

"Beyond the Mine" by Nicole Hebel
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Beyond the Mine

By Nicole Hebel

The green girl from the college was a sorry sight.

It had rained the night before—a good soaking of the Kentucky earth, and the little fool had chosen a white tee-shirt to picket the plant in. Needless to say, the color hadn't agreed with the mud-water thrown up by the workers on their way to the mine, nor with the black dust coating every available surface in a thirty-mile radius. But the girl was curiously unbothered, thrusting today's poster board sign at the incoming vehicles with her usual fervor. Swerving his once-upon-a-time-red pickup around a pothole to avoid further splashing her, Lucas could just make out the words scrawled in thick black sharpie.

Clean Coal Is A Dirty Lie!

Below the words, Lucas glimpsed a crudely drawn picture of a pickaxe and helmet with a vibrant, red line slashing across the image. Then the green girl and her poster were lost to the grey, early morning light.

Jeanie, Steve, and Earl were standing in a huddle behind the bed of Earl's silver, mud-splattered pickup. They nodded once in unison to acknowledge Lucas as he pulled in to the adjacent slot.

“Morning, Luke,” Jeanie grunted as he stepped out of his car. Jeanie’s words caught in the pale cloud of her exhaled cigarette smoke, and Lucas habitually held his breath for a moment to avoid the worst of it.

“Persistent little thing, isn’t she?” Lucas said by way of greeting, nodding towards the gates of the mine. “Not rain nor hail nor snow nor sleet . . .”

Earl spat, and then ground it into the gravel beneath the ball of his boot. “Don’t know what she thinks she’s gonna do out there with her pretty poster. She’s a flyspeck on Rob’s windshield for all he pays attention to her.” Rob Howard was the Smithson mine manager.

“Lara says that girl drives out over an hour every day to get here and wave her sign around,” Jeanie nodded. “Might get her way in the end, anyways. No wonder Rob doesn’t pay any attention to her—he’s got bigger fish to fry.”

Lucas raised his brows. “What’s that mean?”

“Ain’tcha heard?” Steve ground out, his first words all morning. He glared at Lucas as though he had somehow offended him by asking. “They’re lookin’ to close down the mine.”

Something clenched in Lucas’s chest. “They’re not.”

“They are,” Jeanie insisted. She tugged on the end of her long, grey braid for emphasis. “We’re a dying breed. Clean energy’ll wipe us right away.”

The 6AM buzzer sounded—the grating drone as familiar to Lucas as the sound of his own voice. Wordlessly, the group turned and headed towards the processing facility, worn boots crunching with every step.

“The mine’s been here for decades.” Even as he spoke, Lucas heard the futility in his argument.

Sure enough, Steve laughed. It was a hard, humorless sound. “You think they care? The world’s forgotten we’re here.”

Lucas pressed his chapped lips together as the group filtered into the locker room with the other miners, dispersing to their separate corners. As he opened his locker, he found himself wondering which was worse; Steve’s comment, or the silence which followed.

* * * * *

The underground mine was hot as hell. Claustrophobic and deafening. The scream and rumble of the monstrous longwall machine cut to a halt every couple of hours so that Lucas’s crew could replace drill bits, but even then, the mine was far from quiet. Machinery constantly whirred, and the kilometers of mountain above them creaked and crashed and groaned as it settled into the gaps left by the absence of material.

“Good to go!”

They always triple checked that everyone was out of the way of the shearer or shovel and the ever-shifting roof supports before giving the okay. Dust and rock crumbled from the semblance of a ceiling created by the supports, adding to the noise of the longwall machine as it embarked upon the long slide down the corridor. Advance and retreat. Again and again.

The extraction of these long sheets of coal—five thousand tons an hour—kept their small mining community alive. These tunnels, the machines, that black rock—these things put food on the table for hundreds of families across Appalachia, just like his own. Lucas reminded himself of this whenever the job got to be too much—when the hot salt of sweat stung in his eyes and crusted his lips, or in those rare moments of breathlessness when he ducked into a tight space and

realized that his blunted and coal-blackened fingernails could scrape the gritty tunnel walls in any direction.

Every hour Lucas spent in the mine, he spent for his family, and he poured himself into the job until he could almost forget how close he'd come to any other life.

* * * * *

A death in the mines was uncommon. The machines had made it safer than ever before for the workers, though small injuries couldn't be avoided. Cuts and bruises, mostly, despite the required protective attire of hard hats, thick leather gloves, and heavy overalls. Less frequent were crushed fingers, broken bones, and concussions—things which required a trip to the emergency room, thirty minutes away, a drive usually spent in the bed of someone's truck.

Of course, there were other things to fear from the mines—things no one liked to talk about. A scar made for a couple of week's paid leave and a good story, but sickness was hard on an individual, hard on a family. Treatment for lung disease was generally inaccessible and unaffordable. Old Jack had come down with the black lung last year, and in spite of his worsening condition, hadn't quit his job in the mines. His wife had picked up work at a slaughterhouse forty minutes away to ease the burden of cost of treatment, but the couple was still barely scraping by. His regular hacking coughs, echoing through the stone chambers of the mine served as a harsh warning of the subtler dangers of the job.

But death in the mine itself was rare. Rare, but not unheard of. In the Smithson Mine where Lucas worked, there had been six deaths in thirty years. Only two, until ten years ago, when an explosion claimed four workers, including Lucas's father.

A pocket of methane.

A faulty ventilation fan.

Lucas's father had always been proud to work in the mine. To be doing what his own father had done, and back, and back. But he'd wanted more for his boys, and he'd worked holidays and missed birthdays and graduations to save enough to put Lucas through college. With the money his wife made working in the local post office, they'd managed. They did not discuss the fact that their youngest son would soon be in the same position as Lucas.

And then the explosion.

Lucas had been in the middle of his sophomore year in college when he received the news. Nothing was said of it then, but he'd known what would happen the moment the call from his mother had ended. He would return to Phyllis for the funeral, and then stay to fulfill his father's role in the family. He would seek employment in the very mine his father had died in; would don a pair of his father's overalls and let himself be swallowed, day after day, by the darkness of the earth. He and his mother would ensure that Colt went to college, bound for the white-collar office job Lucas had always imagined for himself.

In the moment he hung up the phone, he saw it all.

The only surprise had been Elise; then his girlfriend, now his wife. Two years after Lucas returned to Phyllis, Elise joined him, entrepreneurial degree in hand. Determined to carve out a good life for the two of them, she opened a local diner and hired the wives and husbands of miners like Lucas. A year after she and Lucas married, she gave birth to their daughter, Emma.

Life was exhausting, and never quite comfortable. When his mother began showing signs of early onset Alzheimer's, another portion of Lucas and Elise's meager pay started going towards a facility three hours north.

And yet when Lucas was home spending precious minutes with his wife and daughter, he couldn't say for certain that he would've changed a thing.

* * * * *

The sound of the buzzer grating through the stone walls indicated noon. Thirty minutes to eat if they stayed in the mine. Less if they didn't, and no one ever did. Six hours of underground was enough to drive anyone to the surface.

As Lucas rode through the long entry tunnel in the back of the cramped, six-person XTV towards the promise of daylight, he kept quiet. He listened to the murmurs of the dusty bodies pressed tight against him.

Layoffs, the voices breathed. Mine closing. Family to feed.

What are we going to do?

In the bustle of the mine, Lucas had forgotten. Now that his head wasn't bursting with the screech and grind of machinery, the rumor filled his mind, poured down his spine, and wound tight around his chest. He sensed the weight of the low stone ceiling pressing down, and he struggled to breathe normally.

But moments later, the group was spilling out of the car and into the entry tunnel, walking briskly towards the square of daylight at the end. The fresh, cool Kentucky oxygen penetrated the stale air, carrying with it birdcalls and the promise of light and life.

It was the green which always hit Lucas first. Beyond the raw, red earth exposed by the company was a thick wall of trees and bushes and brush. Beautiful, even a full decade later. Beautiful, despite the wound in the earth that was Lucas's occupation.

The thought made him snort—he'd been reading the green girl's signs for too long.

Most of the miners ate together, but Lucas preferred to go off on his own. After collecting his lunch sack from his locker, he walked back outside, a little farther away than usual to escape the news still twisting in his belly.

What was going to happen—?

“Excuse me. Could you spare a couple of minutes?”

Lucas turned, his back cracking with the effort. He located the speaker instantly—it was the green girl, standing forlornly just on the other side of the gates. He hadn't realized he'd wandered so near the entrance. Her poster was still in hand, but like her tee shirt, it was now splattered in mud, impossible to read.

“Green girl,” Lucas said by way of greeting. He lowered himself down on the nearest, flattest limestone boulder. “Manage to shut down the mine yet?”

“Work in progress.” The girl scuffed at the gravel with her Nike tennis shoe. She looked younger than Lucas had originally thought, although maybe she just had one of those faces. Pointed, elfin features, a fringe of blonde bangs over big brown eyes.

“You want something?” Lucas asked. She was eyeing the distance between them and the boulder adjacent to the one Lucas was currently sitting on. He wasn't sure whether he really wanted to have an up close and personal conversation with her, but it seemed rude not to offer.

For a moment, the girl appeared to weigh her options. Probably deciding whether it was the wisest move to place herself within reaching distance of an unknown thirty-year-old man, nearly three times her size.

“Name's Lucas,” he offered, stuffing a bite of sandwich into his mouth. It was chicken and mayo, a leftover from yesterday's special at Elise's cafe.

“Kaley,” the girl said, and apparently those were enough familiarities for her. She crossed the open gate boundary and sat down on the far end of the rock, just out of reaching distance.

“I’ve never been in here—I’m not really allowed.”

Lucas couldn’t help but laugh. “You’re hardly ten feet inside the gate”

“Still.” Kaley shrugged, then knocked twice on the stone with her fist. She met Lucas’ eyes for the first time. “How can you work here?”

Lucas huffed a sigh. “I’m chasin’ you off if you’re here trying to get me to quit my job. Got enough on my plate without your guilt trip.” He resolutely shoved some more sandwich into his mouth.

But Kaley pressed on, sounding very much as though she were reciting from a textbook. “This industry is killing the environment. The removal of tons of coal every day is compromising the stability of the mountain and polluting the air and water. Furthermore—”

“You even been in a mine, green girl?” Lucas interrupted conversationally.

“Well,” Kaley pressed her thin lips together. “No. But I’ve seen the statistics—”

“It’s loud. Dirty. Claustrophobic. Majority of us are gonna leave here with lung disease. Think more than a handful of us are happy?”

“Then why—”

“I’ve got a daughter,” Lucas said calmly. “Name’s Emma. She’s goin’ on nine. My wife—she’s got her own line of work, too. And the two of our paychecks together aren’t going to be enough to get Emma out of Phyllis when she’s your age, lookin’ for some fancy college to teach her how to preach the environment at the working class.”

Kaley quieted, allowing Lucas to stuff the last bite of sandwich into his mouth.

“I don’t mean to seem elitist,” Kaley said softly as Lucas chewed. “I just want to make a difference. I want you to *see*.”

Her words tugged at him, reminded him of a time when he too had seen the whole world in front of him.

“Why here?” Lucas asked. “Why this mine?”

She shrugged a shoulder. Looked off into the distance instead of meeting Lucas’ eyes. “I’m taking a class. Environmental ethics. Our professor mentioned this mine specifically—she had all of your stats, lists of the workers, everything. Deforestation, toxins in the air. Did you know your drinking water is spiked with mercury?”

The information was not surprising, but it also fell into the category of unspoken things. Faced with it now, Lucas’ mind flashed to a memory of a younger Emma, giggling in a bathtub full of water. As his stomach twisted further, he banished the thought.

“Listen, green girl—”

He was going to tell her about his father. About the sacrifices he’d made. That Elise had made. He was going to tell her how he hated the mine, but hated even more the thought of losing it. He’d finish by telling her to fuck off with her environmental guilt trip, because he and the rest of the miners needed these jobs like they needed food and water.

But Lucas never got the chance. The end-of-lunch buzzer sounded before the words could leave his mouth, a beckoning. All there was left to do was stand, exchange nods, and turn away, differences unresolved and neither of them feeling that they’d been heard or understood at all.

* * * * *

Six hours in the morning. Six in the evening. After only a single decade, the sounds and feel of the mine had etched its way into Lucas's being. So much so that he even dreamt of the endless noise and lamplit darkness.

He worked, calling adjustments, shifting machinery, always exhaustedly listening for that end-of-day buzzer. It was the same as the start-of-day, lunch break, end-of-break buzzer, but this time it was generous. With it came promises of home; of his daughter's squeal of joy when he walked through the door. Of his wife's soft hands rinsing soot from his calloused palms. The feel of warm food in his belly and the sensation of a worn mattress and soft sheets beneath his aching back.

He cradled these promises through the long day, until that buzzer sounded and he could set them down where they would wait until he needed them again tomorrow.

But for now, the day was done.

* * * * *

"Taylor!"

The sound of Lucas's last name pulled him from the trance of his post-work motions. The voice was Earl's, and Lucas tried to wipe the impatience from his expression before the other man could see.

"Earl," Lucas said by way of greeting, nodding once. He placed his hand on the door handle of his vehicle, hoping to convey a point.

Earl's eyes were a shock of blue and pink-tinged white in an otherwise soot-black scape. He looked about as happy as Lucas felt to be having this conversation when they ought to be heading out.

"Rob wants a word," Earl rasped. "Said he tried to get ahold of you this afternoon but couldn't get a reply on the radio."

Though Lucas could list a dozen things Rob would want a word about, none of them he could presently come up with were good. The whispers from the other workers came back to him, and he fought to hold his voice steady.

"Radio was broken."

Earl nodded, but was unable to meet Lucas's eyes. "Thought as much. Rob's already headed home for the day. Said to let you know you oughta talk to him first thing tomorrow."

Lucas nodded slowly, eyes on his hand still clenched around the door handle. "I'll do that."

Out of the corner of his eye, Lucas caught Earl's nod. The other man looked as though he were turning to leave, but then he hesitated. His mouth opened and then closed, and he released a sharp exhale through his nose. He clapped Lucas on the shoulder in place of the words which would not come.

"Take care," Earl said gruffly, and then abruptly turned and walked away swiftly. It was only after the crunch of gravel beneath the other man's boots had faded that Lucas found himself able to murmur a reply.

"I'll try."

* * * * *

Lucas's image of home had changed over the years. It had been a small, dust-covered house with walls and windows constantly near-bursting with the noise of two boys and their parents. It had been the same small house, but less small and less bursting when Lucas went away to school. Then it evolved into something somber, quieter with the death of his father. When Colt went away to school, it was just him and his mother, and then when Elise arrived, it shifted to another place altogether.

Now it was a small, two-story blue house, with a picket fence which hadn't been white in years. It was the warm yellow lighting—so different from the harsh, florescent beams of the mine—glowing in the windows. It was the immediate patter of his daughter's feet upon the wooden floors when she heard the front door open beneath Lucas's hand, and it was the slender figure of Elise silhouetted in the light of their kitchen, watching him embrace their daughter.

Welcome home, my love, Elise would whisper when he finally reached her with Emma clinging to his leg, getting dust and soot all over herself (bath-time was now *after* dinner). And Lucas would refuse even to touch his wife until he'd washed the black dust from his face and hands in their kitchen sink. Only when the last remnants of his day vanished down the drain would he turn around and cradle his wife's face with clean palms to kiss her.

Lucas's images of home had changed with his life, but certain aspects remained steady. Warmth. Comfort. Fullness. Belonging.

Love.

* * * * *

It was easier to whisper hard truths in darkness than in light. That's why he waited to speak until Elise had turned off the lamp by the side of their bed and joined him beneath the comforter they'd shared since the start of their marriage.

"Rob wants a word tomorrow morning."

Elise shifted in bed, nestling into her small furrow of their mattress. "Mm."

"Thing is, Leese, down in the mines, they're talking 'bout layoffs."

She stilled. For a moment, the only sound was the quiet rush and hum of their nearly-broken air conditioner, stuck haphazardly in the bedroom window. Lucas waited.

Finally—

"It'll be tough but . . . we can rely on the café for a while. Just until you can find another job."

There it was. Elise's greatest and most frustrating trait; what Lucas respected most about her, even when it annoyed him to no end. In the decade and more he'd known her, not once had she ever stopped to feel sorry for herself or anyone else, including him. She was a problem-solver, her mind geared to find a solution before anyone else had even registered that something was awry.

"But what if . . ." Lucas hesitated, strangely fearful of the rest of the sentence, and what it would imply. "What if you sold the café?"

Another brief silence, this one of muted surprise. It was hard to catch Elise off guard—so hard that it may as well not happen at all.

"And then?" Her tone was cautious, probing.

"Well. We . . ." Each word stuck in his throat; had to be forced up through his mouth and past his lips to hover fat and lazy in the space between them, "could move."

“Move where?”

“Anywhere.” And suddenly that became the most terrifying word of all. *Anywhere* implied options; something Lucas hadn’t realized he’d had until they were thrust upon him. He wondered if Elise was seeing the same things he had—opportunities which had been disguised by the day-in-day-out of the mine. Choices which had been ignored because they could afford to be ignored.

There was no longer anything keeping their family tied to Phyllis.

Lucas’s mother was in the home up north. Colt was long out of school, long out of Kentucky, long out of needing Lucas’s help. And Emma—her life was just beginning.

“Leese. I know you love that diner—”

“Of course I do,” Elise swiftly spoke over him. “But the diner is a building. An idea. I love that I built it. I love what it’s meant to us.”

But?

Elise hesitated, and then she shifted a little closer to him. When she spoke again, quietly now, Lucas heard that same mixture of hope and fear of hoping which had tugged at him all evening.

“But I have always wanted to do more.”

“Maybe we can.”

Now that he’d thought it aloud, the idea of leaving was like a stolen candy. Impossibly sweet, even as guilt squirmed within him. Lucas imagined sending their daughter to a school with an above-average rating. He imagined Elise’s parents coming to visit without eyeing the soot on the walls, the furniture, and on the man their daughter had married. He imagined going to

work and coming home clean. Of walking into a forest, thick and green, and not seeing the green girl's anti-coal signs burned into the backs of his closed eyelids.

"We could go anywhere," Lucas repeated, stronger, louder. And for a singular moment, his voice colored the utter darkness of the room with the unfamiliar tint of possibility.

* * * * *

Knowing that he might never make it again, Lucas expected the morning drive to the mine to feel different. Final. But except for the whirlwind in his head, the trip was the same. The same gravel driveways, the same dusty houses with their tattered American flags out front. Same dark, winding road, lined with trees. Same girl, standing in front of the Smithson mine's gates, trying to spread a message that no one cared to hear. Today's poster read, *The Future Is Green!* and Kaley shouted something incomprehensible as Lucas blew past.

He pulled into his usual place and cut the engine, but today, did not slip into one of the cigarette-clouded clusters of people. Instead Lucas simply directed a nod in response to the hands raised in greeting at the sight of him, and then headed straight for Rob's office. Out of the corner of his eye, Lucas saw Earl lean towards Jeanie and Steve. Saw his mouth move, and the darkening of Jeanie and Steve's faces when Earl finished. When all three heads turned, Lucas saw the sympathy there, and he quickly looked away.

Through the metal door and up the grey concrete stairs, Lucas moved as though in a dream, gripping the paint-chipped handrail with a sticky palm. Rob's office was three doors down the left, and the wood sounded hollow beneath Lucas's loosely clenched fist. Once, twice—

“Yeah, come in!”

Lucas had been in Rob’s office only a few times before—when he came asking for a job; to fill out some paperwork; to report a glitch in one of the machines. Every time it struck him how dreary the room was. As dismal as the mine, but in a different way. Grey and fluorescent, gritty concrete walls. Rob had hung up a National Geographic cutout of a forest on the wall opposite his desk, as though a creased, discolored photograph could make up for a lack of windows. Taped haphazardly alongside that cutout was the cover of last year’s *Sports Illustrated* bikini issue.

“Lucas,” Rob’s lips pressed together in his usual quick, tight smile. “Have a seat.”

Rob was a harried-looking man in the habit of wearing collared shirts too loose for his small frame. Two cups of coffee and a pair of thick framed glasses did nothing to hide the tired, half-moons under his eyes; he always made a point to show up when his workers did, even if there wasn’t much for him to do. Lucas respected the man for that. They all did.

“How are you this morning?” Rob asked as Lucas lowered himself into the cracked, leather chair before Rob’s desk. “How’s the family?”

“They’re good, sir. Thank you for asking.”

“Emma’s going on . . . what, eight, now? Nine?”

“Turning nine. She’s headed into third this year.”

“Good, good. She’s a bright little thing. Would be with two college-going parents.”

The fact that Lucas had never graduated the university had been lost on the people of Phyllis. He smiled uncomfortably. Rob interpreted the silence as agreement and pressed on, preliminaries out of the way.

“Sorry to call you in first thing. Hoped I could catch you after your shift yesterday but had to get home. Dinner with the wife’s family—you know how it is.”

“Sure, sure.” Lucas was barely aware of the words coming out of his mouth. His tongue felt thick as cotton, dry as coal.

“I know there’ve been rumors flying around. ‘Bout layoffs. That right?”

Rob dropped the word so casually compared to the hissed and muttered whispers of the workers. Lucas could only nod, his mind casting wildly for some hope, only to find that he didn’t know what he was hoping for.

“Well,” Rob leaned forward. Clasped his hands on his desk. “I want to address that first—you’re grey as a ghost. You’re not getting laid off, Taylor.”

Lucas blinked, the oddest feeling of deflation escaping him. “Sir?”

“There’ll be a few layoffs, but for company transitional reasons. Coal’s doing better than it’s done in years. Hear it in the news?” Rob chuckled and leaned back in his chair, hinges squealing. “They’re calling it a revival.”

Knowing that he wasn’t about to lose his job, Lucas was slowly becoming aware of other things. The rush of air conditioning tickling his arms, and the ticking of a wall clock. For a moment, he thought he felt something like disappointment before he remembered this was good news.

“Why did you call me in this morning, sir?”

Rob nodded. Smiled that tight smile again. “A promotion.”

For a moment, Lucas stared. “What’s that?”

“Company’s turning to strip mining on that outcrop, ‘longside the mountain. You’ve been here eight years. You’re a hard worker and an educated man. I want you running your own crew.”

The news was so unexpected that Lucas could only repeat the information he’d just been told.

“The company’s not going under?”

Rob laughed—a short, hard sound. “Like I said. Company’s doing better than ever. This company, coal mining . . .” he leaned forward again. Fixed Lucas with an electric gaze the other man couldn’t break if he’d wanted to.

“This is the future, Lucas.”

* * * * *

Rob told Lucas to take the day off.

Visit the café! Surprise the missus with the news. Don’t worry about the crew—Danbury can cover for you.

By the time he left the building, the other workers were long gone, swallowed by the dark earth beneath Lucas’s feet. He’d arrived at the mine as if in a dream, and felt himself leaving it with the same distance. As he started up his truck and pulled out of the parking lot, he didn’t let himself think beyond the simple tasks before him.

Shift into first. Accelerate, turn the wheel.

He sped up as he approached and passed through the gates, and it was only when he saw her packing her things into her car that he remembered the green girl and their conversation the day before.

She looked up when she heard his engine and the crunch of gravel beneath the weight of the tires. Lucas witnessed the exact moment that she recognized him sitting behind the wheel. Her hand began to raise in greeting, hopeful eyes filling with questions.

Did I make a difference? Have you made a change?

And perhaps there was an unintended answer, written somewhere in Lucas's expression. In the moment before passing her, she froze, mid-wave. Her young face hardened.

Lucas turned away from the accusation in her stare. Away from her. He pressed down on the gas, and watched the narrow road unfold once more into the grey, Kentucky morning light. Just as it always had. Just as it always would.