



George and the Mine Shaft

A short story by Noah Rahm

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A young man stood staring at an abandoned gold mine waiting anxiously for his friend.

He had a look of terror braced by firm resolve. Once or twice he felt the urge to go inside himself, but he knew he must wait.

“Alright George. Let’s go.”, Harold, his friend and a former miner at the mine, shouted from a distance as he ran towards the entrance of the mine.

George only gave a short look back at Harold before beginning to climb the boulders that guarded the entrance. Clumsily climbing the boulders, his breathing quickened. He really enjoyed climbing and often climbed for sport, but this was different and he knew it.

As they neared the entrance it was clear that only one of them could slide in at a time. The mine had been in working order until the day before when the ceiling collapsed.

“What am I doing?” George thought between his heavy breathing.
“Maybe I am crazy!”

Thinking about it only made his resolve stronger. He had reservations about going into the mine before the search and rescue group came, but he decided that he didn’t care. “Every moment counts and it will be at least a few hours before a rescue team can gather.” His anger flared up at the thought of losing his father if he sat back and waited. No. He would take his chances and go despite his fears.

George was the first to slide into the narrow passage making up the only visible entrance left into the mine. The rush of adrenaline in his veins caused him to drop into the dark hole without hesitation. Harold wasn’t long behind and nearly came on top of his leg. The place where they found themselves had a strong smell of sulfur and wasn’t much larger than the area of a small bed.

They both looked around them with their flashlights to see if there was any way through the fallen debris from the collapsed ceiling. “Hey look here! Let’s dig this out.” Harold cried.

Harold had spotted a small opening in the rocks and was busy tearing at the debris with the back of his flashlight as a shovel. George joined him and before long they had it large enough to slide through one at a time.

“Harold, it just occurred to me that we don’t know where he is.”, George stated with a concerned look. “Oh, right.” was Harold’s only reply as he clambered through to the other side of the rock wall.

George was taken aback by his friend’s lack of concern, but decided to overlook it. He followed through and found Harold observing some crystals poking out of the rock.

Upon his eyes adjusting to the darkness of the inner cavern, George could see that they were in a large space evidently making up part of the passage to the inside of the mine. He noticed a slow trickle of water coming from the left side of the ceiling splattering and running down what appeared to be a slope further on.

Harold had left off from looking at the crystals and was looking at a piece of paper he had pulled from his pocket. When he noticed that George had turned to him, he tucked the paper back into his pocket without turning or looking up.

“Quite a dreary place it is.” he managed to say, as if trying to change the subject in a conversation. George at once thought to ask him about the paper, but he felt it more important to get to his father as soon as possible. “I hope my father is able to bear it.” They began to proceed further in, both cautiously aware of their footing. “He wasn’t in good health before and the cold and wet won’t do him any better.” George continued thoughtfully.

They could now see where the stream fell off to a not-so-gradual drop in the level of rock. Peering over the edge they both shuttered. The light

from their flashlights, as strong as it was, did not pierce the darkness enough to see the bottom. With a moments glance at each other, they retreated in the opposite direction where the mine shaft continued with a slight bend.

The air was cool and wet, but there was no breeze in that part of the mine so it was rather heavy air. "I'm glad I thought to bring a jacket." George said to himself, before breaking into a coughing fit.

Harold heard his coughing and gave a look around and a pause as if the sound came from the cave rather than from his friend. George had the feeling that Harold seen him as an annoyance on this mission, though he couldn't tell why.

No matter. George's mind was fixed on finding his father and couldn't give room to think about something else. He could picture his father sitting somewhere in the mine shaft wet, hungry, and alone. Maybe he was suffocating? Maybe he became injured when the mine shaft ceiling collapsed and couldn't move?

The thoughts gave him a pain he hadn't felt before. If distance makes the heart grow fond, then distance plus danger makes the heart heave in pain.

All these thoughts were passing through his mind when Harold suddenly cried out.

Coming from his deep thought, George snapped into a full run following Harold's present action. They both ran and threw themselves face to the ground in order to avoid a huge deluge of bats flying towards the way they had come. The fluttering and movement of wind was enough to make every nightmare either of them ever had pale in comparison.

It was a full ten minutes before they could lift their heads from the ground. Neither did either of them do so for nearly a half hour for shock of the experience.

Trembling, George lifted his body up from the dirty ground. He saw that Harold was also very shaken and wore a most serious look that made him more uneasy. Harold tried a smile, but his eyes betrayed his true state of terror. He asked if George was alright and mentioned that they should be more vigilant for bats in the future. This raised George's countenance, but he could still feel himself shaking.

"Would you like to go back?" Harold suggested. George nodded. He had a resolve to find his father and he wouldn't turn back now.

Further on they struggled to follow the mine shaft deeper into darkness. The collapse of the ceiling left only narrow spaces to continue.

They had been following the main shaft in a fairly consistent line until one point at which, after a bit of hesitation, Harold led off into a passage branching from the main shaft.

At length George spoke of his uneasiness and wonderment with the new direction. "Harold, do you really think he would go this way?"

Harold seemed not to have heard, but did slow his step slightly. George continued, "I don't think he would venture this way since the entrance is the other way."

They were coming to where it was more than a foot narrower than in the main shaft. Harold seemed to grow more expectant, George thought, as the shaft narrowed.

Harold's silence was broken at a quiver of the ground. A weak earthquake followed at which Harold asked him to grab his hand so they would not get separated. Bracing together bent over, they stood in one place while dirt and not a few boulders fell around them.

As the quake settled, George thought he heard a faint cry for help echoing through the mine shaft.

"Did you hear that, Harold?" he said. "It sounded like it came from the

way we came. It was cry—I'm sure of it."

Harold gave a straight face then turned away. "I didn't hear anything," he replied.

As concerned as George was for his father's safety, he was getting concerned about Harold's indifference.

Harold continued to walk further into the shaft, and George reluctantly followed a pace behind.

Looking around the walls of the shaft, George came to realize that this was a newly blasted part of the mine. Unlike the main shaft, no scaffolding, lights, or railing were in sight. Oddly, the ceiling was not caved in here at all. It appeared to have been mostly intact despite the main shaft caving in.

Shining his flashlight at the increasingly narrow passage walls, he could hardly believe his eyes. Veins of gold spread through the rock greeted his eyes. "Hey, look...gold!" he blurted out at his excitement.

Harold turned sharply towards him. "Have you never thought of seeing gold in a gold mine before?" he retorted, showing some annoyance.

It was this that finally made him have enough of Harold's indifference towards his father's plight. He stopped shortly and waited to have Harold's attention. But Harold was much too far in his own thoughts to notice and continued on.

With about a pace between them, Harold finally noticed, turned, and yelled back. "Look, George, if you want to go back, you can go."

George was puzzled. "How can I go back without finding my father? That is what we're here for, right?" Harold shined the flashlight back and then further into the shaft. "Actually, I'm here for the gold," he stated with much seriousness.

At this George ran towards him in a rage. "What do you mean? My father

is in danger and you only care about yourself!”

He was in such a flurry of mind that he dropped his flashlight and could only stutter, “How could you be so...so...selfish?”

Harold’s face changed to a look of compassion and whispered, “Your father is dead.”

George paused as the meaning of the words sank into his ears and into his heart. Could it really be? His father, dead?

Outwardly he could only shake his head and give a deep stare at the dark ground. Harold didn’t venture to break the silence but put his hand on his friend’s shoulder.

Then it came upon George like a gust of wind. He threw off Harold’s hand from his shoulder. “Why?!” he yelled with tears in his eyes. “Why did you trick me to serve yourself?!” George couldn’t decide which was worse: hearing of the death of his father, or discovering the betrayal of his friend.

It was only a short time before it was Harold’s turn to burst into tears. “You don’t understand.” he managed to say as he leaned himself against the wall with his head down-turned.

George’s heart smote him. What could this mean?

Harold finally looked back up at him, holding back further tears.

“I’m sorry for tricking you. The collapse of the mine shaft was not an accident. It was planned sabotage. Some men conspired to get the gold in this mine for themselves. However, your father discovered their plan and in revenge they blew up the mine ceiling with him left deep in the mine shaft.”

“I was so appalled that I had it in my mind to blast the rest of the mine so that it would collapse and those murderers could no longer get the gold. But you see, I couldn’t do it until I knew no one was in the mine.

Knowing that you would go to search for your father in the mine, I decided to offer to go with you. I was hoping that you would decide to end the search for your father after you seen the shaft. I know it was a stupid idea, but I felt so angry.”

Here he resumed weeping, choking on his tears.

George was speechless. Shame slowly came over him. His rage had caused him to falsely accuse his friend and justify his own anger.

“Harold,” he began with a trembling voice. “I am sorry for being angry at what I did not understand and for accusing you. It was very foolish.”

His friend laughed through his tears. “George, we both got angry and did foolishly. I forgive you.”

With a brotherly hug, they both started back the way they came towards the main mine shaft.

At every step towards the entrance George’s heart grew heavier, as if to drag him back into the darkness behind them. He couldn’t tell why, except for, perhaps, a longing after his father? Once or twice he fancied he heard a voice drifting through the air.

His emotions were so mixed with shock, pain, and indeed an undertone of anger. Angered at the men who dared to do such an evil deed to his father, he contemplated just how he would ensure they would be locked up in prison for their crime. “Justice must be done.” he reassured himself. How could he feel any different?

Harold, with just a brief glance towards his contemplating friend, at once read his thoughts. For his face had disfigured into the very picture of rage.

It did not surprise Harold in the least. He had felt the same way and nearly did something he’d later regret.

Harold began to think about what he could say to console him, but at

length he could think of nothing. After all, what could he tell himself to alleviate the cry for justice within his being? Sometimes silence is the best answer.

It was quite some time before the silence between them was broken. George was the one to do so.

“Does anyone else know about this?” he said, the words barely coming out of his mouth.

Harold knew what he referred to and only had to give a nod in negative for George to stop in his tracks. “We must give my father justice. If I have it my way, those men will serve their whole lives in prison!”

Seeming to be relieved at voicing the words, he paused. “You will help me, Harold?”

Harold had stopped and was looking at George intently, shocked at the intensity of his words. Harold barely opened his mouth to speak, when they heard a cry for help reverberate through the cave.

The cry was so dreadful and seemed so near to them that it sent a chill up George’s spine and neither of them moved.

Again, they heard a cry further away—or perhaps muffled. They couldn’t discern which.

Both went looking frantically around with their flashlights.

They had neared the place where the small stream of water fell down to ledge to the unknown. Hearing a repeat of the first cry for help come from that direction, they both ran towards it—but cautiously, as they feared falling over the edge.

To both of their surprise they could see the form of a figure slowly scaling up side of the ledge. At short intervals the figure would pause and let out an agonizing low shriek of pain. At each shriek, George felt the pain deep inside him.

Then came a glimmer of hope. Maybe this was his father! Maybe he was alive and not dead. But oh—he is injured!

Gaining the same resolve with which he had entered the mine, he directed Harold to let him down in hopes of getting close enough to reach the figure in the darkness below.

Harold had anticipated what George would want to do and not a moment was lost in lowering him as far as he could without falling off the edge.

“Be careful.” Harold pleaded, as he finally let go of George’s hand, leaving him to go down the rest of way himself.

It was not without much difficulty that George came close enough to the slow moving figure. The ledge was steep and there were few clefts in the rock to get firm footing.

As a former miner, Harold was accustomed to the darkness and heavy air that filled the shaft they now found themselves inside. It was not so for George. All of George’s strength, knowledge, and stamina gained from climbing in times past came to full use now. He had been weary from the wanderings through the mine already and his body shook from terror and exhaustion. Only the hope that his father would yet be saved kept him on.

Finally, he reached near enough to hold out his hand in order to grab the dark figure’s hand.

He so wished that he could see his father’s face—perhaps his smile—but he had not brought a flashlight with him, needing both hands for the dangerous task.

Harold anxiously waited at the top with his flashlight pointed over the edge, the light barely illuminating the two dark figures below. He could hardly wait until the ordeal would end and everyone would be safe at home.

Slowly, but surely, George helped to pull the injured figure up towards the top of the ledge. Weary as he was, he couldn't give up now. He loved his father and just thinking of his smile gave him new strength. He would pause at each cry of pain from below as he slowly dragged on.

He was nearly ready to give out and just let go when they finally came within the strong beam of light from Harold's flashlight. George remembered yearning after it and thinking "The light!" They had been in the darkness of the mine for nearly six hours.

Harold watched as they came closer. As the face of the injured figure came into the light, Harold's words came out faster than he knew what he was saying. "So it served you right after all for your evil deed, Mr. Grevil!"

The words barely pierced the cool air when the meaning struck George's poor, weary heart.

It was not his father! It was no less than one of the evil murderers. And he was saving him with the last of his strength!

The thought flashed through his mind to take his revenge now. The man was injured and just a slip of his hand would send him into the darkness below—no doubt to his death. Justice would be accomplished and no one would know the difference! George loosened his grip on the man's hand. The man only gave a moan. He was in too much pain and in terror of dangling over the darkness much longer to care.

"See, he doesn't even care himself." George comforted himself through his tears. "Ha! He knows he is guilty. It would be more kind to let him die now than make him serve life in prison."

Then the words he had heard many times before came over his mind like a wave in the ocean. "Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says Yahweh."

He thought about David and Saul. How David didn't take revenge for himself, but showed Saul, the very man who tried to kill him, the love of Yahweh.

George realized how he was so undeserving of Yahweh's forgiveness for the wrong things he had done.

"And yet, you saved ME!" he cried under his breath.

"Oh Yahweh," he prayed for the first time in a long time, "Forgive me!"

Harold felt shame as he seen the struggle in his friend. He asked Yahweh for forgiveness and pleaded that George would make the right decision "to forgive and show mercy..." he prayed.

George tightened his grip on the man's hand and pulled him up. He had given it over to Yahweh and would leave it to Him to decide justice.

When they finally reached the top and crawled over the edge, they could both only lie on the ground for exhaustion.

Examining the man, Harold found that he was in worse condition than he had first imagined. He was badly bruised—nearly skinned—and had multiple broken bones.

Harold came to the conclusion that he had fallen off of the edge. "One wonders how he had managed to survive the fall." he thought.

Before going unconscious, George thought he seen a smile of gratefulness appear on the man's face.

It looked just like he remembered his father's smile to be.

THE END

