mustache around the gaping mouth of the tunnel. But the tunnel was open. At least, it was unblocked near the entrance. “It must be the Old Aztec mine,” Filippo said, trying to sound confident, but it was more of a guess. Both brothers had heard their father speaking of the old Aztec mine being sold to those Maxwell Land Grant people recently. Surely they wouldn’t have bought a collapsed mine—would they?

“If they’re going to mine it again soon, it must not be in too bad of shape,” Alex said, echoing Flip’s thoughts. “Can’t we just sit in the opening for a minute? It’s freezing out here. Please, Flip?”

Filippo was having trouble holding the burro back from going inside, and now the other burros were coming up and trying to get in, too. They shoved him with their noses, and it was taking all his strength to hold them all back. Filippo didn’t like the idea of sitting in any mine tunnel, new or old, but it was certainly cold and wet outside, and anyway, he didn’t think he could hold these burros back any longer. “All right,” he said, as the burros pushed forward and all but dragged him towards the entrance. He dropped the rope and the burros hurried inside out of the rain. Then Filippo took Alex’s cold wet hand in his and led him inside, too. “We’ll just stay here for a minute,” he said.

The small, dim entrance to the mine almost seemed welcoming after the relentless hail, but it was far from comfortable. Water was pooling near the opening, and the boys could feel the muddy ooze seeping around their boots. Somehow it managed to smell like both wet rocks and dust; a strange combination. Alex ran his hands down one wall. There

was water dripping down the rough wood of the support beams here at the front, but farther back, the sides became more dry.

“Alex! Don’t go any further.” Filippo pulled him back into the puddles at the mine’s entrance. “We don’t know for sure which mine this is, or why it was abandoned,” he reminded him.

Alex didn’t answer. His wet shirt stuck to his back and his teeth chattered. He wanted to sit down, but he didn’t want to sit in a puddle. He leaned against the cold rock and shivered.

Filippo looked out of the mine at the rain. The hail was coming down more sparsely, now, but even in that brief time, it made the ground white. Filippo bent down, picked up one of the small balls of ice at the mouth of the mine, and looked at its icy concentric layers. Like a tiny onion. He put it in his mouth and rolled its icy smoothness over his tongue. “Here,” he said, handing another to Alex. “Crunchy.”

For a few seconds they didn’t say anything, just sucked on the hailstones. Alex reached out of the tunnel to pick up another one, and came back with a small handful. How perfectly round they were! And from how far up above they had come. Alex rolled two of them against his front teeth, imagining the tiny balls of ice dancing from cloud to cloud far above, bouncing off the mountaintops... only to land here and melt slowly into his tongue.

Filippo anxiously watched the rain fall. How long would the storm last? He wondered how much daylight they had left. What time had they left the top of Baldy,

anyway? Not long ago, but it seemed strangely dark. And regardless of the storm, he knew the sun set early on this side of the mountain.

“Flip?” Alex’s voice, muffled with bits of ice, cut into his thoughts.

“Yes?”

“Where are the burros?”

It was such a simple question, yet so unexpected. Filippo whirled around and his heart fell into his toes. The burros had vanished. There was nothing to be seen but the black, gaping gullet of the mine. Filippo could’ve slapped himself. He should never have let go of that rope! What had he been thinking? “They must’ve gone further in,” he said. He glanced at the dark beyond the entrance and added, a little too flippantly, “I guess I’ll go fetch them.”

“I’ll come, too.”

Filippo put his left hand on the stony wall and stepped into the dark, Alex at his heels. He felt Alex’s hand on his right shoulder and straightened a little. “This mine always was structurally sound,” he said. “They say that mining company is going to open it up again for mining, pretty soon,” he said.

“Right.”

“And we know the mine is empty. The burros would not go in, if they smelled a bear.”

“Right.”

“The mine is so old, there will be no dynamite leftover inside,” Flip went on as they walked, ever so slowly, into the black depths of the tunnel. He felt the ore-cart rails

under his feet as he shuffled forward. “The burros must’ve worked in here, long ago. They’re following an old habit.”

For a few seconds, no one said anything, and it was quiet. No, quiet wasn’t the right word—silent, Alex thought. No splatters of rain, no rush of wind could find their way this deep into the mountain. The farther they went in, the more both boys started thinking about hundreds of thousands of pounds of dirt, rocks and trees above their heads. The air was still and stale-smelling. Filippo coughed once, and Alex jumped at the sudden sound. He picked up his toes as he walked. “Flip?”

“Yes?” Filippo’s mouth was strangely dry. The light from behind was fading fast, and somehow, the walls seemed closer here than they were at first. The sides were uneven with rocks sticking out at odd angles, little pits where the miners had once chiseled into the stone, hunting for the next vein, to lay the next charge, to find the next fortune, all the time blasting further and further into the depths. The ceiling was uneven, too, rocks and mud glittering with small droplets, interrupted with thick wooden crossbeams like rafters. Flip stooped a little as he walked with his left hand brushing the rocky wall, his right hand outstretched in front of him. On the right side of the tunnel, another opening was approaching. A second entrance? Probably not, probably just the miners following another vein of quartz. Whatever it was, there must have been either a ventilation shaft down there, or else part of it had caved in, because the light was dim but not pitch dark, and the air seemed fresher somehow as they went by. Filippo tried not to think about cave-ins and walked just a little faster.

“Flip?” Alex’s voice came from behind.

“What?”

“There... there aren't any tommy-knockers in abandoned mines, are there?”

“No. They're only in working ones. Everyone knows that.”

“Oh.” The dark didn't really bother Alex; he was used to it, or at least, used to seeing things in a blur as they went by, not paying them much attention. But the thought of tommy-knockers was enough to give anyone pause. Always invisible, the little dwarf-like men inhabited all the mines around the area, and often did things like move tools or steal food. Alex knew they were supposed to be helpful to miners, but he didn't relish the thought of little people running around down here in the dark with them.

“The good thing about tommy-knockers,” Filippo said, echoing Alex's thoughts, “is that they always help miners. They'll warn you before a cave-in, or before an explosion.” Despite his confident words to Alex, Filippo was still thinking about leftover dynamite. He tried to put out of his mind images of bloodied body parts strewn all over the walls, or the stories he'd heard of miners trapped in the back of the tunnels, living out their last hours in tiny, dark, suffocating rooms.

Filippo paused for a second. He could not see his feet anymore. He looked over his shoulder and saw a dim point of gray light, the opening to the mine, but it was getting ever smaller, like a lantern slowly burning itself into darkness. Ahead, more darkness. Filippo felt his heart pounding strangely. The last thing he wanted to do was step further into this shaft. The light was going fast, now that they were past that second opening, Filippo could see that in just a few more steps, they would be in pitch darkness. For a second, Filippo looked back at the mine entrance behind them, and imagined himself and

Alex walking into town without the burros, the entire valuable load of copper lost, every last bit of the hard-picked ore the men had gathered impossibly from the peak, gone. And he saw the leering expressions on the men's faces, the pained eyes of Papá when he realized his two useless sons had not only come in late but lost the entire copper train. Flip closed his eyes for a second. As much as he hated the thought of stepping further into the dark, he knew to give up and turn around was impossible. He took a deep breath, and took a step.

This wasn't so bad. The burros must be right around here somewhere. He must not, he could not go back to town without those burros. Flip took another step, and another... and then the tunnel must've been slightly curved, because all light suddenly vanished. And it was dark, darker than Filippo had ever imagined it could be. The dankest, most cheerless shed at night could not compare with this, for even the dingiest barns had drafts and chinks in the wood, where if not light, then air could stir. Flip continued on through the tunnel, but he no longer felt that he was walking into an empty hole—more like he was swimming through it. This was a clinging, constricting, enveloping kind of dark, a moldy, musty, dead, smothering blanket of it. Filippo felt a sudden overwhelming sense of invasion-- people were not meant to be down here. Not live ones, anyway. Flip could hear his heart beating in his ears. He wanted to turn around and run, but he forced himself to breathe, instead. He clenched his right hand into a fist. It was only a tunnel! It was only dark! Only dark. He shut his eyes, opened them again. Slowly, almost against his will, he moved his left hand in front of his face. The darkness did not change. Filippo placed his hand back on the wall—and the wall was gone.

For a moment Filippo stood, suspended between the tunnel walls. He couldn't have moved even if he wanted to; he felt suddenly that he had no body, that he had somehow melted into the darkness, become part of it, a shadow lost in a sea of shadows. All around him, above and below, the dark was complete. No beginning, and no end: it simply was. A wave of nausea passed through him. "*Ave Maria, piena di grazia,*" he said, under his breath, but he couldn't even finish the sentence.

"What is it?" Alex's disembodied voice cut through the dark behind him, and Filippo suddenly felt his brother's hand tighten on his shoulder, bringing him back into the present. "Did you find the burros?"

"No," Filippo answered, though his mouth was so dry, it hardly sounded like his own voice. He licked his lips. "Not yet." His heart was beating like he'd been running a race, but he still failed to bring himself to move.

"What is it?" Alex's voice was tinged with concern. "Are there bats?"

"The wall," Filippo choked out. "It's gone. I've lost it."

There was utter silence for a moment. Then Alex pushed his way past Filippo on the left, feeling along the wall with both hands. Sure enough, it stopped, here, but he could feel it continuing on, to the left, making a corner. "It's another tunnel," he said. He felt Filippo's hand on his shoulder as he took a few steps into the dark. In a moment, he found the wall again. "It's an entrance. There," Alex said. "It keeps going. Would the burros turn?"

Filippo felt the wall again, now, too, leaned his shoulder against its comforting stony presence, held onto the wooden beams like a lifeline. He was surprised and

ashamed to find that he was trembling. “I don’t know,” he muttered. Spots seemed to float in front of his eyes. He blinked, but they remained. Flip imagined uncountable passageways, identical to this one, all leading to tight corners of impassable rock. Alex had not yet grasped what was all too clear to Flip: that this turn was likely only one of many they’d already passed. How many other twists had the passage taken already, leading them away from the main tunnel, while Flip had assumed they were heading in a straight line? If they turned around now, would they arrive at the mine’s opening at all? His heart sounded oddly loud and galloping in his ears. Flip let go of Alex and slowly sank to his knees, still leaning against the wall, his breaths coming quick and shallow.

Alex sensed that he had stopped and sat down next to him. What had gotten into Flip? For a second, he thought maybe his brother had lied, and he actually had seen something here in the mine with them. Tommy-knockers—or something worse. He cocked his head for a second, listening. But no, Flip would not lie. All he heard was his brother, panting for breath. Alex reached behind him, hunting for Flip’s hand. There it was, cold and trembling. Alex shivered. Whatever was wrong, it was something bad. He’d never known Flip to act like this. Alex felt along the wall with his other hand. They weren’t too far from the opening, by his reckoning. They’d passed two tunnels on the right already, but no more than that, he was sure. The air by those tunnels had been cleaner, as if they opened up to the surface somewhere along the way, like a prairie dog hole with multiple exits. This place must be huge! It made one’s mind boggle to think about all the work that must’ve gone into blasting these tunnels in the mountain,

following the veins in the rock for gold. Alex remembered the Deep Tunnel project underway digging under Baldy and wondered how far back this Aztec mine went. It had to get to a stopping place eventually. Anyway, stopping place or no, the burros had to be somewhere up ahead, and probably pretty close. Surely they wouldn't have gone too far, not if they were simply following the ore cart tracks out of habit. Alex tapped the old, half-buried iron rails with his toe, and wondered how many times these burros had made the trip down into this place. It must be like a second home, to them.

Alex shifted his weight restlessly. What were they waiting for? Those burros were loaded down with valuable copper. It was up to him and Flip to get it back to town safe. Alex wasn't sure what happened to Flip, but he knew they couldn't just sit there. There was a job to do! "It's all right, Flip," he said aloud, a little awkwardly. "We'll find the burros."

Flip wanted to shout hang the burros, hang mines, hang America. But the darkness was too thick for shouting. To shout here would be like shouting under water. Why was it so hard to catch his breath? Filippo took in a deep gulp of air, held it for a moment, and let it out slowly. Then he froze.

Alex heard it, too. His hands suddenly felt sweaty. "Flip," he began.

The boys sat in the dark, in utter terror. Faintly, almost imperceptibly, they could both hear the sound of knocking.

Tip. Tap. Tip. Tap.

Alex's hair all stood on end. "Flip," he said again, his voice several octaves higher. But before the boys could decide what to do, the knocks were suddenly answered.

Throughout the tunnel came a horrible ear-splitting shriek. Breathily and shrill, it rose to a fevered pitch before crashing down in a series of short honks like an inconsolable goose. Filippo and Alex put their hands over their ears. As soon as the sound died away, Alex jumped to his feet. Tommy-knockers or no, he knew what that sound was—the burros. And they were coming up the tunnel straight for the boys.

Alex turned back towards where he knew Flip was sitting, and with a heave, somehow he hauled his big brother to his feet. “Stick to the wall!” he cried, pressing Flip tight against it with one arm, and flattening himself alongside. “Stick to the wall!”

Filippo had just a second to spread himself against the cold stone, pressing his face into the dirt and feeling the rocks digging into his chest. Then the tunnel behind him erupted into chaos. Fur and muscle pounded past with a trampling of hooves, snorts, and clunks in an avalanche of noise.

Then it was still.

Filippo slowly came away from the wall and let out a long breath. His heart was pounding, but his head was clearer now. He put out his hands on both sides, feeling around for Alex. All the images of smashed, bloodied bodies he had banished came flooding back into his mind all in a rush. “Alex!” The word tasted like dust. He licked his lips and dropped down, feeling along the narrow tunnel floor frantically, stubbing his fingers on the iron rails. He was sure there was a cave-in, but he couldn’t tell if the rocks he felt were part of a new wall or the old one.

“I’m here,” Alex said from several feet away. Filippo closed his eyes in relief (not that it made much of a difference).

“Are you all right?”

“Yes.” There was Alex’s hand. Filippo took it. “Let’s get out of here,” Alex said.

“Which way?” Flip managed to get the words out. He struggled to keep control over himself, tried to breathe normally.

“This way.” Without hesitation, Alex started down the tunnel at a brisk pace, as if he were going for a walk in a vegetable garden.

Filippo followed him, but he moved closer to the left until he felt the wall again under his hand. Wait, was this the left wall, again? Didn’t that mean they were heading back further into the mine? Or had they somehow switched sides in the tunnel? Filippo simultaneously wanted to stop, wanted to sprint, wanted to shake Alex, wanted to scream. Instead, to his surprise he found that he was meekly following his little brother down the tunnel without a word. The silence grew, except for their soft footfalls along the rocky floor. Every now and then, there was a slight metallic tip-tapping sound of a foot hitting a rock or one of the half-buried iron rails.

Alex kept his ears tuned for tommy-knockers, but they heard no more ominous messages. The knockers seemed content now that they were leaving. Alex shivered, and walked on.

It was difficult to tell when exactly the light started to appear. It didn’t take long. The brothers noticed it about the same time, a thinning of the dark to a gray, rather than black, as if they were swimming nearer to the surface of a lake, or in those indistinct moments before the sunrise. Filippo doubted at first, wondering if his eyes were playing tricks on him. Surely they had been farther back in the mine than this. As they continued

up the tunnel, Flip was looking down and now he could see the dim outlines of his feet. They almost looked strange to him, after being bodiless for what seemed like so long. There were puddles along the floor, too. Their feet splashed louder as they started to walk a little faster. There was no doubt about it. The light was growing!

And Flip could make it out, now, the dim outline of Alex's head bobbing in front of him, and—now that he looked harder, he could see a mass just in front of Alex, too, what was it? It was the hind end of a burro! Filippo almost laughed aloud at the absurdity. With one hand Alex still held onto Flip, with the other, he was holding onto the pack saddle as it lurched rhythmically along, side to side with the burro's every footfall. Filippo blinked, almost blinded by sudden light as the tunnel curved and led into sunshine, and for a moment, he shut his eyes. But he knew up ahead was his little brother, leading them on; and though his eyes were still closed, he found he could see.