

## The Musings of a Coal Miner by Lee Blanton

My grandfather sent me to work when he caught me sneaking out wearing trousers with my hair stuffed into a cap. I had become something of a social pariah for our family, and spoiled every hope of being married off. The only true choice was to have me disappear in the dust and mud of his failing coal pit. My hair was cut, my skirts were burned, and I was given trousers and a pick, and sent into the earth. Even as the walls closed in and my breath grew thick, I had never felt more free in my life, and of course, there was Ethan.

Ethan would never tell me his last name, or even what part of Scotland he was from. I knew that his father had died in the war, that his family sent him to the states, and that he had sold his soul to my grandfather but sent every penny to his mother and sister. If I ever tried to probe further, he would put a gentle finger to my lips and whisper how I should search for my stories elsewhere. He was the first person to ever encourage my writing. On our scarce days off, we would steal my uncle's brand new Ford, and go into the city. Ethan would take me onto the streetcars, and gawk at any new construction. I would listen to his excited ramblings about the bright future and his place in it as a famous musician, and mine as a famous writer. There was an old stone house that had been turned into a shrine for Edgar Allan Poe. Ethan was in love with it. For a while, it was passed around between the city's historic foundations before it settled into the hands of a foundation dedicated to the father of mystery. Ethan admitted that he had wanted to buy it when he first came to the states, but figured it was better off as it was, than torn into a heap. We'd find a spot near the river, usually by the shiplock, and sit for hours. He would hum his old songs in an older language which suited his accent, and I would write whatever fairy tails sprung to mind.

He was my muse and his voice was like crystal, but one evening, there was a hitch in his song, and another, and then a cough. I suppose it may have sounded like any other cough to anyone who would be passing us by at the time, but a miner knew the difference. It was a cough which was clogged with black dust. I flinched so hard that my pencil broke in my hand, just as my heart shattered in my chest. I could feel Ethan's hand shake slightly as he grasped mine, but said nothing. There was nothing to be done. Once it had its grip on you, there was no coming back from it, and besides, it wasn't as though any of us could afford to walk away from the mines.

A month or so went by, and there was an accident in the pit. Ethan, myself, and five of others were trapped. Rubble and a collapsed beam stood between a suffocating death and our escape, and one man would have to hold it for the rest. Ethan did not hesitate. His cough had gotten more persistent over the weeks. Anyone with eyes could see from the color of his skin and eyes that he was not long for this world. He dropped his pick, pulled me in for a gentle final kiss, and lifted the beam just enough for the rest to crawl through. I tried to stay behind, but Ethan ordered the others to drag me out. The last I heard of his voice was that clogged, blackened cough.

My grandfather's mine closed after that. The men that I had formed bonds with followed the work out west, and my family had no choice but to take me in again, if only to avoid scandal. As the months wore on, I rarely left my small room. I'd grip a pencil, and stare at an empty page, desperately trying to write. Whenever lead touched paper, the only words that came to mind were the words I had written to Ethan's sister to inform her of his death. I would stare out my window, hoping to hear the voice of my muse rising out of the pit where he was buried. I could taste the coal in my mouth, and I pleaded with no particular god to allow me a sign that his lively spirit had not been smothered under that dirt.

On the anniversary of the accident, my uncle came to me and tossed his keys onto my desk. I was too tired to drive, but he took the same route that Ethan and I would take. My uncle brought me to lunch with a friend of his, I believe his name was Tucker. I hardly registered the conversation, but the man told my uncle something about limited space, and we left soon after. One of the hotels that Ethan was so excited about was finally finished and nearby. It shone just as bright as he had promised, but my head and eyes hurt too much to appreciate it. As we walked through the crowd of finely dressed gentlemen and ladies outside, I heard talk of stocks, and banks, and quiet panic over an uncertain future. I paid it no mind. I simply coughed into my handkerchief. When I pulled it away from my lips, I saw the black stain on the cloth and finally heard the voice of my muse calling me from a distance.