

NO MAN LEFT BEHIND -Ivannah Jacob

“Give it some time Cole,” Ma had whispered, pushing me onto the porch as Pa raged inside, “He’ll get over it eventually.”

Her face told me she didn’t believe that herself.

So there I was, heartbroken in my car, speeding away from Ridge Town, West Virginia, as fast as I could.

I stopped at the rickety sign stuck into the side of a cliff as my eyes welled up with tears. “Welcome to Ridge Town,” it said in chunky red block letters. Hanging obliquely, it looked like it might plunge onto the gravel road, if I sneezed. It amazed me how quickly things had changed. A few years ago, I was everything Pa wanted in a son. Now...he couldn’t stand the sight of me. I had really hoped that he would understand my decision and would see where I was coming from.

I stepped out of my car and walked to the road’s edge. Ridge Town lay sprawled below me. At first glance, it seemed like your classic sleepy mountain town. It sat nestled between peaks with a main road slicing through the town, bordered by houses and shops. But, unlike the picturesque mountain escapes that flooded my social media feed, the houses here were made with dull grey bricks and roughly all maintained the same cubical shape. The grass, drained of a life, was a scraggly brown. A thin layer of black dust coated the windows and created canvases on which children traced pictures with their stubby fingers. The dust had leached into the air above the town, tainting it grey. A trademark rasping cough accompanied almost all able-bodied men. Most of these images could be attributed to the coal mine that sat at the very end of the road. It stretched for miles through the belly of Gale’s Peak. And everyday of every week, men like my Pa would venture through the yawning tunnels to shovel coal onto a conveyor belt. They say it’s the closest brush a man could get with death, buried by layers of ancient rock, isolated and alone.

Despite this, most of Ridge Town’s residents were proud of their heritage. Miners were hailed as heroes and the stories and legends that surrounded the mines were enough to fill books and capture the hearts of the youth.

Pa, a big burly man with arms as thick as trees and a body built like a wrestler (the evidence of the 56 hours a week he spent shoveling coal) was awfully good at telling mine myths. His family had been miners for generations. According to his stories, my great grandPa was an infamous mine hero who legendarily dug himself out of rockslides with his bare hands and saved fellow miners from being crushed to death in the tunnels. Like many other children in Ridge Town, I fell in love with Pa’s job.

However, I was left in the dark about the challenges faced by my community even when my fixation with mines grew. My parents didn't mention that coal mining, though lucrative at first, was gradually losing its steam, as other energy sources started taking root. They didn't mention that the company operating the mines was losing money and had started to cut down on paychecks. My family was barely scraping by, especially after Pa's medical bills started to pile up too (He had black lung, a common disease found in miners, and the cut in healthcare subsidies didn't help).

Pa's family had been too poor to fund his education. Then Ma got pregnant and he dropped out of college and took up coal mining. Though proud of his job, his lack of education meant fewer occupational options and he vowed not to make his son bear this burden.

When I was 15 and going into high school, mining towns had been receiving a lot of attention. There were always journalists lurking about hoping to score interviews and report on the mines. Occasionally, a movie star or two would turn up to shoot an action scene. All this publicity meant that a boarding school up north was looking to offer scholarships to children of miners. After long discussions and weighing every possibility my parents decided that I should take up the opportunity. The entrance test required me to digest 8 subjects worth of material on the floor of my bedroom. Nevertheless, I received an invitation a week after and my future went from a guaranteed job in the mines to a world filled with infinite possibilities.

In high school, I was always biased towards science, especially with Ms. M. To say that there was never a dull moment in her class was an understatement. We were constantly engaged in some lively discussion or the other. On one particular day Ms. M showed us graphic images of what the future would look like if we continued burning fossil fuels the way we did today. The hellish images of raging forest fires tearing through the parched earth and devastating floods that swallowed entire cities creating Atlantis-like ruins caught me off guard. Then, as she frequently did, she asked us for possible solutions. The average answer seemed to be to stop relying on coal and move on to greener energy sources.

But then what would happen to people like Pa? Moving away from coal would destroy their livelihoods. Most of the miners wouldn't have the expertise to switch to other professions.

When I brought this up to Ms. M she smiled sympathetically at me, "You're right Cole. The future of the mining community needs to be taken into consideration. But think of it like this, whether we like it or not, one day we are going to have to stop relying on coal because we will simply run out of it or the situation of the earth will be so dire we will have to stop. If we act now we still have the option of a smooth transition."

Ms. M's words stuck with me and got me thinking about the future of my community.

When I graduated from college I applied to WINDTECH (a wind energy company).

Unfortunately, Pa, a staunch supporter of mining, did not share my sentiments when I got the job. To him, my support of renewable energy was an act of treason. When I had gone back to Ridge Town I had known I was walking into a minefield. It hadn't taken much to trigger him. I tried to explain to him that the shift to renewable energy would happen with or without miners' consent, but when it did happen miners needed to be able to adapt.

He exploded.

"It's funny don't you think?" He had yelled, "All these people campaigning for renewable energy probably never had to think twice about where their electricity came from. They've never had to see or experience the lives of miners who slave away inside tunnels that they might not even come out of alive. We've done every gritty job and now we aren't green enough! Who do you think would want to hire someone like me? I don't even have a college degree! I made it a point to make sure that you wouldn't feel trapped like I do, and the first thing you do is leave us in the dust and join hands with the people who see us as an inconvenience!"

With a heavy heart, I walked back to my car and jetted away from Ridge Town. If miners were ever going to be convinced of transitioning into a greener future, there had to be individuals who would fight for them so that they would get the best life possible.

The year is 2030. It's a warm August day, and I am standing on a podium to inaugurate WINDTECH's greatest achievement yet. Behind me are rows of whirring windmills. In front of me are families and friends along with reporters and their crew who have come to capture this awe inspiring moment.

"Thank y'all for being here. Today, we celebrate the addition of 30 ex-miners into our wind farm workforce," I gesture to the men standing beside me with huge grins on their faces. "Over the past year WINDTECH has been retraining these young men to work as technicians on this farm. Along with a good pay, they'll also enjoy the added perks of subsidised housing, insurance and a safe working environment. We still have miles to go before we sleep but, never again should miners be afraid of the green future, for these men are living proof that the mining community will not be left behind!"

The applause is thunderous. People are elated. A sense of fulfilment fills me as I look at the crowd.

Suddenly, a pair of familiar eyes lock with mine.

The world grinds to a halt.

All the mayhem fades into the background.

A faint shiver travels down my spine as I realise I am looking into the proud eyes of my Pa.

