

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and
Chapters

University of Nebraska Press

2010

Goodbye Wives and Daughters

Susan Kushner Resnikck

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Resnikck, Susan Kushner, "Goodbye Wives and Daughters" (2010). *University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters*. 78.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples/78>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Nebraska Press at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Susan Kushner Resnick

*Goodbye
Wives and
Daughters*

[Buy the Book](#)

© 2010 by Susan Kushner Resnick. "Once in the 40s" is reprinted from *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems* by William Stafford, and is used by permission of Graywolf Press, St. Paul, Minnesota.
© 1998 by the Estate of William Stafford. All rights reserved. Manufactured in the United States of America. ⊗

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Resnick, Susan Kushner.

Goodbye wives and daughters / Susan Kushner Resnick.

p. cm. Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8032-1784-3 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Bearcreek (Mont.)—History—20th century.

2. Bearcreek (Mont.)—Social conditions—20th century. 3. Coal mine accidents—Montana—

Bearcreek—History—20th century. 4. Coal mine accidents—Social aspects—Montana—Bearcreek

—History—20th century. 5. Coal miners—

Montana—Bearcreek—History—20th century.

6. Wives—Montana—Bearcreek—Biography.

7. Women—Montana—Bearcreek—Biography.

8. Disasters—Psychological aspects—Case studies.

9. Bearcreek (Mont.)—Biography. 10. Coal mines and mining—Montana—Safety measures—History—20th century. I. Title.

F739.B36R7 2010

978.6'652032—dc22

2009030035

Set in Monotype Bulmer by Kim Essman.

Designed by A. Shahan.

To David, the best husband a writer could have.

[Buy the Book](#)

[Buy the Book](#)

Once in the 40s

We were alone one night on a long road in Montana. This was in winter, a big night, far to the stars. We had hitched, my wife and I, and left our ride at a crossing to go on. Tired and cold—but brave—we trudged along. This, we said, was our life, watched over, allowed to go where we wanted. We said we'd come back some time when we got rich. We'd leave the others and find a night like this, whatever we had to give, and no matter how far, to be so happy again.

WILLIAM STAFFORD

Contents

Acknowledgments	<i>xi</i>	11	The Wait	<i>99</i>
Introduction	<i>xv</i>	12	The Games	<i>111</i>
Prologue: <i>The Centennial</i>	<i>1</i>	13	The Beloved	<i>117</i>
1 The Romance	<i>7</i>	14	The Good-byes	<i>127</i>
2 The Inspection	<i>19</i>	15	The Grief	<i>138</i>
3 The Teenagers	<i>30</i>	16	The Clues	<i>148</i>
4 The Union	<i>39</i>	17	The Exodus	<i>161</i>
5 The Mice	<i>49</i>	18	The Inquest	<i>169</i>
6 The Notebook	<i>55</i>	19	The Blame	<i>188</i>
7 The Explosion	<i>64</i>	20	The Crash	<i>200</i>
8 The Panic	<i>71</i>	21	The Survivors	<i>207</i>
9 The Rescuers	<i>79</i>		Notes	<i>219</i>
10 The Travelers	<i>86</i>		Bibliography	<i>223</i>

[Buy the Book](#)

Acknowledgments

Why is the author's family always thanked at the end of the acknowledgments? Not this time. I thank David, Carrie, and Max for everything they did to make this book possible: observing that "someone should write a book about that," as we waited for our steaks at the Bearcreek Saloon; picking actors and actresses to star in the movie; and allowing me, without complaint, to abandon my mothering post so I could gather this story. I love you three more than anyone in the world.

For helping to bring this book to the public, I thank my agent, Wendy Strothman, who saw the women's story as I did and believed in its worth; my editor, Heather Lundine, who won me over when she told me that the story made her cry; Rhonda Winchell, who often kept me from crying; copyeditor Jonathan Lawrence, who taught me to think with more precision; and Leslie Rubinkowski, who contributed wisdom and support on writing and fashion.

The friends and families of the miners were astonishingly welcoming and forthcoming with their painful stories. I am especially indebted to Bob Wakenshaw, for giving me all the facts I needed, but more importantly, for giving me his friendship; to Wayne Freeman, for being bold enough to explore the mine buildings with me and for

escorting me up the Beartooth Highway; to Denny Becker, for urging me to pay attention to the abandoned mine buildings and poignant cemetery when I drove through Bearcreek; to Dan Gainer and Burt Douthit of the Olcott Funeral Chapel, for giving me so many leads; to Bob Oxner, for being calm enough to keep me from panicking inside the Bull Mountain mine; to Jim Beadle, for providing copies of all the official pre- and post-disaster reports; to Karen Bjork, archivist extraordinaire of the Montana Historical Society, for being able to find anything that still exists; to Oakla Oleinik, for bringing her father back to life for me; and to Jeff McNeish, for answering so many questions, confirming so many theories, and generously sharing so much information. Your great-grandfather would be proud of you. Finally, for opening your wounded hearts and lovely homes to me, I thank Thelma Mourich Bischoff, Virginia Sommerville Casey, Gil Sommer-ville, Marlene Sudar Reed, and Doris Anderson Spaulding.

Also, thanks to the following people, several of whom have passed on since I interviewed them: Jonna Adams, Nathan Adams, Mari Aguirre, Andy Anderson, Linda Anderson, Evelyn Bateman, Louis Barovich, Mike Barovich, Joe Basone, Sally Becker, Jane Laird Biestek, Louise Van Black, Marlene Freeman Bradford, Melody E. Bragg of the National Mine Health and Safety Academy, James Brophy, Luba Barovich Brown, Alec Cameron, Margaret Meiklejohn Cameron, Gary Cline, Phyllis Cortner, Lynn and Pits DeArmond, John DeMichiei, Frank and LuDon Deville, Pearl Deville, Olga Marinchek DiPasquale, Linda Dutcher, Tom Ennes, Scott Faulkner, Carol Feist, Tom Flaherty, Winnie Freeman, Rita Gibson of the State Law Library of Montana, Sam Giovetti, Art Halpin, Peggy Hatfield, Jim Herbal, Marilyn Muller Hobbs, Mrs. Henry Hodnik, Leo Hodnik, Josie Germanetti Horton, Bill Houtonen, Pete Jovanovich, Norma Besinque Johnson, Leo Jordan, Lewis Jordan, Dorothy Lindsay Jorgenson, Ray Kotar, Joe Lester of the National Weather Service (Billings, Montana), Leslie Linn, Clem Lodge, John Mance, Katrina Wilson Martin of the State Law Library of Montana, Magi Malone, Jody Martinez of the *Ukiah Daily Journal*, John Maxwell, Robert Mc-

Donald, Marlene Mourich Matranga, Jessie Cameron Mourich, Lou Mourich, Sam Mourich, Jane McKee, Jack McNeish, Bob Moran, John Muller, Ray Mus, Vince Mus, Mike Naglich, Don Nordstrom, Jerry Nordstrom, Jane O'Donnell, Jennie Starkovich Pasek, Dale Pelo, Marvin Pelo, Frank and Linda Planichek, George Plank, John Plank, Jim Quigel of the Historical Collections and Labor Archives at Penn State University, Bonnie Ransdell, Marion Reid, Mary Reid, Paul Reid, Willard Reid, Dorothy Williams Repac, Kevin Richardson, James Saastamoinen, Josephine Meyer Schwartz, Wilma Shupak, Mary Smith, Charles Thom, Glenn Tjeltveit, Jeanne Wakenshaw, Betty Waters, and Julie Yanchisin.

[Buy the Book](#)

Introduction

Bearcreek, Montana, used to be wild. In the 1920s, when it was still new, there were eleven saloons. Eleven saloons and not one church. It was a town of brothels and fistfights and rollicking parties to celebrate brides brought over from the old country. The miners worked and drank and worked some more, surviving on the miles of coal spread under the mountains. Some called it a coal camp, but it was different from the others. Montana Coal and Iron, the firm that owned the area's largest mine, didn't rule the community—there was no company store that the miners were forced to patronize, no company-owned houses they had to live in. The residents of Bearcreek were free to shop and sleep where they wanted. There were two hotels, rows of profitable businesses, a hospital, and a bank. People said it was a little slice of utopia, this village that sprouted up in the middle of vast natural beauty.

Bearcreek is wild today, too, but in a different way. Now, the sagebrush grows tall on hillsides once congested with streets and houses, the places where the miners held those parties and the shopkeepers laid out their shoes and skillet. Horses wander through hollowed-out mine buildings that have disintegrated in the decades since the tragedy that cut off the town's blood supply. During its glory days,

almost two thousand people lived in Bearcreek. On Election Day in 2005, thirty-three voters reelected the mayor, a man named Pits who also happens to own the only saloon still in business. One saloon, with pig races that give tourists and travel writers a reason to come to town, but still, after all these years, no church. No hotels or hospital or bank, either, and the closest store is a little quilt shop. It's technically located in Washoe, a twenty-one-resident village up the road from Bearcreek that was established enough, until the 1950s, to have its own grammar school and post office. But now Washoe blurs into Bearcreek and its tenuous hold on an identity. The cemetery on the hill is arguably Bearcreek's most populated spot.

The people who remain and those who speak fondly of the Bearcreek they once knew refuse to call it a ghost town. But almost all of them will admit this: Bearcreek was killed, as surely as if it had been flattened by an earthquake or burned by a wildfire. Cause of death: the worst coal mine disaster in Montana's history. The 1943 disaster killed 75 men, leaving 58 widows and 125 fatherless children. Since that day, there have only been three underground coal mine disasters in the United States that have killed more men. But none of those destroyed a community. By the time the disaster struck, Bearcreek had segued from Wild West rowdy to Norman Rockwell wholesome. Fewer people lived there, but it had become the quintessential all-American hometown. After the disaster, it was broken and nearly empty. Utopia? Never again.

The first time I heard about Bearcreek, I didn't even know its name. A gray-bearded former river guide who owned a bed-and-breakfast in Wyoming gave me one piece of advice about visiting Montana. On a particular road, he told me, there's an abandoned coal mine. *Make sure you stop and look at it*, he urged. *And on the other side of the road, there's a cemetery with photos of the miners embedded in some of the gravestones. Very moving.*

It sounded interesting, though I was actually dreading the trip from his nurturing hideaway in the Grand Tetons to Montana. I just wanted to skip the whole state completely.

I'd come West from my New England home in 2005 with fresh loss dominating my life. A good friend who'd never smoked had died way too young from lung cancer. An even younger neighbor had died in his sleep while on a business trip. And most traumatic of all, my mother had died, suddenly and unexpectedly, at sixty-nine. She'd had a fairly rare lung disease called pulmonary fibrosis, but it hadn't curbed her life until she fainted one day, landed in the hospital the next, then suffocated to death less than a week later. She didn't suffer, a nurse told me, because she lost consciousness before she stopped breathing. Just like the Bearcreek miners as they lay on the ground in the mine and faded out. *They didn't suffer*, people still say, *they just went to sleep*.

Three months after my mother died, I flew across the country with my family for a long-planned national parks vacation. I didn't want to go. I wanted to stay home, staring and sighing until I felt better. I tried to cut the trip short and cancel the Montana leg. The Grand Tetons and Yellowstone National Park seemed doable; Montana—so foreign to someone who grew up in Rhode Island—seemed overwhelming.

The only reason we'd added Montana to the itinerary was to drive the Beartooth Highway, a gorgeous sixty-eight-mile road of hairpin turns that climbs through the mountains leading from Yellowstone to southeastern Montana. Charles Kuralt, who hosted the TV show *On the Road*, christened the highway the most scenic drive in America. But before we took the trip, we learned that for the first time in its sixty-nine-year history, the highway had been closed for the summer due to mudslides. Well, I thought, now there really was no point in hitting Montana. I looked into canceling hotel reservations and changing plane flights, but with all the fees and phone calls required, those chores became paralyzing as well. I gave in to Montana.

We found an alternate route from Yellowstone and landed in Red Lodge, the town at the end of the Beartooth Highway. Also a former mining town, Red Lodge has fared much better than Bearcreek. Because of the highway, it's been a tourist destination for decades. Its main drag consists of upscale restaurants and gift shops filled with

the kind of treasures you only buy on vacation: chokecherry lip gloss, cowboy cookbooks, whistles carved from antlers. These bobble markets share sidewalk space with a few biker bars, some real estate offices, and a thrillingly comprehensive penny candy arcade. A few minutes outside downtown, there's a wild animal sanctuary where injured or abandoned wolves, mountain lions, and other normally fierce beasts heal and live in peace. Our kids played with a baby bobcat that lived in the director's office. It was one of the highlights of our vacation, and the most exciting activity we found in Red Lodge.

We asked the waitress at our hotel's restaurant for advice on how to keep busy. She told us there was only one choice.

"Pig racing," she declared.

Pig racing? I really wasn't in New England anymore.

She directed us to the Bearcreek Saloon, the restaurant-bar-pig-racing establishment down the road from Red Lodge and from those abandoned mine buildings the owner of the bed-and-breakfast had told us about. The saloon, which serves the best steak I've ever tasted, gets crowded, especially when the racing begins. Patrons can place two-dollar bids on any segment of a twenty-five-square grid. Five squares are then randomly selected and assigned to each of the storybook-cute pigs lined up in the starting chutes of the track behind the saloon. The pigs wear colored vests and appear to be smiling. Once the gate is opened, they run around a tiny track toward the finish line and their reward: a pile of pigweed. Mayor Pits, who wears a big cowboy hat and bellows commentary into a microphone with a voice like an auctioneer, declares the winner. The crowd hanging over the track cheers. Whoever bet on the winning pig gets twenty-five dollars cash. The rest of the money goes into a scholarship fund awarded yearly to local college students.

The decor inside the saloon is simple: dark wood, floral tablecloths, and framed copies of the newspaper articles from the week of the mine disaster. The stories hang over nearly every table. The *Billings Gazette* front page nailed just inches from my face told how

the Bearcreek women had held themselves together as their lives dissolved.

“Unbounding faith and hope—the indestructible courage and stamina of women the world over since time began is manifest by those who waited for word of husbands, sons, fathers and brothers trapped in winding passageways of the Smith mine at Bearcreek,” began the story written by a woman reporter clearly in awe of her subjects. As was I. My most normal of losses hurt an awful lot. I couldn’t imagine how those women had endured the loss of everything. They had lived everyone’s worst nightmare, losing not only someone they loved but the neighbors, families, homes, and livelihoods that had rooted them.

That night, I began interviewing the people of Bearcreek. The folks sitting at the bar—the friendly mayor’s wife, the gentleman in the white cowboy hat who’d been an infant when the disaster happened, the quilt shop owner who served as town historian—told me what they knew and gave me the names of other people to contact. Before flying home, I visited the cemetery. Stark and virtually unadorned, with dry weeds and haphazard clusters of graves, it reflects the raw simplicity of loss. I also picked up the only volume that existed on the disaster, a forty-page pamphlet published by the local historical society.

Back East, as they say Out West, I started making calls. Almost everyone I reached agreed to an interview, despite the facts that I was a complete stranger and that I was threatening to irritate their most delicate scar tissue. It was as if they had been waiting sixty-odd years for someone to just ask them what happened.

I was driven to tell their story by four forces: fascination at how the surviving women managed to continue getting dressed every morning after facing all that loss; the need to honor their heroics by sharing their story with the world outside their tiny neighborhood; anger at those who had let the disaster happen; and hope that someday history will stop repeating itself. The Smith Mine disaster isn’t just a sad story. It’s also a cautionary tale. What happened in 1943 is still

happening in coal mines today: owners violate safety rules, the government looks away, and sweet men die.

Fewer American miners die today than sixty years ago, but the numbers aren't consistently declining. More coal miners died in 2006 than had in the previous eleven years. And the causes of those deaths haven't changed. A gas explosion trapped and killed twelve men in West Virginia's Sago mine that year, an event made even more painful when family members were mistakenly told that all the miners had survived. In 2007 six miners and three rescuers died in Utah's Crandall Canyon mine, a tragedy blamed on unsafe mining practices and a possibly corrupt mine owner. There's no reason to believe that the United States is immune to another major mine catastrophe like those that are still quite common in Chinese and Russian coal mines.

"In a perfect world, employers would sufficiently value their workers that they would do everything they can to ensure their safety," Cecil E. Roberts, current president of the United Mine Workers of America, wrote in 2007.

The UMWA is fighting for that perfection, but its leaders need to stay tenacious. Despite new safety legislation inspired by recent disasters, many laws are never actually enforced. Violators are fined, but the fines aren't always collected. Men who make a better living as underground coal miners than they might in other manual jobs don't always feel entitled to demand safe conditions or union protection, though it's more than reasonable to expect life *and* money from a job.

Nobody ever took responsibility for the Bearcreek disaster, and the families didn't get any compensation for their pain. All those people died, and even more grieved, but it was as if they didn't matter. That sense outraged me more than anything else. All people matter. I hope this story will be a reminder of how much.

*Goodbye
Wives and
Daughters*

Prologue: *The Centennial*

If you look at a map of Montana, the western border shows the profile of a sad old man. His bottom lip pouts and his craggy nose faces down in disappointment. If you imagine the south-central part of the state as the man's jaw, Bearcreek is located close to the base of his throat, the spot where one's hand automatically goes in times of shock and sorrow. You'd think the folks who once called this their home wouldn't want to come back to a place that slammed them so hard with those two emotions. The day before the tragedy that changed everything, Bearcreek was a jolly all-American town of coal-mining families just trying to get through the war. They carried ration books to the market and drove only as far as their gas points allowed. But they still had fun, with movies in the winter, fishing in the summer, and dances year-round. The day after the mine exploded, Bearcreek's heart was broken. And through all the decades that followed, the fracture never fully fused. So, why come back? Their hometown has been dying for more years than it thrived. They've managed to move on with their lives. But none of these facts kept them away from the town's Centennial Celebration in 2006. Hundreds of visitors showed up. That's how wonderful this place once was.

Bearcreek's children have gotten together every few years for de-

cedes. These reunions, with their dinner dances and printed programs, are evidence of how powerful tragedy can be. It can tear families apart, but it can also keep communities together, no matter how far their members scatter. Maybe these people stage so many elaborate reunions—five between 1989 and 2006—because only those who waited those nine long days for survivors and then wept together through so many funerals truly understand the depth of this loss. Or maybe because they’re determined not to forget the catastrophe that most of the world overlooked. It was wartime. Bad things were happening everywhere. The deaths of some anonymous coal miners and the demise of a tiny town barely registered.

Thelma Mourich Jovanovich Bischoff headed down early to help serve the pancake breakfast. Sunbeams were just starting to pick their way through dense, gray clouds. Thelma, who lives five miles away in the tourist town of Red Lodge with her cat and, sometimes, her grandson, was on the planning committee for the celebration. A bubbly woman who’s still flirtatious in her eighties, Thelma wears jeans and drives through blizzards. She’s always game for a party, even if it means showing up at dawn.

She was up pretty early—for a teenager—the morning of the explosion, too, on account of an ex-beau who’d surprised her with a visit the day before. He’d messed up her plans for that night’s high school dance, not to mention infuriating her steady boyfriend. Thelma must have thought that was her only problem as she walked up the hill to her grandmother’s house, where the surprise visitor was staying. Then emergency sirens started ringing, and Mrs. Mourich instinctively knew that the mines weren’t screeching because a man had snapped his leg or fallen on the tracks.

“This is the big one,” Thelma’s grandmother told her.

For years the older woman had been worrying about what could happen in that mine, where her husband had once worked and her three sons still did. But maybe she’d developed protective calluses from all the tragedy she’d known already. Thelma, whose dad man-

aged the mine's electrical system, was only sixteen. She had no idea how hard grief could hit.

Virginia Sommerville Casey still cries when she talks about the winter of 1943. Maybe that's why she stayed at the celebration for just a few minutes. She'd put on a dressy brown blouse and walked to the party from her Bearcreek house. She's a tall woman who as a teenager was as beautiful as a movie star. Now, though she's still the type of woman whom people would call *handsome*, she hides her big blue eyes behind tinted glasses. Virginia is warm and welcoming, the type of woman who nurtures visitors with hot coffee and impromptu meals, but she's shy, too. So when she couldn't find any of her old friends among the crowd jamming Bearcreek's main drag, she walked back home. Maybe she just didn't need any more reminders of the worst day of her life, when her run as a contented young wife and mother stopped short.

Many of the people Virginia had grown up with were in the old stone bank building, a tiny structure that serves as town hall these days. The Centennial planning committee had laid out artifacts from Bearcreek's heyday on long tables. People squeezed past each other to see keepsakes that had survived decades in attics. Among them: schedules from the days when a train ran through town; tin signs advertising Smith Mine coal as offering *More Heat Per Dollar*; grade school group shots, circa 1938, with scrubbed and combed miners' kids smiling in front of the mountains; an album of obituaries summing up the lives of those whose trajectories had shifted abruptly after the mine disaster; union membership lists; photos from prom nights; and an Army uniform from World War II.

After looking at the mementos, people began to claim spots for watching a parade. A handful of older folks climbed onto a flatbed trailer decorated with a long Bearcreek Bearcats banner, settled into plastic patio chairs, and held onto signs proclaiming their high school graduating classes. When the parade began, they waved those signs—1940! 1949!—as the crowd cheered. If it hadn't been so hot,

some of them might have tried to squeeze into the letterman sweaters they'd brought from home.

Wayne Freeman sat in a folding chair watching the parade. He waved to his cousin on the alumni float, happy to see someone he recognized. Wayne, who had just turned seventy, was six when the mine exploded. His grandfather was the superintendent of the mine, and his great-uncle held onto its purse strings. A federal inspector had chronicled pages of safety violations months before the explosion. After the explosion, kids sometimes shot dirty looks at Wayne, and adults sometimes cursed his family out loud for what they may or may not have done to cause the disaster.

Wayne spent part of the celebration trying to sell copies of a fictionalized version of the mine disaster that he'd written and recorded on tape. In his story, the union leaders are the bad guys and his family's culpability isn't mentioned. Revisionist history, of course, but that's what he heard at his dinner table. He also saw the effect the disaster had on his relatives. Several of the men in his family committed suicide or went insane after the explosion. They couldn't bear the pain, Wayne says.

One of the Centennial's afternoon activities, in addition to the three-legged races and other vintage games meant to replicate the old Labor Day picnics, was a walking tour of Bearcreek's few remaining streets. The tour leader pointed out landmarks. *This is where the doctor's house was*, she said, *that's where the high school stood*. Doris Anderson Spaulding walked with the small group. Until she was thirteen, when the mine disaster pierced her family, she called this area home. She still knows the streets by heart, so she couldn't help raising her hand to correct the leader.

"No," she said in a soft voice, when the woman announced who had lived on a particular corner, "they weren't the first family in that house."

Doris didn't mean to be contrary—she's too well-bred for that—but what she seemed to be saying was this: you aren't seeing everything.

And that message could have applied to the entire day. The laughter and balloons and country music bands didn't represent the Bearcreek she'd left decades earlier. Maybe before the disaster the town had been light and frivolous, and once in a while after, but this joviality was an aberration. Like the sun pushing its way through the morning clouds, the joy felt forced. Just driving through this town, bracketed as it is by crumbling mine buildings on one side and a desolate cemetery on the other, makes the chest tighten. This big party, Doris could have been saying, doesn't make up for anything that happened.

Before the walking tour ended, she bowed out to sit in a cool car. The weather in Montana is apparently as unpredictable as it is in New England. All summer it had been unexpectedly hot—as it was on the day of the explosion.

That February morning it was so mild that men went outside without wearing coats. By nightfall, as rescuers tried to get into the mine to save their comrades and as women stood outside waiting for news, the temperature had fallen to below freezing and a blizzard was brewing. The weather on the day of the Centennial was strangely similar. When the sun dropped away in the afternoon, the warmth abruptly vanished. A cutting wind blew the smoke from the evening's pig roast all the way across the main road, so that those who had been there in 1943 might have been reminded of the smoke pouring from the mouth of the mine.

Bob Wakenshaw had seen that smoke. He smelled it and breathed it, too, as he peered into the mine entrance waiting for his father and both grandfathers to walk out. But as the day grew colder, his mother, Mary, sent him to a neighbor's house to wait. There was no need for an eleven-year-old boy to shiver like the rest of them, she decided, even though she wouldn't leave the mine for sixty-two hours, and then only for a nap.

As night fell on the 2006 Centennial of his birthplace, Bob stood at the hillside cemetery. The townspeople had worked hard to identify all the graves and raise money to build a new shelter where people

could read the directory, or just sit and remember. Bob had come the previous day to put flowers on his family's graves. They're clustered together on the left side of hill: a stone for the triplet babies who would have been his big brothers, if they'd lived past their first day; markers for his sister and mother and grandmother, who lived full lives despite all the sorrow they bore; monuments to his father and one of his grandfathers, whose life stories take far less time to tell.

A minister wearing jeans and a black vest conducted a service to rededicate the cemetery. He read from Ecclesiastes and imagined what the buried folks would say if they could speak.

"As we sat at the bottom of the mine that day we thought of our families and wished them well," he said, quoting conjured-up coal miners. "It's good to see they made it through the tragedy."

He made it sound easy, getting on the other side of a tragedy, but Bob knew better. He stood close to his wife and children and grandchildren, but even their love couldn't purge his grief. The temperature kept dropping, and most people hugged their body heat into themselves. Bob took off his jacket and put it on a shivering woman's shoulders. He bowed his head and prayed. The evening sky, now deep blue and gray, looked like a bruise.

1 The Romance

She should have thrown salt over her shoulder. Knocked wood. Spit onto her fingertips. Anything to fight back the evil spirits. Instead, Mary Wakenshaw practically invited them into her house.

“Dear Bud,” she wrote to her husband. “I’m glad I’m a coal miner’s wife and thankful for it.”

She was comparing herself to the women she saw all around her on a California military base in 1943. Those wives—the unlucky ones—were hugging and kissing their men for what they knew could be the last time. The soldiers’ wives had come from all over the country to say their good-byes before the men crossed the ocean to fight for the best American values: Democracy, with all of its fair play and justice; and Capitalism, which paved the way for anyone to realize his dreams of wealth and freedom. Those wives were making a noble sacrifice. Still, it wasn’t easy to say good-bye.

“Really,” Mary wrote, describing the sad scene, “it’s pathetic to see them grasp the few minutes of happiness they can.”

She was on a road trip with her daughter, Fannie, a tall girl with broad shoulders and a confident smile. Fannie had come to the base to marry her high school sweetheart before he shipped off. She adored the young man so much that she’d pasted the butt from the

last Camel cigarette he'd smoked before leaving home six months earlier in her scrapbook. Now, finally, she'd get to be his wife. Mary, Fannie, and the boy's parents and brother had traveled fifty-four hours by train from their homes in the Montana mining town of Bearcreek. They drove two hours to the Billings, Montana, train depot, boarded an overnight that took them past snow and mountains and more snow before stopping in damp Portland, Oregon, where they switched to another sleeper that would bring them to California. The trains were crowded and dusty, with overpriced coffee and lousy cheese sandwiches for sale. Mary's hands were always dirty. Fannie slept with her head on her mother's shoulder, but Mary couldn't find herself a comfortable position. Instead of resting, she wrote letters to Bud, sometimes twice a day.

"I pinned the balance of my money in a rag and in my girdle, so hope it's safe enuf," she wrote.

She told him about the soldiers who mobbed the train platforms, and the pair escorting a prisoner of war. Though the country had been at war for more than a year, and it had touched Mary in the form of ration books and tire drives, this was her first up close look at it.

"Bud, you couldn't believe in a million years what war is like till you see it out here," she wrote in one of the letters. "I mean soldiers, huge barracks built in the hills and soldiers, soldiers everywhere. It's a beautiful day out. I hope it stays nice."

The train swayed and her pen jumped. She had to pause when she lost her daylight to the eclipse of a tunnel, but she never broke her connection with Bud. She was only thirty-eight, but they were coming up on their twentieth wedding anniversary. They'd buried three children, raised one to adulthood, and seemed to be doing a decent job with their boy, Bobby, who was about to turn twelve. He was a good kid, though sometimes prone to typical preadolescent shenanigans. In December, a boy at school had called him a Jap, probably the most vile insult to spit at a kid in those times, so Bobby slugged him. The teacher banned Bobby from the annual Christmas pageant, so he had to endure the humiliation of watching from the audience

right next to his mother. But if that was their son's worst crime, Mary and Bud could consider themselves lucky.

They were lucky in love, too. They'd reached that stage in their marriage during which so many couples—even those who've held on to respect and affection—become more business partners than romantic ones. But Mary and Bud seemed to have preserved the tender parts of their relationship. She asked often, in her letters, if he missed her. And she signed every one of them with a plea for his safety: *Take care of yourself.*

Because she knew that her family was making a sacrifice, too. Bud was a coal miner working more hours than ever because of the war. Coal fueled those trains that took the soldiers and their wives all over the county. It powered the factories where the girl riveters worked, assembling bombers and ships for the war. The very coal her husband cleared from under the Bearcreek hills went directly to the Army and Navy. Mining as much coal as possible was considered a patriotic duty. Bud's mine ran twenty-four hours a day, six days a week.

Unlike the soldiers' wives, who were new at this game, Mary sent her husband into danger every day. But when the possibility of death hovers for most of your life, as it had for Mary—first she worried for years about her coal-mining father, who'd already had his head smashed by falling rock in the mine, and now Bud—it didn't feel as scary anymore. It became normal, and almost unnoticeable. Maybe, in order to get up every morning and watch a man go into the earth, you need to numb yourself a bit.

While Mary took in America's landscape that February, Bud spent his time immersed in its internal riches. Every working day he walked into a cave full of coal and blew things up. He was a shooter at the Smith Mine, one of the crew who drilled holes into the walls, stuffed explosives in those cavities, set them aflame, and ran for cover. The coal tumbled off the mine's walls, filling the air with dust. When it cleared, hours later, other crews rolled in machines for collecting the coal and loaded it onto open boxcars. The cars brought the black

hunks of profit out of the mine to the tipple, where it was cleaned and sorted, loaded onto railroad trains, sold to big companies and little homeowners, and, finally, burned for fuel.

Unlike shaft miners, who climb into a little cage and then drop down to the coal bed as if they're taking an elevator from the penthouse to the lobby, the Smith men rode straight into the mountain to harvest their coal. Once they were inside, a hoist lowered the cars they rode in, called mantrips, to the main tunnel, which sloped down gradually and led to a honeycomb of smaller paths and rooms. There they worked and ate and became best friends. The men divided into crews based on skill—shooters, trackmen, timbermen—and, sometimes, language. It wouldn't do anyone any good for an Englishman to be paired with a Montenegrin if they couldn't communicate. For one thing, they wouldn't get as much work done. And, of secondary importance to some, they wouldn't be able to protect each other if they couldn't shout warnings using the same urgent words.

It was dark and airy in the mine, with parts of the black walls as shiny as patent leather. It was never too hot or too cold, since the temperature stayed about fifty-seven degrees year-round. The men especially appreciated their temperature-controlled workplace when it was frigid or sweltering outside. And when they saw their fathers stooped and bowlegged from decades of crawling and crouching in other mines, they appreciated the height of the Smith. The ceilings were luxuriously high—high enough for Bud, who was six-foot-two, to stand up straight.

Bud had been working in the mine for eighteen years, but he aimed higher. He already had a second job as the Bearcreek constable, but he dreamed of becoming sheriff of Carbon County. He ran for the job in 1942 on the Democratic ticket. He came up with a campaign slogan and had it printed on business cards: "Pledges Efficiency and Economy," people read when he passed them out. He rigged a poster advertising his candidacy to the top of his maroon Ford to remind anyone he passed on the road of his hopes. His chances looked pretty good, until he got lied to. The sitting sheriff had promised Bud that

he wouldn't run again. Then, maybe because he saw how popular Bud was becoming, he changed his mind and entered the race at the last minute. The county seat was home to a large Finnish population, and the incumbent was a Finn. He won the election, and Bud stayed at the mine. His life would have turned out quite differently if he'd left mining for a clean uniform and an office in the courthouse.

Mary would have rested easier if he'd won the election, too. Though Bud was earning more money now because he was working so many shifts, the paychecks were never enough to compensate for the danger. He'd already been hurt once, back in the twenties, while trying to link two coal cars. When he stepped between the cars to insert the pin that would hold them together, one car rolled. Chomping together like a nutcracker, the cars trapped and crushed his left leg. Bone snapped in two places. His buddies threw down their tools and rushed him to the hospital. The doctors examined the wound and talked about amputating Bud's leg below the knee. For some reason, they decided to wait and see if it would heal instead. They set it in a wooden trough weighed down with a bucket of sand, and he stayed still until the bones fused. When he could finally walk without crutches, he swayed a bit, because the injured leg had healed shorter and at a different angle than the healthy one. His gait reminded Bobby of John Wayne.

So many things could hurt a man underground. Falling rocks, fire, blasting powder. Even breathing was dangerous.

"Man, the air was foul today," Bud had said more than once at the dinner table.

He and his union brothers didn't push for cleaner air, though. It was wartime, and getting the coal out was the priority. How would it look if they beefed about their conditions when the kids in the armed forces were suffering so much more for the country? At least coal miners got to come home to lovely women like Mary every night.

Mary was a seventeen-year-old housewife when they met, though she'd never been married. She cooked and cleaned while her younger

brother attended high school and her father mined coal. It wasn't the life her mother had planned for her.

She'd been born in Czechoslovakia in 1905 and toddled onto American soil three years later. Her parents settled in northern New Jersey, where the smokestacks clouded out the sun. Her father worked on the docks and her mother took in ironing and cleaned houses, when she could breathe. When her asthma got too severe, she took herself to the doctor. He predicted she'd die if she stayed in New Jersey. Go West, he said, where the air is still clear and dry.

Mary had been a city kid, shooting marbles on the sidewalks, jumping rope double Dutch, and following the neighborhood organ grinder and his monkey around. The wild west was nothing like home. She was ten when her family got off a train in southern Montana and began to homestead 320 acres adjacent to an uncle's land. Mary and her brother, Godfrey, went to school in town during the year, but in the summer they worked harder than children should to keep the farm going. They planted wheat and fence posts, hauled springwater for miles, burned sagebrush, and killed rattlesnakes. A rattler attacked Mary once and she remained unconscious for several days, only to awaken to see her mother working on her funeral shroud.

Besides running the ranch, their father worked at the local coal mine. Their mother stewed cottontail rabbits for dinner in their one-room house. Their land was in Crow Indian country, and Mary and Godfrey befriended an old Indian who herded sheep near their ranch. He let them ride his pony and view the world up close through his field glasses. Their mother trimmed the man's hair and gave him eggs to take home.

At one time in her childhood, Mary's life actually intersected with Bud's. She and Godfrey always passed a big rock on their way to school. Their father had told them a legend about an old man who had stopped at the rock to rest during a February blizzard back in 1905 and had frozen to death. That summer, when the snow finally melted, a rancher found his body. He was lying with his legs crossed and his hands on his chest, as if he were just napping, and he still

wore the coat, vest, striped pants, and fine shoes he'd tied on the day he died. The rancher and the local coroner found a watch, a pair of glasses, and seventy-five cents in silver in his pocket. They settled him into a box and buried him by the rock. A few months later, Bud's father, Adam, heard about the mysterious corpse. He hadn't seen his own father in a while, but since the old man tended to move a lot, he hadn't been too worried. Now he contacted the coroner and helped him dig up the body. Sure enough, there lay his father, Thomas Wakenshaw.

It was a story Mary's mother would have appreciated, but by the time Mary found out about the coincidence, her mother was long gone. She died when she was thirty-eight, shortly after her children had left the house for a trip into town. Mary, who was fifteen, was heading back home from her errand when she saw her father on a horse in the distance. He was riding toward her, and she could tell by how urgently he rode and how stiffly he sat in the saddle that she didn't have a mother anymore. He was rushing to town to get the undertaker.

After the funeral, Mary's father sold the farm and moved his teenagers to Bearcreek, where he'd be closer to the mine and where Mary would be able to find a future.

And there he was, sitting in the stands at a baseball game.

Bud Wakenshaw was nineteen when he glanced over at the girl he'd spend the rest of his life with. She'd grown up to be a petite brunette with twinkling eyes, high cheekbones, and a narrow but perfectly shaped smile. He had a job in the mine, as his father did, and spent his free time working at his parents' ranch. He'd grown up around the ranch, the beloved only child of a happy couple.

His mother, Mag, had suffered more than one miscarriage and had given up on trying to bring a live baby into the world by herself. She and her husband, Adam, decided to adopt. But they were firm on one requirement: they wanted a girl. They arranged to meet two nuns from a Helena children's home at a nearby train station and adopt a newborn girl from them. The nuns stepped off the train, one hold-

ing a boy and one holding a girl. Mag insisted on taking the girl, but the nuns said she was already spoken for. Bud's parents were about to leave, childless once again, when one of the nuns pulled a classic trick. *Hold the baby while I use the bathroom*, she asked Bud's mother, and handed her the boy. Mag cradled that baby, looked into his soft eyes, and gave in to fate. By the time the nun returned, Mag realized she couldn't let go.

They named the baby Robert, but everyone called him Bud. He grew into a quiet man who was strong in spirit and body, the perfect balance to Mary, who was as delicate as she was vivacious. They got married seven months after they met, at the Pollard Hotel, which was and still is the fanciest establishment in Carbon County. Visitors see the same broad center staircase when they walk through the main entrance, and look out at the street through the same tall, arched windows as the young couple did. Their wedding day coincided with Easter Sunday and April Fool's Day of 1923, so people believing in signs could have predicted that the marriage would be either a miracle or a joke. Bud wore a fine suit with a silk tie and combed his thick auburn hair back off his forehead. Mary teased and curled her bob, then styled it so one perfect S-shaped curl fell onto her forehead. She stepped into a dress with a bodice made of two layers of lace. After the kisses and cake, Bud and Mary honeymooned at his parents' ranch, then moved into a hilltop house in Bearcreek. It had cold running water and an outhouse. Three months later, Mary was expecting.

It must have been so exciting, knitting booties and daydreaming about the baby who would be born right around their first wedding anniversary. By summer, Mary would be proudly pushing a pram all over town.

But the pain started too early. She was only seven months along and the contractions wouldn't stop. The doctor was helpless; all he could do was catch the premature baby she delivered. It was a boy. Then two other boys, children she hadn't even begun to dream about, descended into the world. The triplets were perfectly formed, with

all their fingers and toes and tiny noses, but they were much too small to survive. She named one baby after Bud, one after her father and one after his father. Robert, Frank, and Adam lived for an hour and a half.

Her father built them a coffin that wasn't much bigger than a cigar box. A friend draped silk handkerchiefs on top of the babies, and a horse-drawn sled pulled them through the snow from the house to the Bearcreek cemetery. Mary and Bud said their prayers over a small, white gravestone shaped like a pyramid. It was carved with the words no mother should ever have to see: Wakenshaw Babies.

Whenever things got bad, Mary told herself to *keep pushing*. So she pushed through her grief. A year later, Fannie was born. The little girl developed scarlatina and rheumatic fever as a child, but survived. Six years after that, Bobby arrived. Life settled down. Bud and Mary hosted potluck dinners, dressed up for dances, and attended all the school events, where Mary talked to everyone. She went to ladies' club meetings and he went to union meetings. They camped by mountain lakes with other mining families in the summer. He played Santa Claus almost every December, passing out candy and fruit, courtesy of the union, to kids in the center of town.

Two weeks after her trip to California, Mary was home in Bearcreek waiting for a basketball game to begin. It was a Friday in February, and she was happy to be back to her routine. Fannie had gotten married, kissed her husband good-bye like all those other young wives, and returned to business college in Billings, though she was spending the weekend at her parents' house. Bobby, who'd stayed with his grandparents while his mother was away, was back in the nest, too. And she didn't have to remind Bud to take care of himself anymore; she was there to do it for him.

It was the last normal day of Mary's life.

None of her children played on the Bearcreek High School basketball team, but that didn't matter. Everyone in town went to the games, just as the adults attended the high school dances long after they'd

graduated. And Mary had been rooting for the squad since she was a teenager and her brother played on the town's first official team. The Bearcats had gotten better and better every season, filling the high school with more and more trophies and banners. In 1939 they won the biggest contest of all, the state Class B championship. The whole town had celebrated with a big banquet. Since then, though, the team had gone downhill. This year they'd posted more losses than wins.

Mary, Bud, and Bobby sat in the bleachers. It was an unofficial game, but important just the same. The referee stood in the center of the court and held up the ball. The players froze in their positions until he blew the whistle. Then they exploded up the basketball court, intent on giving their fans the happy ending they deserved.

After the game, Mary and her family headed home. On the way, Bobby would have tried to catch a glimpse of the slag heap by the mine buildings. The pile of coal waste was always burning, so it glowed, like magic, when the wind blew through it. He was surrounded by majestic mountains and the endless Montana sky, but the smoldering mound delighted him.

Inside their narrow rectangle of a house, Mary and Bobby got ready for bed. Bud prepared for his next job. As town constable, he needed to make his nightly rounds. There hadn't been any serious crime in Bearcreek since early in the century, when one guy killed another at the pool hall, and, later, when a boardinghouse resident shot his roommate to death for annoying him and stealing his liquor. These days the constable just broke up brawls or found drunks a safe place to sober up.

As Bud got ready to leave, Bobby took a prized box of candy out of his dresser drawer. Walnettos, chewy squares of caramel dotted with walnuts, were the boy's favorite sweet. He broke the package in two and offered half to his father. He probably wouldn't have shared his stash with many people, but he adored Bud. At eleven, he was still young enough to worship the man who took him sled-ding and surprised him with gifts. One morning, Bobby woke up to see a Popeye lamp in his room. Bud didn't drink, but he went to the

local saloons to play pitch and poker. When he won, he'd spend his take on punch cards, which were like lottery tickets that paid out in prizes: sometimes candy, sometimes a rifle, sometimes a sailor man leaning on a lamppost.

Now Bobby wanted to pay back that generosity with Walnettos.

"Not right now," Bud told him, as he grabbed his blackjack, a small but deadly weapon made of leather and weights. "I'll have one later."

Then he hurried out the door.

His dad got home from rounds very late and went to the mine very early, so later would mean tomorrow after his shift. That was okay, though. Bobby would save his dad's Walnettos until he saw him again.

The next morning, February 27, 1943, Mary placed a three-minute egg in its cup and presented it to her father-in-law. Adam Wakenshaw, who lived close enough to the family to join them for every meal, had been eating the same breakfast since he was a boy in England. And, of course, he always ate it the same way: cracking off the top of the shell with a spoon, then scooping out the yolk. Adam had a lot of long-standing habits. He almost always wore a dress suit. And he'd been mining coal for most of his life. At seventy-two, he was the oldest miner at the Smith Mine.

It was no place for an old man, but Mary's sixty-five-year-old father, who lived with them, was also breathing in coal dust all day. With all the younger men fighting the war, the retirees had been called back. And they weren't allowed to quit unless they found a replacement, which was almost impossible. *Soldiers on the home front*, one politician would later call them. Bud wasn't old enough to retire, but if the country hadn't been at war he'd probably be farming instead. He'd already made a deal for a parcel of land; he just had to wait for peace to cultivate it.

On this morning, as Mary served all three of them their eggs and bacon, they were actually excited to get to work. After working at the

same mine for eighteen years, today was the first time they were all scheduled for the same shift.

While the men ate, Mary packed their sandwiches and poured fresh water into the bottom compartments of their cylindrical tin lunch pails. Outside her kitchen window, she could see the sun on the foothills. It was going to be a warm day, the kind that melts the snow just enough so it sparkles. A perfect day for welcoming spring.

That's just what Mary had planned. Once the men left and the kids rolled out of bed, she was going to drive to the train station in Red Lodge and pick up a shipment of chicks that were on their way from Billings. After Bud's leg had been crushed in the mine all those years ago, he'd used his workers' compensation money to buy some Anaconda chickens. He'd been raising them in a big chicken coop out back ever since, and he'd just gotten word that his fluffy new babies had arrived. Mary's big chore of the day was to bring them home. She'd do some shopping in town, too, and before she knew it, it would be time to feed these men again.

Their shift ended at four. They would be hungry for a hearty dinner.