

THE MINE SHAFT

Charles Edward Brooks

O! why were we given hungry hearts and wild desires if we have to
live in a world like this?

-Thomas Hardy: *The Woodlanders*

As the ship listed crazily from side to side, Mary Ellen Redman gripped the edges of her berth. She refused to look through the porthole at the raging storm outside. They had said at dinner that it would last all night.

Still, she thought, it's better than flying. The ocean's a kind of monster, but at least it has a top and a bottom. It has boundaries; it's finite. The sky has no beginning and no end. It's just too horrible to think about.

In this turmoil, sleep was out of the question. She switched on the light and reached for her book: Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.

From time to time, she glanced in the wall mirror at the foot of her berth. What she saw made her feel, as usual, proud and guilty: proud that the handsome

forty-one-year-old woman in the glass was herself, guilty that the full, voluptuous body belonged to that same self. A body that time and again led other people, mostly men, to behave in objectionable ways. She could never find it in her heart to blame them, for her own corporeal being somehow caused them to act as they did.

The wind howled with a frenzy that she had never heard before. As the ship rose and plunged with ever more violence, the children in the next cabin screamed in terror.

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The landscape grew greener and hillier as the train chugged northward. Vineyards clung to the hillsides. Olive groves encircled the villages, through which the train passed but seldom visited. A well-dressed gentleman in his forties was the only other occupant of the first-class compartment. She carefully avoided his eyes, which she felt to be upon her.

For the first real vacation since her girlhood, Mary Ellen had wanted something altogether different. Fortunately, those had been her doctor's sentiments as well.

"Miss Redman," he had said, "you've been working in the library for twenty years, with maybe just a week off in the summers. And then, there was your

mother's long illness before she passed away. Now you can get away for a couple of months, *and you should*. Really get away, to another country, another culture." A significant pause. "Where the...ah...customs aren't as confining as they are here. I'm telling you this as your physician."

And she had worked out the plan herself, using the steamship company's material, the world atlas, and her other sources at the library. No one at the travel agency had ever heard of the little town toward which the train was now puffing: Santa Cremilde, in the hinterland behind the district capital, Vila. One more reason for spending her holiday there and not elsewhere.

Armed with a thick folder of traveler's checks and a bottle of antidepressant tablets, she was venturing into the unknown for the first time in her life. Money would not be a problem. But suppose something went wrong with her health? The doctors there would hardly know her language, and she certainly did not speak theirs.

At the next stop, the gentleman gathered his things, rose, and said something that she did not understand. Once outside, he bowed deeply to her from the station platform. Now that he no longer constituted a danger, she allowed herself to look at him. Despite herself, the admiration that sparkled in his eyes gratified her.

As she stepped briskly toward the town's one hotel with the porter at her side, Mary Ellen tried to calculate the proper tip to give the man for his trouble. As compared with the dollar, the currency used in this country was virtually worthless. The price of modest refreshments quickly escalated into the thousands. But she managed well with numbers. She felt confident that it would not take her two days to become adept with the local money.

During the short walk from the train station, she looked uneasily at every passerby. She hoped to see no other foreign tourists, to hear no languages other than the country's own. Especially not her mother tongue. If she could feel severed from the past, for only a few weeks, then the joy of being on vacation would be unalloyed. Perhaps something new, something unfamiliar, even slightly frightening, would happen. Among her own kind, nothing of the sort would ever transpire.

She turned to the porter and spoke very distinctly, as though to a deaf child: "Do you have many foreigners coming to Santa Cremilde?"

"Desculpe, minha senhora. Não falo inglês."

Without understanding the words, she took the man's reply as a good omen.

English oaks and numerous varieties of pine overarched the sandy track. A carpet of pine needles covered the forest floor; here and there a cluster of wood fern burst luxuriantly through it. The track led up the highest of the hills surrounding Santa Cremilde. The local people called it a mountain, but having seen the Rockies, Mary Ellen had other notions of what mountains should be like.

The trail sloped consistently, but not steeply, upward. In an hour she expected to reach the top, where there was said to be an abandoned mine. Occasionally, through the foliage, she glimpsed the ruins of a house, overgrown and manifestly long-since deserted.

In her wanderings about the town, people rushed to the doors and windows when she passed their dwellings. Seldom, if ever, had they seen such a fine-looking blond lady, a foreigner, clad in a warm-up suit and clipping along at a fast pace. Up here, there was no one to stare at her at all.

But close to the end of the ascent, on the left side of the track, she discovered a stone house that appeared to be inhabited. The ground in front of it, stamped down hard, nourished no weeds. An arbor built against the building supported a shiny grapevine. In the back, a kitchen garden boasted lush tomato plants and rows of a long-stemmed vegetable like collard greens. Not a soul was in sight. No

chattering voices, no blaring radio or television broke the near-silence of the surrounding forest. The entire property was immaculately kept.

Very near the top of the hill, Mary Ellen came to the cave that had provided access to the silver mine a century earlier. Next to the gaping entrance, an enameled metal panel depicting Our Lady of Something-or-Other had been affixed to the rock face, its colors still vivid after a hundred years. A prickling sense of adventure drew her into the opening, amply lighted by the bright sunshine. Toward the back of the immense, otherwise empty chamber, a rusted iron grill blocked the way. Beyond the barrier, she could just make out the collar of the mine shaft.

Since passing the last house, the one that looked inhabited, the woman had heard nothing but faint birdsong that seemed to come from trees far distant. Now she became aware of a weird, soothing music emanating from underground. Somehow, the action of air currents in the mine shaft and its crosscuts was creating these moaning organ tones. She grasped the bars and leaned forward to listen. In her mind's eye she saw the men who had descended from this spot into the rocky passages below: the dark hair, the faces glistening with sweat, the lithe, nearly naked bodies.

When she came out, the sun blinded her for a moment. Once re-accustomed to the light, she realized that the patch of azure in the distance was the ocean. No

more than a glimmer, much too far away to be either heard or smelled. Seen from this vantage point, the monster seemed entirely inoffensive.

As the walker started down the hill, she heard the sound of chopping up ahead. She soon reached the intriguing house, now on her right, where a youth was hoeing in the garden. From his blue jeans upward, his body was bare, as were his feet. She stepped forward cautiously, so as not to make her presence known, and then stopped stock-still to peruse the picture before her.

Muscles rippled under the ivory skin of the youth's arms and shoulders. Curly black hair framed an earnest adolescent face.

I've never seen such a splendid creature in my whole life, Mary Ellen mused. Of course, he's just a boy. I could be his mother. The odd thing is: *He looks like me*. That straight nose, the dimple in his chin, the shade of his skin: all the same as mine. His hair is black and mine is blond; that's the only difference. It's uncanny!

As if she had spoken aloud, the youth turned suddenly toward her and leaned immobile on the hoe. His porcelain-blue eyes matched her own exactly. As she looked deeply into them, she trembled with pleasure. It was almost like looking into a distorting mirror, but one that warps for better rather than for worse.

The boy's expression changed not at all vis-à-vis the stranger. Neither smiling nor frowning, he stared at her openly, without the slightest self-consciousness.

Nobody has ever looked at me like that, the woman said to herself with a mixture of discomfort and joy. If I let him go on, he'll look right into my soul. He'll know everything about me!

With some effort, Mary Ellen tore her gaze away and strode down the track toward the town, feeling the blue eyes boring into her back. As the outskirts of Santa Cremilde came into sight, a wolf dashed across the road in front of her.

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The enameled panel puffed out as if it would burst. She no longer knew just whom it portrayed. For the Queen of Heaven now looked like a boy dressed up to play the part. Black hair fell about the lissome, creamy face. The dimple in the chin would be delicious in a smile, but the young actor took pains to perform his role with dignity. He did not smile at all.

From underneath the panel a triangular head appeared. A pink-colored snake glided out into the open, rose like a cobra, and swayed before her. "I'm not venomous," it said in the voice of Methuselah. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

Mary Ellen Redman sat up in bed, snapped on the lamp, and consulted her wristwatch: four o'clock in the morning. Outside her window, rain poured down in bucketfuls.

Once she had fetched a glass of water, she drank it slowly and got back in bed. Turning off the light, she lay back sleepily and recalled her dream.

Well, she thought, I haven't been reading Freud and his successors all these years for nothing. The interpretation of *that* dream couldn't be more obvious. It's not a lack of *theory* that's my problem.

Just before she fell asleep, she remembered something the doctor had said: *We can trust our dreams to guide us in real life. For they come from the deepest parts of our psyche.*

And I *will* trust this one, she happily resolved.

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After three days of rain, the sun had returned in full glory. Gorse and Scotch broom glinted yellow along the mine track. For the first time, she noticed the tangy aroma of eucalyptus in the forest.

Just before she came to the last house on the left, two foxes in the brush peered out at her, evidently unafraid. Their orange fur shone like fire against the dark foliage.

The youth was gathering tomatoes in the kitchen garden. Ripe vegetables, brilliantly red, almost filled the basket at his feet.

Where is his mother? Mary Ellen wondered. People here seem to have big families. Where is the rest of his?

As soon as she reached his elevation, he turned toward her with the same earnest gaze as before. And she kept her expression attuned to his: serious, neutral, but not indifferent.

The boy dropped the two tomatoes in his hands into his basket, then unbuttoned his jeans and pulled them down to his knees. He wore nothing underneath.

Mary Ellen gasped. She had already begun to formulate a thought around the word *obscene* when she drew herself up short: There was nothing obscene about the youth's action.. Prior to this minute, she would never have imagined such an act by a member of the opposite sex as anything but boorish in the extreme. But there it was: The boy's gesture was simply *beautiful*.

Cupping his genitals in both hands, he held them out toward her like a gift. The blue eyes never left her face.

After what seemed like long minutes, Mary Ellen started slowly up the hill, keeping her eyes riveted on his. By the time the gorse bushes obscured his face, she was almost walking backward.

In the cave, the organ music did not soothe her; nor did the view of the far-away sea. Within a short time, she was hurrying back down the track, asking herself all the while just what she might be rushing *toward*. But when she reached the first house, the youth had vanished out of sight.

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Grizzled Pedro set the first course before the smiling lady. In the three weeks since her arrival, he had become her advisor and paternal protector. He had even invited her to his home to meet his wife and the couple's confusingly rich progeny.

“*Bolos de bacalhau!* That's my favorite, Pedro.”

“Yes, *minha senhora*. Good, very good.”

As she consumed the delectable codfish cakes, Mary Ellen reflected that she had never eaten so well anywhere as at this insignificant little hotel hidden away in the hills. Nor had she *felt* so well for many years. She was taking her vitamins and minerals every morning, but she had left her antidepressant tablets in the suitcase. For there was just no time for depression here. Too many things attracted her attention, tempted her to be up and about and doing.

Especially one thing.

Glancing around the dining room, she realized that for days now she had been searching for the lineaments of *his* features in every face about her. In every human being in the hotel, on the streets of Santa Cremilde, she perceived an approximation to *him*, like the pale imitation of a Platonic idea in the world of matter. And the very imperfections of the poor creatures made her love them. It wasn't their fault that they were less than perfect.

Mary Ellen Redman, she chided herself inwardly, just don't get carried away. But another part of her laughed indulgently at the chider.

When the waiter brought her main course, she posed a question that had been dangling on her tongue for days: "Pedro, I've noticed on my walks that one of the houses on the old mine track is lived in. Who lives there?" She strained to keep her voice and expression casual.

"Old mine trail, *minha senhora?* *Ninguém.* Nobody don't live on that."

"But Pedro, I've...seen somebody working in a garden up there."

"Maybe somebody keep a few vegetables. No danger, *senhora.* *Não há perigo.*"

Try as she might, she obtained no information from the man. Either he did not know, or he did not wish to say, who lived in the house. She had often had the impression that Pedro answered her questions with a view to reassure her and

make her feel welcome in Santa Cremilde, rather than to convey the truth. Might he even be in cahoots with the mysterious youth in some way?

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The next day dawned sunny and hot. Mary Ellen donned a brand-new blue warm-up suit for her walk. By the time she got to the rim of the forest, she had to take the jacket off.

Almost the whole way up the hill, rabbits and Iberian hares darted across and along the track. They displayed no shyness toward the hiker. On the contrary, they seemed to accompany rather than flee from her. Birds, too, appeared in profusion, different species singing in a curiously coordinated manner, as though the performance had been rehearsed in advance.

The youth was sitting stark naked on the front steps of the house, eating cherries from a hollowed-out gourd. His legs were spread wide apart. When she approached, he fixed his eyes on her. She returned his gaze, but did not linger.

As she mounted, the heat became ever more intense. At the top she hastened to seek shelter in the cave, where the air was refreshingly cool. Breathing hard, she sat down with her back against the grill and wiped the perspiration from her face. The organ tones, like a soft diapason, flowed from the shaft behind her, washed over her like a balm, and dissolved in the sunshine outside.

A few minutes later, the boy loomed up in the entrance. Outlined against the blazing light, his nude body resembled a work of art, stylized and tenuous, more than flesh and blood. As he stepped into the cave, she saw that he was carrying a mound of cherries in his upturned palms. When he reached the seated woman, he dropped to his knees and held out the fruit. His skin gave off the clean odor of wood smoke.

As Mary Ellen looked into the youth's blue eyes, and he into hers, the tones from underground modulated into a new pattern. Repetitive, without the slightest irregularity, it pounded forward like a work by a minimalist composer. The boy's chest heaved to its rhythm. Somehow she knew that the ocean, out there on the horizon, was undulating in the same perfect time. Gradually, as she listened, every other sound in the cave, in the forest, in the world, joined in. Beating hard, irresistible, the music surged ecstatically upward. And soon, in the merest instant, she would be part of it too.

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