

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

“PANSBORO STORIES”

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SPRING 2020

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for a baccalaureate degrees  
in English and Stage Management  
with honors in English.

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**ABSTRACT**

This thesis contains four manuscripts, all short stories from different perspectives. All four stories take place in the same fictional town – Pansboro, Pennsylvania.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Mary. You have been with this project since I wrote the very first story for it in English 212. You have taught me so much about writing, but even more about life. I would also be remiss if I didn't thank my Mom, my forever first reader, and my Dad, my forever tech support. To all the people who encourage me to keep writing – Colin, Casey, Brooke, Cody, John, BAMA Class of 2020 – I could never have done this without your unfailing support. Finally, to John O'Hara, thank you for showing me that writers can come from anywhere and that the stories of the coal region are important.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

*America may be unique in being a country which has leapt from barbarism to decadence without touching civilization.*

John O'Hara

The idea for this project first came to me while I was driving home from Penn State for winter break during my sophomore year. That particular drive, though I was following the same two-and-a-half-hour route between campus and my parents' house deep in the anthracite coal region that I had taken many times before, felt different. It was my first time driving it alone, and in the dying December light, I noticed more of the geographical details and subtle differences in place as I passed from rolling farmland to the ridges and windy roads of my hometown. The observations I made that day became the basis for "Going Home," (now titled "Maddy's Story") a meditation on the landscape of Pennsylvania's coal country and the original story in this collection.

As the concept for "Going Home" developed in workshop, it became clear that it was grasping at something bigger than what a 20-page story could hold. It quickly grew from a meditation on the landscape to a larger project about the people of the area, and the ways that their relationships with the landscape have shaped the trajectory of their lives. The research I did for this project encompassed three different categories - geographical, historical, and literary.

Though I conducted each concurrently throughout the project, I feel that they categorically represent the most important components of *Pansboro Stories*.

My geographical research consisted of re-exploring the coal country that I have called home for over 15 years. Since Pansboro, in many ways, is an analogue for my hometown, Pottsville, Pennsylvania, I wanted to establish a body of visual references that could inform my writing as the stories developed. During the summer between my junior and senior years, I spent several hours a week driving around Pottsville, Schuylkill County, and the surrounding areas taking photos and documenting what I saw. In addition to my original photographic/recorded research, I also conducted a small body of photographic research from online resources for locations, such as the St. Nicholas Breaker (formerly located north of Pottsville in Mahanoy City, PA), that I wanted to reference but could not easily access (St. Nicholas Coal Breaker 2013). The St. Nicholas Breaker was demolished while I was working on this project. For that reason, archival images were crucial for the revision process of “Going Home,” in which the St. Nicholas Breaker had a major influence on the development of the mining ruins observed by the narrator. Since much of the mining land around Schuylkill County is privately owned, using found images was often easier than trying to take my own (Reading Anthracite Coal).

In addition to taking inspiration for the setting, *Pansboro Stories* also finds its historical roots in my hometown - Pottsville, Pennsylvania. During its heyday in the early twentieth century, Pottsville was an important and well-developed city with rich culture, a thriving economy, and deep ties to the anthracite coal industry. About a century later, it retains only the deep ties to the now-diminished coal industry. My base knowledge of the history of Pottsville comes from my childhood - having learned about it year after year in a Social Studies/History class very similar to the one described in “Annie’s Story.” As someone who is not truly “from”

the coal region (my family moved to Pennsylvania from Ohio when I was in preschool), these factual accounts of the once-important Pottsville, the lives of coal miners, and the history of the area I now called home seemed like stories and legends. This project gave me the opportunity to revisit the history of Pottsville as I understood it while also supplementing my own knowledge with resources made available on the city's website (City of Pottsville), as well as through our Historical Society (Historical Society). Much like the experience of living in the coal region in present day, I believe that the historical component that exists in *Pansboro Stories* enriches both the town and its residents. It also functions to amplify the sense of loss that is felt by all as a result of literally living in the ruins and memory of a once-prosperous place.

Though the majority of my literary references are contemporary, there is one author from the turn of the century who was a major influence on this work - John O'Hara. O'Hara was born and raised in Pottsville, and is renowned as our most famous author. Even though he had a contentious relationship with the town throughout his life due to his unflattering portrayal of the area and its residents in many of his stories, O'Hara remains a major literary influence in the Pennsylvania coal region (Britannica 2019). The two major influences that my collection takes from O'Hara are its title and overarching concept. When he wrote about Pottsville, O'Hara called it "Gibbsville." One of O'Hara's many published works, *Gibbsville, PA*, is a massive volume of short stories that all take place in and around "Gibbsville." As a homage to his work, I have also renamed Pottsville something vaguely reminiscent of its true identity - "Pansboro." Much like the history of the coal region, John O'Hara's work is a cultural milestone that I could not ignore in the crafting of this collection.

In addition to the locally-known work of John O'Hara, it is my hope that *Pansboro Stories* finds itself in conversation with other contemporary works published on the cutting edge

of the coal region's development. The two main pieces that inspired my form were *The Spoon River Anthology* by Edgar Lee Masters and *Heat & Light* by Jennifer Haigh. *The Spoon River Anthology* is a book of poetry that I have been interested in since grade school because of its unique form. Each poem in the book is an epitaph from one of the town's dead residents. While the elements of macabre and mystery certainly intrigued me, the aspect of Masters' work that I found most-fascinating was the way he was able to weave the short epitaphs together to craft both a narrative and strong sense of place. Just as many of his epitaphs reference other people in the town, I wanted to give the interlocking stories of this collection the sense that they were all existing in the same plane (Masters 1970).

*Heat & Light*, a contemporary novel, was introduced to me in the earliest stages of *Pansboro Stories* when its author, Jennifer Haigh, visited University Park in December 2017 as part of Penn State's Creative Writing Program's Mary E. Rolling Reading Series. I was immediately inspired by her work, and devoured *Heat & Light* shortly thereafter. Though the book employs many of the same strategies that I found intriguing in *Spoon River Anthology* (multiple perspectives, overlapping stories, shared setting, etc.), it took them one step farther. Haigh uses her wide variety of characters to establish a breadth of voices from various stakeholders on both sides of the contemporary debate on fracking. What struck me the most about her work is that she creates just as much sympathy and understanding for the fracking company workers, bosses, etc. as she does for the people whose land is compromised by the process. I admired this honest portrayal of "all sides," and knew that I wanted to create something similar in my own work, only in regards to the coal industry (Haigh 2017).

Though the *Spoon River Anthology* and *Heat and Light* were two of the biggest influences on *Pansboro Stories* as a whole, I had the privilege to work with several other

collections that dealt specifically with the Appalachian region of the United States, particularly in regards to coal mining and fracking. They include *Shale Play* by Julia Kasdorf and Steven Rubin, *The Book of the Dead* by Muriel Rukeyser, and *Coal Mountain Elementary* by Mark Nowak. Each of these authors addressed the topic of fracking or mining poetically, using a unique voice and strategy to communicate a similar message about the impact those industries have on the people and land they interact with. Since these books of poetry were introduced while I was well into the revision process for this collection, they impacted the style of the collection, rather than its structure. These books provided a roadmap that helped to solidify the balance of lyrical writing and factual honesty that I was trying to capture in these stories (Kasdorf & Rubin 2018) (Rukeyser, Moore, & Naumburg 2018) (Nowak 2009).

## Chapter 2

### Maddy's Story

We sat in silence for most of the ride.

After consuming a dinner that consisted of two large orders of Sheetz popcorn chicken and a bag of tater tots, Jake had promptly passed out in the passenger seat. He was asleep before we even merged onto the highway. I couldn't blame him. Freshman year was tough for everyone. The last few weeks of his first semester had taken a toll. Every mile we drove was one mile closer to the first break of his college career and three weeks of uninterrupted relaxation. I knew he was dreaming of waking up in Massachusetts. Lakeside at our parents' house. It would be our first Christmas there since they moved back for good. I was dreaming of driving to Massachusetts, speeding right past the exit we were currently on course for. Mom had sounded disappointed when I told her we had to delay the tree decorating for a few days, but when I told her it was so I could go to Jesse's funeral, she understood. Strong friendships were the only thing that could drag her back to Pansboro, so she fully supported my decision to go see Rose, who needed me now more than ever after the week she'd had. Jake agreed to come along to touch base with some friends he hadn't seen in a while, but I wondered if he was starting to regret his decision.

66 ½ miles to go.

The ridge was my favorite part of the drive. After about 20 minutes on the highway, the valley that cradled our university (and the small city that came with it) gave way on its eastern side to a narrow passageway of ridges. The highway was quite literally carved around them. Just when it looked like you were about to drive straight into one of the massive sandstone walls, the road would take a sharp curve to the side, revealing a steep passage lined with trees. Two weeks ago, they would have been gorgeous – vibrant leaves standing out like fire against the dark stone. Now they were all but barren, and the glaring light of the early evening sunset showed only a few clusters of brown leaves hanging on for dear life against the brutal winter winds. The only spots of color were the few evergreens that rose up like sentinels in the otherwise deciduous-dominated forest. I always liked to imagine what it must have been like for the first group of people who crossed the ridges and made it into the lush, sun-soaked valley they had been searching for. They probably thought it was the most beautiful place they had ever seen. Many people still had that reaction, except now the attraction was one of the largest football stadiums in the country – an athletic oasis smack dab in the middle of rural Pennsylvania.

Unfortunately, the rest of that particular stretch of interstate was not so glamorous. The now-leafless forest continued on for miles. With only tractor-trailers for company, we sped over hill after hill. From a distance, each one looked fuzzy in the dying light, but as individual trees flew by, their angular branches were revealed to be anything but.

Jake was flung into consciousness when his head smacked into the passenger side window as our car skidded around a particularly sharp turn.

“Jesus, Maddy!” he exclaimed rubbing his temple.

“Sorry, dude,” I replied getting the car back on course, “it’s the stupid semi-trucks that won’t STAY IN THEIR LANE!” Even though I knew the truck driver couldn’t hear me, it felt

good to yell those last few words straight into my rearview mirror. It had been a long semester for me too. Jake turned back against the window like he was going to make another attempt at a nap, but now that he was conscious again, I wasn't giving that up so easily. There were still 50 miles to the exit. "How were your last two finals?"

"Alright, I guess. Calc was kind of hard because the open-ended questions were so long. I barely finished. Had all day to study Chem, though. Thought my brain was going to explode."

"Did you feel prepared for the exam?" He had certainly looked like a zombie when I picked him up. He had dragged his feet all the way across the science center parking lot looking dazed and confused.

"Yeah... I don't really remember much of it... but yeah. The answer key is supposed to be posted tonight..." he trailed off again. After a few moments, I thought I had lost him once again to the sleep-inducing combination of exam fatigue and fried food, but I was wrong. He was just lost for a few moments in the Pennsylvania wilderness.

"How were your exams?"

"I think they went well," I said. All five of them.

"Even the lab practical?"

He had me there. "Talk about feeling like your brain is going to explode." We both laughed. Even just two days later the premise did seem funny, but four hours in an organic chemistry lab trying to get the right compound to form out of water and dust while keeping your sanity intact isn't very amusing at the time. Now it was only stressful because the results would either put me in advanced organic lab next semester or regular lab. It was easy to guess which one med schools would prefer to see.

“It was rough especially with everything that has happened this week...” my studying efforts had been going really well until the news of Jesse’s death came to me a few days ago. Ever since then, things had been an endless stream of phone calls and text messages. Many were heavy with speculation. Even now my phone felt like it was buzzing constantly with a new article or theory. The official report had been released this morning: Accidental Drug Overdose.

“I guess.” Jake shifted uncomfortably and fell silent. Secretly, I envied his detachment from the situation. He was close to Rose, but had only met Jesse once or twice. They had missed each other in high school by two years. There was another long pause, except this time I knew that Jake wasn’t asleep. He alternated between scrolling through various social media outlets on his phone and staring blankly out of the windshield at the road before us. Twice he turned to take a poorly-angled picture of me. Unflattering Snapchats to his friends, no doubt.

“You’d better not be taking a picture of me,” I said on turn number three.

“It’s not a picture,” he said. I sighed in relief. “It’s a video!”

“You suck,” I laughed. Even Jake exploiting me to get laughs from his friends was better than the sleeping Jake who left me alone with only my thoughts.

At 23 miles to the exit, I started having doubts.

Growing up, I couldn’t wait to get out of Pansboro. Now that I had done it, it was even harder to go back. Dad had landed us there when I was a toddler as a result of a promising business venture that just happened to have its brick-and-mortar in coal country Pennsylvania. Even though it was only six hours away from our family in Massachusetts, it might as well have been on another planet. Mom moved to Pennsylvania kicking and screaming and had continued

to kick and scream up until a few months ago when they finally moved “home” to start retirement early, just a few days after Jake moved into college.

Needless to say, we never exactly assimilated to the culture of the area. For years, I spent every major holiday and half of every summer far away from the city where I was growing up. I hadn't really been back since I left for college. To me and Jake, home was always Massachusetts. Even though all of my friends, my school, and my life were in Pansboro, I considered myself an outsider to the town that raised me. My friends at college all assumed I grew up in Massachusetts because I retained the accent my family spoke with and my parents had brought to Pennsylvania with them. Since unofficially moving out for college, I had developed a more romantic vision of Pansboro. In a certain light, the dying city could be seen for its faded glory with a rich history and the potential to make a comeback in the 21st century. It was a far cry from the reality of most people who lived there, but it was much easier to explain.

With every mile we drove, my urge to speed past the exit increased. At 5 miles, I broke into a cold sweat. I knew I was being irrational. Rose had remained my best friend since second grade, even through our mutually tumultuous freshman years and now my permanent move to Massachusetts. We had always been able to talk about anything, and I felt confident that nothing could change that. I had made plans to go back and see her over break anyway. They were just being... expedited. And anyway, a promise was a promise. I couldn't back out now.

One mile.

I took a deep breath and merged into the right lane to get the exit. I caught a major pothole with my back tire (apparently, they started this far out now) and the jolt sent both of our heads on a collision course with the ceiling of the car. I missed by a fraction of an inch, but Jake's made solid contact with a resounding thud.

“Ugh! Maddy I swear to God!”

“I’m sorry! You know the roads out here suck!” He continued to glare at me. I really did feel bad for dragging him along with me. Even though he never told me straight out, I knew that Jake was solidly of the opinion that the only place this car should be driving was home to Massachusetts, our dog, and his bed. I appreciated that he was trying to be supportive anyway.

Almost immediately after taking the exit, the fertile farmland crumbled into the rough landscape of coal country. Hundreds of years of strip mining had left massive craters with abandoned buildings and mining equipment along the highways. Piles of rusty scrap metal dotted the hills. They might have been a shipping container, a piece of one-prized machinery, or even an old company office outpost. Now they all looked the same - weathered and shapeless. Even the areas that had been “reclaimed” with cheap dirt and new trees seemed vaguely artificial, like the orange rivers that ran alongside them. As a kid, they were the ruins of an ancient civilization that were ripe for the climbing – something our mother tried her best to stop us from doing.

“Hey,” I said in the soft tone of memory. “Do you remember when we used to play on the old train cars near Rose’s parents’ house?” We were Explorers. International Spies. Members of an Intergalactic Space Force. The three of us spent hours wandering the fields and railroad tracks around Rose’s childhood home. She lived in one of the boroughs of Pansboro. While Port Ash had a convenience store, Chinese restaurant, and even one of the nicer parks in the Pansboro area, its outskirts were also full of old mining equipment and miles of railroad. When we weren’t exploring the abandoned dye factory, we were climbing on the railcars or hiking out to see the old trucks that were half-buried in the grass.

“Of course! I was always the evil mastermind. You two thwarted my evil plans more times than I could count.” We both laughed.

“Maddy?” Jake’s tone was suddenly serious.

“Yeah?”

“How are Rose and Braden doing?”

Now it was my turn to hesitate. I could tell that he had been wanting to breach this subject for quite some time. “They’re... fine,” I said keeping my eyes locked on the dark, empty road between towns. The truth was that I didn’t really know. A few phone calls and several text messages had revealed little about Rose’s condition and even less about Braden.

“Oh, we’re hanging in there,” Rose had said earlier that day. Her hollow voice crackled through the speaker phone as I had thrown shirts and textbooks into my suitcase. “Braden’s asleep right now, so we’ll see.”

Jake and I both unconsciously scanned the edge between our headlights and the dark shadows on the shoulders for deer that might try to make a break for it and jump in front of our car. “You know that Jesse and Braden were close, so it has been especially hard for him, I think. Rose has been doing everything she can to keep him grounded.” Jake nodded.

The Old Ravine Bridge rattled in complaint as we drove over it. I recently read that it was one of the most dilapidated bridges in Pennsylvania. It had supposedly been reinforced a few years ago to preserve its structural integrity while it waited to be replaced, but the general local consensus was that the day would never come. I took it at a crawl just to be safe. The sun had set into an overcast dusk that seemed to drain the color out of everything it touched, but I knew better. The grey tinge was permanent. The last leg of the drive to Pansboro took place on

a windy state road that was frequented only by coal trucks, industrial park-bound tractor trailers, and people that live in the shells of old coal settlements.

“They’re called patch towns” my 8th grade teacher had told us, flipping through a slideshow of hundred-year-old pictures borrowed for the day from the Pansboro Historical Society. “They were built by coal companies to house their workers, complete with a company store and school.”

They were supposedly called patch towns because they were impermanent settlements that literally sprung up in patches with the coal mines. In reality, the name was appropriate because they were the only patches of life over the scarred earth. They were also far from impermanent. As a child, I had a hard time connecting the tiny borough and townships my friends lived in to the shack-filled villages that flashed across the elementary school projector. Now the connections were much more obvious. Minestown was the first of seven patch towns between The Old Ravine Bridge and Pansboro – “the big city.”

Long since left behind by the coal companies that built them, some former patches, like Minestown, now stood as independent clumps of life under townships, villages, or boroughs. The smallest, Ashburg, was one street, marked only by the two speed limit signs on its borders (one which reduced the speed limit by half, the other which brought it back up two minutes later, both covered in graffiti). The largest, Carbonview, looked like any other small town. Some were merely skeletons, existing under the assumption that a few stubborn residents still lived there, vigilantly making sure the patch didn’t lose its claim to its own postal code. The difference between settlements that were abandoned with the mines and those that still clung to their own zip code, taxes, and legacy was always a small group of stubborn citizens. Despite the famed resilience of the coal region, abandoned patches were far more common than populated ones.

“Will you text Rose and tell her that we are about 20 minutes away?”

“Sure.”

In the absence of any elaboration, I read into Jake’s voice for a few moments.

“Do you want me to drop you off at Caleb’s first?” I finally asked.

Jake hesitated, and I could tell that he was conflicted. He and Caleb had been best friends since preschool. Their relationship was portable. Now that we had moved two states away, our schools were much closer together than our houses. He and Caleb saw each other all the time during the semester.

“Nah,” he finally answered. “I’ll hang out for a little bit.” Even though Jake hadn’t known Jesse very well, he had grown up with Rose like a sister. I would have been surprised if he hadn’t wanted to see her at all during our visit, especially knowing how hard the last few days had been on her. “Caleb and I are going to hang out tonight. I’m staying over and then we’re getting food with some of the guys who are in town tomorrow while you’re at the service,” he said. “I’ll meet back up with you then.”

“Okay, that’s fine. Make sure you tell Caleb’s family I said hi.”

“Will do.”

As we crept through the final stretch of the last little coal village, I pressed down on the gas. Years of driving on back roads had made me comfortable with taking their unpredictable curves ahead of the speed limit. The small-time cops that sometimes camped out just inside of the “Welcome to Coalville” sign to nab people who didn’t heed the severely-reduced speed limit didn’t extend their jurisdiction to the nameless mining roads. As we climbed to the top of the hill that overlooked Pansboro, a massive structure with a hulking asymmetrical façade began to

materialize in the distance. It stretched over both sides of the road, its metal limbs reaching out from the edges of the old stripping pits. My high beams flashed across the sign that hung over the road from one of the conveyor chutes.

### *Coal Keeps the Lights On*

Years of Pennsylvania winters had taken their toll on the old breaker, but it stood just as it had in its heyday 70 years ago. Many natives referred to it as “The Guardian of Pansboro.” To me, it always felt more like the gatekeeper. It kept us in as much as it kept everyone else out.

The streets downtown were quiet for a Friday night. It was nearly 7pm, so we were hitting the lull between those picking up dinner at one of the many pizza establishments supported by our small area and the bar crowd who were either already hunkered down in their “spot” getting a jumpstart on the night or wouldn’t be out for at least another hour or so. Rose and Braden’s apartment was situated in a row of low-income housing right behind the elementary school’s bus shelter, just a few blocks away from downtown. I turned carefully around the big wall that separated the school’s property from the rest of the city. The car’s high beams revealed a mural on the school-side. A new addition, it depicted all three Pansboro schools and the happy students that attended them. Rose and Braden’s “street” hadn’t been paved since the homes were built in the 70s, so I proceeded with extreme caution. Even the best roads in Pansboro were famed for their massive potholes. This street was a minefield.

Rose met us at the door after watching me steal one of her neighbor’s parking spots. Even though we hadn’t seen each other in months, it felt like days. She looked just the same as she always did. Kind face and wild hair. Led Zeppelin t-shirt layered with a red flannel. Only her

eyes betrayed her as anything less than her usually bright self. They were just bloodshot enough around the edges to suggest a long, sleepless night. They were also cushioned by puffy purple bags that confirmed my theory. Even though I knew they looked worse than they really were because she was so pale (even paler than I was, which was impressive), it was all too obvious that the past few days had taken their toll.

Her smile was genuine though, and much needed.

“There’s cold pizza in the fridge,” she said as Jake bent down to hug her. Since his last round of growing, he was now a good foot and a half taller than she was. It was her way of telling him that she was okay, and it was what he needed to hear. He started rummaging through her fridge immediately and emerged seconds later with a bag of cold Mario’s cheese pizza.

Original recipe.

“Dude,” he said popping the bag open, “I haven’t had good pizza in months!”

Rose had a kettle of hot water ready on the stove. She poured us all a chipped Star Wars mug full of tea, served up three plates of cold pizza (we all agreed that the pizza was easily the best thing about Pansboro), and we crammed around her tiny kitchen table, picking up right where we had left off. Rose’s kitchen was small, but adorable. She had wasted no time painting the walls a bright shade of dandelion yellow when they moved in. Braden had let her do it without protest. They had a windowsill full of plants and matching cushions for each kitchen chair before they had a bedframe. As Jake dug in to his third slice, the apprehension I had felt driving in was starting to ebb.

“How was your finals week?” I asked pouring the second round of tea.

“Oh, it was fine,” she replied. “I’ve been done since Wednesday.” Rose was taking classes at the Coal County Community College (QuadC, for short). “I’m going to be so old when I graduate!”

“Yeah right, you’re what? One semester behind.” She was three semesters behind. A fact that we both knew. Rose had stuck it out for one semester at her first school, a place that she had hated from the first time she stepped on its campus. I had never really understood why she had gone. Almost a year and a half later, she went back on her own terms. I cried when she’d told me she would be starting Nursing school during one of our hours-long phone conversations. We all feared that she would never go back.

“Would you believe that the stuff we did in AP Government would have actually come in handy for this Political Science class?” Rose said. “I should have paid more attention the first time around. Braden had to help me with all of my papers.”

“Where is Braden?” Jake asked casually between bites of pizza.

“He’s upstairs sleeping... His job has been taking a lot out of him,” Rose said stirring her tea.

“Does he like the new position?” I asked.

“It’s been good so far,” she said, but I could see the hesitation in her eyes. Braden had graduated from Pansboro High School a few years before us. He had since gotten a degree in Telecommunications from one of the nearby State Schools, but quickly learned after graduation that he could make more money working for one of the companies that had a facility at the Blue Anthracite Industrial Park than at the internship he needed to qualify for a job in his field. The combined income of his full-time job and Rose’s part-time babysitting gig was enough to support the two of them and their cat, Smudge, while still saving to move out once she graduated. That

is, until the metal plant closed at the end of the summer with the Blue Anthracite buyout. Braden had been able to transfer to a position in the new company, but not without conceding to lower pay. Many of the employees, including Jesse, were not as fortunate.

“The hours are better and all... But he’s not sure that he can get off for the service,” Rose started. Her voice shook. “Since he just started working there a few months ago and all. They can’t give him any vacation days until he officially finishes his training period.”

“Rose, he’s been working there for almost six months. I’m sure they’ll give him off,” I replied. Except I wasn’t. We both knew that he was lucky to have the job at all. No matter how much he and Jesse had acted like brothers, they weren’t, and the office was not obligated to give him time off.

“Let’s get out of here,” Rose said, standing suddenly. “I think I need a donut and some caffeine.”

“Dunkin?” I asked smiling in spite of the tension hanging around the small table. Rose knew that I was always in the mood for coffee, especially coffee from our old high school haunt – the downtown Pansboro Dunkin Donuts.

“Absolutely. Just leave your plates in on the table. I’ll grab them later.”

“Jake, we’ll drop you off on the way.”

Caleb’s family lived in the part of town affectionately known as “Old Money Pansboro.” It was made up of two of the oldest streets in town, and located near the center of the city. During the boom times, the business moguls and coal tycoons built their mansions there. Some of them were still “in the family,” and were lived in as normal houses with the occasional eccentricity. A few still had the original carriage houses attached. Others, an elaborate fountain

or marble statue in the front yard. One of the biggest and most-famous was owned by the original Blue Anthracite family and was now a pseudo Art Gallery/Museum. The bottom floor was a perfectly-restored replica of what the Blue Mansion had been in its heyday, while the top housed a studio for piano lessons and art from the area high schools.

Sadly, many of the Pansboro mansions met a much grimmer fate when the money dried up. Most of them stood condemned, slowly crumbling back into the hillside. The ones that could be saved had been repurposed over the years and divided upwards of 10 ways into cramped apartments. On the outside, the apartments didn't look very different from condemned buildings, so sometimes it was hard to tell. There was one section of the street, however, that remained consistently kept up by some of Pansboro's better-off citizens - Brody Avenue. At the time that the street was made, the vehicles that travelled on it were all pulled by horses. Instead of the parallel parking that went on in the streets below, the residents of Brody Avenue were able to perpendicular park.

Caleb's house was on the corner of Brody Avenue and 14th Street. It was a large, sky blue, Victorian structure with two stories of porch held up by white columns. A wrought iron fence surrounded their perfectly kept front lawn. Their house had always reminded me of a postcard. As we pulled up, their Welsh Terrier came charging out of the front door with Caleb's mom following close behind.

"I'll see you tomorrow!" Jake jumped out of the backseat with his duffle bag and made a beeline for the porch. They waved as we drove away. Though there was a smile on Caleb's mom's face, her eyes were unmistakably grave.

For the sham of a city that it was, Pansboro somehow supported not one, not two, but three Dunkin Donuts locations. They dotted the city like small pink beacons of happiness at the low price of \$1.29 for a cup of coffee. The Dunkin that Rose and I called “ours” was on the outskirts of town at an intersection that could take you anywhere you could ever want to go: back to town, out to the old Blue Anthracite land, or to the gas station on the other side. Out of the three Dunkin options, it was the least-likely to be populated by creeps or weirdos and it had never once been robbed. Its normal clientele was one of two age groups - under 25 and over 75. That also seemed to be the two age groups that this location employed. The woman who took my order was so old that she could barely stand, let alone operate the cash register screen. The one that gave me my coffee looked so young she barely seemed old enough to have a job at all.

In a weird way, coming back to this Dunkin Donuts with Rose was more going home than anything. Our favorite table was even open, waiting for us in the corner. The only other people in the seating area this late were a group of middle-school aged girls who were excitedly whispering over a rainbow of half-consumed frappes a few tables over and the two old men who were sitting at the table across from us. It appeared that they were trying to help each other use their respective smartphones with little success.

“Excuse me, miss,” one of them said to us as we sat down. He appeared to be dressed almost completely in leather except for his jeans. Everything about him was rough, but his toothless smile was not threatening.

“Yes?” I squeaked out, taken by surprise at being addressed so abruptly.

“Can you get this application off of my phone? I can’t seem to figure out how to delete the damn thing.” He handed me the phone before I could answer. It was the same brand as Rose’s, but a model that I had never tried to use before. The app in question was Pinterest.

“I’ll do it,” Rose said. I handed her the phone. In five seconds the despised app was gone and Rose was handing the man’s phone back to him.

“Thank you. Thank you so much. The darn thing.” We both giggled under our breath as he turned back around.

In the meantime, our two small black coffees sat steaming together on the table. Paper cup. Flimsy plastic lid. Bold pink and orange print. In high school, I always said that if I ordered a small black coffee during a trip to Dunkin, it meant that I was there on business. It was unobtrusive. It wouldn’t sweat water all over the table or cause a distraction by rattling or slurping at a crucial part in a conversation like an iced drink might. It wasn’t a huge commitment, so I could drink it whether I actually wanted coffee or not. At the same time, it held its own. Black coffee meant business in the way that a caramel swirl iced coffee with cream and two sugars just couldn’t.

Rose had always agreed with me.

She picked hers up and took a long drink of it.

Do you remember when they used to show up in our English class?” Rose blurted out after several moments of silence. I didn’t hesitate.

“YES. They always got there right as Mrs. Jones was about to start. Every Thursday, straight out of study hall.”

I could still see it. Braden and Jesse always busted into the room in the 5-10 seconds between Mrs. Jones finishing attendance and starting the day's lesson. They had been big time seniors our freshman year. Their claim was that they "would rather learn than waste away in the overcrowded holding pen that was the third-floor study hall room."

Mrs. Jones had been skeptical for the first few weeks.

"I love..." Jesse started looked around the room for some hint of what we were supposed to be learning about that day.

"Antigone," someone coughed from the second row.

"Antigone!" he exclaimed.

"Does Mr. Bernstead know that you two are down here?"

"Of course," they had answered in unison, giving her the biggest puppy dog eyes I had ever seen on anyone, let alone two 18-year-old boys. She gave them both a very stern once over. We all knew that, had she chosen to reach for the phone in that moment and call up to the study hall room, Mr. Bernstead would have no idea that they were here. He probably hadn't even realized that they had left in the first place. The sole-monitor for a 200-person study hall, Mr. Bernstead famously reigned over his dominion from behind a newspaper at the desk in the front of the room. If he looked up once every 5 minutes, it was a crazy day. As far as we could tell, Braden and Jesse left through the door that let out to the back stairwell the second he looked down from taking attendance and were long gone before he looked up again.

Mrs. Jones knew it too, but she let them stay anyway. For a long time, I couldn't figure it out, but eventually I realized that it was simply because she liked them. And who could blame her? Rose and I quickly cycled through our favorite Braden & Jesse memories - the time they filled the band room up with balloons, when they bailed us out at Sheetz after Rose had lost her

wallet and needed gas to get home, when they took each other to senior prom just because they could even though they both had girlfriends. But the happy memories just didn't cut it.

"I hate this," Rose blurted out. We both fell to silence.

"Yeah."

"I hate thinking about it."

"Yeah."

"It's just so hard because he was so young... It's like seeing yourself..."

I nodded.

I wanted to say something more profound and sympathetic, but the words seemed to be stuck somewhere deep in my chest. I hated it too. It was a tragedy that no one should have to endure, but it was not uncommon. An even bigger tragedy.

"You just don't think about it... Until it happens." She nodded, staring into her coffee. I knew what she was thinking. It could have anyone. It could have been Braden. Heck, it could have been Rose, or Caleb, or any of them. This place had a habit of holding on to you. Trapping you. Even now I could feel the walls of the Dunkin Donuts closing in around me. The worst part was that Jesse's death was unremarkable.

What was there to say? Jesse was a real person, only three years older than us. He was a son and a brother, even to an estranged family. He was Braden's dearest friend. They had grown up together, gone to school together, and even lived together at different times. It was only in recent years that they had started to grow apart, living very different lives. We all were. As I watched Rose stir her now-cold coffee it dawned on me that Jesse and I hadn't really spoken in the three years since I graduated, and now we never would.

"What was it..." I asked quietly. Rose looked up from her coffee.

“What?”

“What was it? That he overdosed on?”

“They told us that he got some bad heroin.”

“Heroin?” I nearly spat my coffee out all over the table. Jesse was known to smoke, but heroin was far more serious than anything I’d ever heard of him doing.

“Yeah. But that’s not what did it. That’s not what killed him.”

“Then what?”

“It was laced with something. Fentanyl.”

A heaviness settled between us. Rose didn’t need to tell me what I already knew from what little town resources and police report information I had seen in the past few days.

Braden had found him. He had gone to Jesse’s house to drag him out to a long-awaited trivia night after he hadn’t answered his texts. He called 911, but Jesse had already been on the floor of his living room for hours. There was nothing the paramedics could do. Jesse was pronounced dead at 6:03pm in the arms of his best friend, so the obituary read. More like a blurb. The tragedy of his death had been overshadowed that morning by an unrelated event – a meth lab in Mine City (another patch town) that had exploded that night, killing not only the two meth heads that ran it, but the family that lived next door.

Just another piece of coal region news.

## Chapter 3

### Braden's Story

Braden crept silently down the staircase. He could just barely make out the outline of each step, but he still clearly pictured the shaggy, olive-green carpet covering each one. He skipped the last step. It always creaked loud enough to wake up the entire neighborhood, let alone Rose, who was sleeping just up the stairs. The soft thud of his right foot landing on the living room floor was far more discreet. She hadn't moved an inch when he got out of bed, but he wasn't taking any chances. This morning, he wanted to be alone.

The coffee pot was already on when he walked into the kitchen. It was part of Rose's nightly ritual to prep the coffee for the next morning. Braden laughed every time he watched her meticulously measure out exactly two and a half scoops of coffee and evenly spread it around in the filter. She was equally exact with the pot of water. On the rare occasion when she wasn't around, Braden made his own coffee. He haphazardly tossed a few scoops into a crinkly filter and added in about enough water for himself. Even though he didn't need to be awake this early anymore, neither of them had changed the coffee maker's 3am timer.

As Braden poured himself cup #1, he saw Rose's refrigerator calendar out of the corner of his eye. This month's theme was Valentine's Day, complete with a recipe for candy heart cupcakes. Rose stocked the calendar chock full of birthdays, family gatherings, nursing school exams, dinners, appointments, and whatever else she could think of. Almost every day had something, even if it was just a blurb that said "free day" with a smiley face. It was rare for a

square to be totally blank, so February 20th caught his eye immediately. He turned away when he realized why. She had left it blank out of reverence. It was hard to believe that Jesse had already been gone for almost two months.

Braden poured himself another cup. The blinking green microwave clock informed him that it was just a little bit past 3am. Even though he no longer worked overnight hours, he still often woke up out of a dead sleep just in time to make the infamous fourth shift at McCCasey Metal, 4am - 1pm. Sometimes, secretly, he wondered if he was cursed. Jesse had once told him that he thought his sleep schedule could never be normal again after working there for so many years.

“I think that I’m going to wake up at 3am every day no matter what,” he said after they had both woken up in the middle of the night on a trip to the cabin and met in the kitchen to grab bottles of water. Never mind that they had only gone to bed two hours earlier.

“The other people in the nursing home are going to love me!” Jesse exclaimed slamming the refrigerator door.

“I know what you mean,” Braden said, cracking open his bottle, “I haven’t slept on a normal schedule since college at least. And even then, I wouldn’t call that normal.” Jesse laughed.

“You might still be able to stop it,” he said, “If the Old Man transferred you to first shift, you would be golden. Never have to think about waking up at the crack of 3am again.”

“Yeah right,” Braden answered. “The Old Man only puts geezers on first shift. That’s why fourth shift has so much work to do!” They both laughed. The shift structure at McCCasey was actually determined by some convoluted system of seniority, union status, skill level, and straight up favoritism. You usually couldn’t expect to break into daylight hours any time before your 40th birthday. Rumor had it that Old Man McCCasey made his own son work fourth shift for five years before allowing him to transfer to the company office. Something about building character.

“I reckon I have about three or four more years before I can get him to put me on third,” Jesse said, “maybe less if someone quits.” Jesse had started his job with McCasey Metal three days after he and Braden graduated from high school. Since then, he’d been slowly clawing his way towards regular business hours. Originally, working fourth shift meant that he could take a few online classes during the day. By that summer, just a few years later, it meant that he had to use blackout curtains to pretend that it was still dark outside when he played video games and smoked.

“If that’s how long you have left, I’m never getting off fourth shift,” Braden said. At the time, he had been half joking, but they both had known that it was a very real possibility. McCasey had always taken Braden back for overflow work during the summer, but those hours didn’t count for much in the Geezer’s eyes. The guys loved to give Braden a hard time about college. “You don’t need no piece of paper to load boxes,” was a fairly common statement from the older full-timers. They weren’t wrong. Braden made twice as much money putting McCasey boxes on a pallet then he would at an entry-level communications position anywhere within 50 miles of Pansboro, if there was such a thing. And that wasn’t counting benefits.

Braden shook his head and drained the last of coffee #2. Now neither of them would ever know what it was like to work day shift at McCasey.

Braden couldn’t sit still anymore. He had to leave. The microwave was now blinking somewhere between 3:30am and 4:00am. Rose’s first class (according to the schedule posted next to the calendar) was at 10am. Even if he waited for her to wake up, they would only see a few minutes of each other before he had to leave for the office. He sat his coffee mug down in the sink, careful not to clang it against the other dishes that had spent the night there, and headed for the door.

Braden's "yuppy shoes," as his family liked to call them, had been given the place of honor on the shoe rack. They were shiny and black and matched every shirt-tie combination he owned. "10 bucks at Walmart and you can fit in anywhere," he mused. Rose had gone with him the night before he started his new position to pick them out. She entertained a very one-sided conversation about color and style and browsed while he remained fixated on the collection of footwear before him. He was frozen at the beginning of the aisle. The shoes all seemed intensely artificial, and every fiber of Braden's being was resisting the idea of cramming them on his feet.

After several minutes of half-listening to Rose, he grabbed the first pair he saw in his size and bolted for the register. She followed him, confused.

"These are perfect," he said tossing them onto the counter.

"Are you sure?" she frowned.

"Yeah," he tried to recover, "they're simple. I think they are perfect for me. Don't need anything fancy, y'know?"

"Don't you think you should at least try them on?" After she saw the pained expression in his eyes, Rose didn't push the issue again.

Even though they now had nearly three months of wear on them, the shoes looked and felt just like they did on the day he bought them. Braden had even managed to scuff the side of one of them up pretty well on the edge of his desk, but the shoes were still too new. They were also no more comfortable or broken in than they had been the day he walked them out of Walmart. At a loss, he supposed they might look new forever. He certainly had no interest in ever buying another pair.

Braden grabbed his keys off the hook by the door, trying to silence their brassy jingle as much as possible. The rest of town was still sleeping under a blanket of stars and patchy fog, and he wanted to keep it that way.

Anyone that said Downtown Pansboro was a ghost town during regular business hours had evidently never seen it in the early morning. Braden rolled slowly from intersection to intersection. Every traffic light was blinking yellow, but none of them were in sync. Braden thought they looked more like a string of twinkle lights stretching down Main Street than traffic controllers. Every now and again, a delivery truck would rumble by and illuminate part of a building that was outside the range of the intermittent streetlights. The light threw shadows across the ornate stone façades of the city's oldest buildings before fading away into the darkness.

Braden thought that he might stop at the Dunkin Donuts at the edge of town before driving to the office to kill time and grab coffee #3, but instead of turning left at the end of Main Street to go towards the highway, he found himself veering to the right rather suddenly. This path out of town wound up the ridge behind the old Pansboro Pizzeria. Eventually, it led to Coal Ridge, a small group of houses that sat on the edge of Pansboro Proper and the beginning of the Blue Anthracite mine land. It was the longer of the two ways to get to the Pansboro Industrial Park/Office for sure. Braden's pulse increased with every turn. He hadn't driven this way since the last time he picked Jesse up for work.

Jesse didn't live exactly in Coal Ridge. The summer after high school, he cut a deal with Blue Anthracite and moved into one of their old service houses. It was actually out of town a ways, about halfway between Coal Ridge and the Park. There had been many occasions over the

years when Jesse had walked to work. Traversing the service road on foot was definitely not recommended, but it could be done.

Braden would have driven straight past Jesse's house if he hadn't stopped there so many times before. After one of the sharper corners, it seemed to appear out of nowhere. He knew before he even saw it that he would be stopping, but he didn't realize how involuntary the action actually was. He pulled carefully pulled off to the side of the road and got out.

The house looked the same as it always had. The white paint was perpetually tinted grey from the grime of the street. Or maybe it was just from years of Pennsylvania weather. If it wasn't for the shreds of police tape that still hung around the front porch, it would look like any other abandoned building in the weak morning light. Braden squinted to make out the signs in the windows. Right next to the postings about trespassing and private property, there was some loopy cursive stuck to the window.

Braden couldn't believe it. It was the crooked-ass State University sticker that Jesse had acquired years ago, still hanging on for dear life. One of the first weekends that Braden was home from his first semester of college, he had come over to Jesse's to celebrate. After a night of having way too much fun, Jesse had gone upstairs and come back with the cheesiest sticker from Braden's college that he had ever seen.

"Where did you..."

"Shhh. Don't speak," Jesse had replied. He had stumbled over the entryway and plastered it proudly on the front window for all of the passing coal trucks and Pansboro drivers to see. "I grabbed it at the gas station this morning. Now they'll at least think someone intelligent lives here."

Braden smiled at the memory. That night felt so long ago. Even in the months leading up to the GreenCorp takeover, he hadn't seen much of Jesse. Granted, he had been spending a lot of time with Rose, making sure that she was comfortable in their apartment while simultaneously trying to prove to her family that he was capable of supporting her through the end of Nursing School. Not that she really needed him. Despite the fact that Braden had graduated with a bachelor's degree "on time" and with decent grades, he was convinced that Rose was smarter than him in almost every way. It just took her a little bit longer to figure out what she wanted to do.

Jesse was the same way... would have been the same way. Sure, rising through the ranks at McCasey Metal wasn't most people's dream, but it was something. As much as they joked around about the purgatory of fourth shift, Braden knew that Jesse meant it when he fantasized about working the cushy daylight hours. The Old Man might have been a grump, but he was a fair boss. Most people who got on at McCasey out of high school stayed on until retirement. Their deal with Blue Anthracite kept them running constantly. The Old Man expected hard work, but he always compensated fairly, paid into everyone's pension, and respected his employees. He busted on everyone, but if he like you, he'd do anything he could to keep you. Old Man McCasey was even known to overlook unfavorable drug test results if he felt that the quality of work was not suffering. Braden knew that was another reason that Jesse had stayed on with him for so long. Passing random drug tests had never been his forte.

A breeze tossed some leaves up on the side of the road. Braden shivered. This winter had been especially bitter, but the previous seasons had not been kind to them either. The day that GreenCorp showed up at the McCasey Metal with the Blue Anthracite Rep, it had been almost 100° in the building. Companies came through all the time to try to sell products, tour the

facilities, etc., but that time felt different. For the first time since Braden had started working for McCasey, the Old Man looked nervous. Then the notices came.

The only people who made it through the Blue Anthracite takeover with jobs were the most senior of senior union guys and Braden, the fourth shift nobody. He had been the only person in the room with a college degree that qualified him to shuffle papers at the GreenCorp office. Everyone else was turned out to unemployment or “early retirement” as the GreenCorp HR Manager preferred to call it.

How could he have known? How could he have known that Jesse never applied for unemployment or job replacement? Braden had been whisked away to a week of orientation to learn how to enter his hours in the GreenCorp timesheet system, answer the phone with the appropriate script, and how to manage the system of invoices and outboxes that he was suddenly responsible for. Suddenly he and Jesse were on totally opposite schedules. His weekends were a blur of Rose and overtime. Jesse’s messages seemed so normal. How could he have known that all the time Braden assumed Jesse was spending looking for a job, he was actually holed up in his house in a drug-induced haze? How could he have known that some idiot local drug-dealer would sell him enough fentanyl to kill an elephant, let alone a skinny 25-year-old man.

He couldn’t have. Or was that just what he told himself to avoid facing the truth?

With each desperate thought, Braden stepped closer and closer to the house, as if begging it for answers. It alone had witnessed Jesse’s deterioration and final moments. If there was an explanation, it was there.

Just then, the sun emerged from behind the ridge and glared straight into his eyes, momentarily replacing his view of the house with orange light. He shook himself, as if coming out of a trance.

If he didn't leave now, he would be late for work.

## Chapter 4

### Annie's Story

"Who can tell me what year Pansboro was founded," Annie Clemmons asked turning away from the blackboard. A few reluctant hands went in the air, but most of the class remained stoic, glassy, locked in the same position they had been in for the last 20 minutes. "You all should know this," she hinted, side-eyeing the big Pansboro poster hanging next to the board. It showed a map of the city and surrounding areas with the founding year printed in bold under the title and above the city's motto "Gateway to Anthracite." It was also going to be on their quiz in a few days. A hand in the third row shot up. "Marcus!"

"Miss Clemmons, can I go to the bathroom?" Though his question was poorly timed, Annie wasn't giving up that easily. She knew he could figure it out.

"Can you answer the question first?"

"Uhhh... 1804?"

"Correct!" He jumped up to leave without delay. "Take the pass with you when you go." Annie couldn't tell whether the answer had suddenly occurred to him or he read it straight off the poster, but at least he answered it. She added a red checkmark to his name for the day to record his participation. So far, only 5 out of her 22 students had checkmarks.

"And who founded Pansboro?" another easy one to get the gears turning. She got a few more hands, and called on one of the trio of girls in the back left who were usually pretty good about participating. Except for during history. "Emma."

“Jacob Pans?”

“Yes!” Emma smiled and high-fived the girl sitting next to her, Sadie.

“Now, for all the marbles, you should ALL know this, what was the main export of Pansboro during its heyday in the late 1800s?” Almost all of the hands shot up. Thank god. At least most of them were listening. One of the only people who didn’t have their hand up was Sadie. She was an exceptional student, but never seemed to want to talk during class. Annie knew she knew it. Sadie’s dad was the only person she had ever met who still worked as a coal miner.

“Sadie.” Annie watched her eyes snap up in panic. The other two girls looked at her encouragingly. “What was the main export of Pansboro back in the day?”

“Coal?” her voice was barely above a whisper.

“What kind of coal?”

“Um...”

“It’s part of the city motto!” Sadie was thinking hard. Annie was starting to wonder if any of her students looked at the Pansboro poster. When found it in the room at the beginning of the year, she thought it was fascinating. Pansboro was far from a traditional city grid, with roads zig-zagging every which way through the city and its surrounding townships and boroughs.

“An.. Anth... Anthra...” It was on the tip of her tongue. Some of the other students were starting to whisper muddled suggestions. Annie thought she heard “anthracite” from the opposite end of the room.

“Can anyone help her out?” Annie asked before someone inevitably yelled it out on their own accord.

“Anthracite!” James yelled from the front.

“Correct. Nice job, guys.” James was one of Annie’s only students who actually seemed interested in learning the history of Pansboro. He had been offering his own facts to the class about the different coal companies, patch towns, and miner organizations that had once dotted the Pansboro hills all week and had raised his hand to answer every one of her questions. Sadie looked relieved. She whispered something to Emma and fell silent again. “Today we are going to continue talking about the different miner organizations and ‘mobs’ that were in our area.” A few heads perked up to listen more closely. The Pansboro miner mobs and organized crime was one of the more interesting topics of discussion that Annie got to cover. There was only so much detail that you could go into with a fourth-grade class, but the most engaging parts of the stories had more to do with the mystery and less to do with the violence.

When the bell finally rang to signal the day was over, 13/22 students had a red checkmark for their participation. It didn’t help that history was their final subject of the day, or that they had to split it every other day with environmental science.

“Don’t forget that we will be having a quiz on this material on Friday! Review your study guides!” There was a collective groan and shuffling of papers as anyone who had already forgotten to pack their study guide shoved it into their bag. Most students wasted no time packing up and getting ready to leave, even though their busses wouldn’t arrive for as long as 45 minutes.

Abbey Run Elementary shared the district’s small bus fleet with both Coal Hill Middle School and Pansboro High. The high schoolers got out half an hour earlier, but Abbey Run and Coal Hill were left competing for drivers and bus space at 3pm. After a week of late buses, Annie quickly realized that Abbey Run typically got the short end of the transportation stick.

Waiting for the buses to arrive gave her a chance to grade papers and get organized for the next morning. It had been a particularly tough week for most of the students, and teachers for that matter. Though it hadn't happened yet, snow loomed in the forecast.

"It's only a matter of time," the older teachers warned her at lunch that day. "Pansboro hasn't seen a snowless February in decades."

Annie wasn't quite feeling the snow-day fever. The prospect of losing a few days of instructional time filled her with more anxiety than elation. There was some buffer built into her lesson plans, but not enough to make up for a week of missed class. Even enough two-hour delays or early dismissals had the potential to put them behind. With the state-wide assessments starting in less than a month, there just wasn't much time to spare. Mrs. Czechawitz, her mentor teacher, had tried to assuage her fears during their last in-service day by suggesting that she temporarily use her last subject time, which was usually devoted to the rotation of environmental science and history, to catch up if need be. It was what most of the teachers did.

Annie felt torn. She flipped back and forth through her next two weeks of plans looking for space to add potential catch-up time. The instruction of local history was a district preference based on their charter, but if her students did not reach the knowledge benchmark required for the PA Standards testing in March, their poor performance could result in her contract being "cancelled for the next school year." She needed to make it at least one more year for the union to give her full protection, and several more after that to get tenure like Mrs. Czechawitz and the other seasoned educators who saw her dilemma as a nonissue. For as little interest as her students sometimes demonstrated for coal miners and the Appalachian Mountains, they demonstrated even less for long division.

“Bye, Miss Clemmons!” James said, dragging Annie out of her thoughts. He stood patiently next to her desk waiting for an answer with a neon orange book bag and a smile.

“Have a nice night, James,” she answered. She looked at the clock above her blackboard. It was 3:40pm. She would have just enough time to make it back to her apartment, change, and meet Sabrina for dinner. Sabrina would be an excellent opportunity to get a second opinion on her snow day strategy. She wasn’t a teacher, but she had grown up in Pansboro and always provided solid advice when they were in roommates in college.

The restaurant that Sabrina chose was a small pizza shop in a strip mall outside of the city that had been built near an old coal field and adequately named “Miner’s Plaza.” Annie had never been to it before. For being such a depressed area, Pansboro certainly had a lot of places to eat. Despite the fact that she had been living there since August, Annie felt like she hadn’t even tried half of them yet. “Pivecco’s” advertised “coal-fired pizza” as their specialty. Sabrina was waiting in the lobby sporting a pink blazer and heels. Pivecco’s was actually much nicer on the inside than it looked from the front of the strip mall. For the first time since moving to Pansboro, Annie felt underdressed.

“What’s coal-fired pizza?” Annie asked as they grabbed an open booth.

“Oh, it’s pretty much just regular pizza but instead of burning wood to power the oven, they burn coal.” Sabrina scanned the extensive menu quickly, but Annie kept coming back to the coal-fired pizza.

“Does it taste any different?”

“I think they say it’s crispier? But I don’t really think so.”

“I’m going to try it.”

The waitress took their order without writing anything down and returned with their drinks. Her hair seemed to be defying gravity, piled on top of her head and secured with a large purple flower.

Annie and Sabrina chatted about the usual subjects of their weekly dinners: their lives, relationships (or lack thereof), and mutually binge-watched fantasy-thrillers.

“Are you SURE there are no eligible male teachers floating around Abbey Run?” Sabrina asked as if more had spontaneously appeared since their last meeting. After Sabrina’s last relationship ended when her long-time boyfriend moved to Shanghai to pursue researching at an engineering firm instead of marrying her, she declared that she was taking a hiatus from men. The way she told it, his over-inflated ego had caused him to jump on his company’s first offer of a leadership position, even if it was halfway around the world. She just couldn’t support such a shallow life decision. Though Annie supported her decision, she also knew that he had offered to take her with him. Sabrina cancelled her flight out to meet him at the last minute and they hadn’t spoken since. Even though she had sworn men off, she was not taking a hiatus from trying to find one for Annie.

“I’m so sure. There are only like 3 male teachers to begin with and two of them are over 50.”

“What about the other one?”

“He’s nice. I don’t see him very often. He teaches kindergarten in the other part of the building.” Sabrina’s eyes grew wider with hope and Annie knew she had to shut her down before the entire restaurant heard her scheming to get them together. “I think he’s married though.”

Truth be told, Annie was more sure that he wasn’t married. She just didn’t want Sabrina to get her hopes up. After watching her best friend’s relationship collapse due to distance, she was in no hurry to put any sort of dating roots down anywhere.

“Darn. Why are the best ones always married?” She sighed dramatically and took a few more bites of salad.

“Maybe it’s best not to get too involved with anyone at work. You never know what could happen.” They were silent for a few moments. Despite Sabrina’s lackluster review, Annie thought the coal-fired pizza was actually one of the best she had tried in Pansboro.

“So how are things at Abbey Run? Still liking it?”

“Oh yeah, it’s great. It’s a tough time of year for the kids, but the teachers and administration have all been wonderful.” A short answer, but a truthful one. Abbey Run had its problems, but the people were great. So much so that it often made up for the seemingly pointless meetings and school board drama.

“That’s great, Annie! So, are they renewing your contract?” Sabrina asked. It was clear that she was dying to know. Annie supposed that Sabrina felt as though she had some stake in her status in the area. It had been Sabrina who had pushed her to apply for the job when offers didn’t come in from the districts she applied to closer to her home in Philadelphia.

“I don’t know yet,” Annie tried to sound positive, “they don’t have to decide until June after all the grades and classroom reports are in and the standardized test results come back.”

“That sucks.”

“I know. It’s technically enough time to find a job if they drop me, but it would be tough. And I would probably have to move again.”

“They won’t drop you, Annie, don’t be ridiculous. I bet you’re doing more than half the teachers at that school.”

“It’s not that... I just know it’s about the funding,” Annie said. “They made it abundantly clear when I took the job that they ‘will strongly consider renewing my contract if I demonstrate

proficiency at teaching to both the district and state standard of knowledge.’ Basically, either those kids pass the PA Standards, or I’m out.” Sabrina nodded. Their waitress returned and slipped the check under the pizza tray. Her purple flower bobbed dangerously as she bent over, but did not fall.

“Well, you’re definitely right about the funding. The district would never make it without the Standards money.” Sabrina said, taking another swig from her iced tea carton.

“I don’t know how you drink that stuff.” Annie laughed. As far as she could tell, Beams Iced Tea was a mixture of equal parts water and pure corn syrup with a dash of tea powder and “natural flavors,” to taste. She couldn’t keep it down, but Sabrina and the other locals seemed to thrive on it.

“It’s in my veins, girl,” she replied, finishing off the carton. They both laughed off the tension that had crept into their usually light-hearted dinner. “Don’t let this funding stuff get you down. They probably won’t want to go through the pain of replacing you.”

“The real issue is that there just isn’t enough time. Teachers are talking about impending snow and days off and everything else but we’re barely staying ahead as it is. I have as much extra time in my lesson plans as I can afford, but it’s more than likely that I’m going to have to drop something to keep them on track for math and English. My mentor thinks that I should take some time from the local history block, but then I’m slipping on the district standards.

“Oh man, are they still having you guys teach Pansboro history?” Abbie nodded. “We had that stuff when I was in fourth grade.”

“Did you like it?”

“Not at the time. It was boring as all get out. But I did eventually come to appreciate it. Like years and years later when I was far away from here and had to try to explain it to people at college. I’m sure you remember.”

Annie did. Way back during the early parts of their friendship, Sabrina had attempted to explain the place she had grown up, Pansboro. With the help of a few visual aids, she had woven an image of a town with the scars of the coal industry, shadowed by “better times,” and boasting some of the best pizza there was. Beautiful architecture from a century ago combined with stripping pits and impossibly confusing streets to create something that was at once inspiring and grotesque, especially to those who lived there. It was a place with exactly 346 historical plaques, and no one to read them. Annie never really understood it until she came to visit and then, eventually, became a permanent resident.

“And now that I work for the Chamber of Commerce, I use that stuff every day,” Sabrina exclaimed, signing her name on the check with a flourish. “‘Historic Coal Region Mine Tours’ just cracked the Top 10 reasons to visit Pansboro. Right under the County Jail and the Beams Iced Tea Challenge.”

“What is the number one reason to visit Pansboro?” Annie asked, intrigued. Sabrina laughed.

“It’s a tie between ‘Family’ and ‘The GreenCorp Campus.’”

Even now, she and Sabrina were on the cusp of the coal industry from the history she taught her students. The parking lot of the mall looked over an old strip mine. It had been abandoned for decades, but still left an unmistakable imprint on the landscape. As they walked to their cars, Annie could just make out the outline of the ridges and jagged rocks that lay beyond the “no trespassing sign.” It was a remarkably clear night. Above the strip with its jewelry store, pizza

joint, and cellphone carrier, there was a blanket of thousands of stars that continued out beyond the old strip mine and onto the horizon.

## Chapter 5

### Chuck's Story

“Here you go, Chuck.” He watched a brown plastic Dunkin Donuts tray slide in front of him, followed by a heavily-nail polished hand. The tray housed the usual: a small black coffee, a powder-sugar covered “Pansboro Cream” donut, and the morning newspaper. He picked up the paper to get a better look at the front page.

“The paper feels a little thin this morning.”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s just a slow news day,” Missy responded over her shoulder as she headed back to the counter. Chuck hesitated before nodding. He’d have to weigh it against another copy just to be sure nothing was missing. Once before he had missed a whole day of Local Interest because some kid lifted the comics pages and took the Local Interest Section with them. A preliminary flip through seemed to indicate that everything was accounted for. Maybe Missy was right. It was just a slow news day.

A dusting of powdered sugar fell on the Sports Section of the *Recorder Daily* as Chuck dug into his Pansboro Cream. Sometimes they got overstuffed and made a mess, but today it was perfect. Both Pansboro basketball teams lost last night, to Miner’s Valley nonetheless. The paper was so thin that certainly they should have had the space to do a follow-up article to figure out what the hell happened there.

By the time he finished reading the Sports Section, Missy was back with his first coffee refill.

“Are the rest of the boys joining you this morning Chuck?”

“Well, Donnie has a doctor’s appointment, Sal is visiting his kids in Columbus, and Gary’s still in the hospital, so it looks like it’s just me.” Chuck liked Missy. She was a good waitress, and always remembered his and all the guys’ orders. But sometimes she had a tendency to pry a little too much.

“I see. Well I’ll come out on my break, sweetie, and we’ll talk.” Chuck started to protest, but Missy was already halfway back to the counter to take someone else’s order for donuts and coffee. That was the other thing about Missy. She loved to talk.

Chuck attempted to draw the paper out for as long as possible, but when it was done, it was done. Even the crossword, which could sometimes stump the group for hours, took only a few minutes to complete. Unconvinced that it wasn’t a reprint of a previous puzzle, Chuck wracked his brain to remember another place he had seen all of those clues together. He’d have to ask Donnie. He was the one who remembered stuff like that.

He folded the paper up, exactly as it had been and placed it on the edge of the table to signal that he was done with it. Missy would come and whisk it away with the plastic tray and the rest of his garbage, but for all he knew, they would give it to someone else. Some lucky person had probably been getting his crossword solutions for years.

Once the newspaper and tray had disappeared, and his coffee was topped off, Chuck turned to his bag, which was currently occupying Sal’s usual spot next to him in the booth. He liked to joke with Chuck that the bag was almost as old and worn out as he was. The memory of it made him chuckle. He and the bag had certainly been through a lot together. 30 years in the coal mine had done a number on both of them, but they were both better than ever. Especially since his kids had it restored for him as a retirement present. At the time, he had played it off as a ridiculous gesture. The old tool bag should have been retired to the back shed to aid in the putzing projects

that retirement would bring. Or better yet, thrown out, like it was before his daughter fished it out of the trash.

Now, he was happy to have it. It was like having a part of the mines with him wherever he went. And, though he had never admitted this to anyone, not even his coffee buddies, having the old bag around reminded him who he was. Once a coal miner, always a coal miner.

He opened it and retrieved a small, leather bound notebook and his favorite pencils.

“Ooo,” Missy said, sliding into the bench across from him. She must have been on her break and was returning to make good on her promise of chatting. “Got anything new?”

“Oh uh you know, more of the same,” Chuck flipped through a few pages before finding the sketch he was working on. It was a depiction of the Old Pansboro Mine entrance. He had finally gotten the shape of the gates right, but now the background was giving him issues. No matter what he tried, the shadowy machinery that was always visible moving slowly in the distance kept falling flat. “I’m working on this right now. It’s mostly just for me, but I might end up using it for part of a commission.

“Who for?” Missy leaned across the table and turned her head to try to see the half-done sketch from the correct point of view.

“The people that bought the Blue Anthracite land. They reached out to me a few weeks ago. I haven’t given them an answer yet, though.” He added quickly, “I’m not too sure that I want to do work for them.” In fact, Chuck was almost sure that he didn’t want to do work for them.

“Well, why not? They want to pay you, don’t they?”

“They’re willing to negotiate, I think. But it’s not about the money, Miss, you know I don’t do this for the money.” With as few expenses as he had, his pension from mining was just enough to live on. His savings paid for anything else he wanted. He usually drew and painted for

himself. The first mural Chuck ever created was for his kids more than two decades ago. He painted a whole zoo full of animals on their back fence using paint that he salvaged from Blue Anthracite's construction department. The colors hadn't been quite right for some of the animals, but the kids had been thrilled anyway. Other than that, he hadn't painted much until he retired. Just a quick sketch here and there.

Behind Missy, who was now gabbing about exposure, taking chances, and "getting your work out there," he could see most of the second mural he had ever created. Not long after they retired, he and his buddies, unable to break the habit of waking up before the sun, started up a morning coffee routine at the nearest available spot – Dunkin Donuts. It didn't take long to become regulars. Most of the usual clientele at Dunkin did their business through the drive through. Missy was pretty much the only waitress that worked during the week, if you would call her that. Her first duty was to the cash register, but she tried to come out from behind the counter as much as possible. She had been the first person, other than Chuck's family and buddies, to see his work. "Hey, that's really something," she had said one day when he was sketching a scene of coal miners at work. "How much do you charge for one of those?" Missy was also the first person to buy one of his sketches. She said that it was hanging in her living room.

When Dunkin Donuts went through its big remodel a few years ago (the coffee meeting had to be temporarily relocated to the McDonalds down the street), the owner asked Chuck if he would be willing to paint a mural on one of the seating area walls. He initially turned him down, but eventually Missy and his buddies talked him into it. They also helped him paint it. A six-foot-long scene of miners breaking for a "breakfast" of coffee and Dunkin Donuts. Chuck had had his misgivings about the anachronistic details, but many people said it was their favorite part. The

owners of the Dunkin tried to pay him, but he didn't accept the money. Instead, they started giving him free coffee.

Chuck sat facing the mural every morning. Most days he didn't think much of it, but sometimes, especially when he was in a creative slump, it acted as inspiration. It inspired Missy too. She was always trying to get Chuck to do more murals around Pansboro.

"I don't know, Missy. I'm not so sure about these GreenCorp people. They said they were looking for the landscape of a mine transforming into 'a brighter and safer future.' I'm not even sure what that means. I know the mines aren't exactly beautiful, but if they didn't like 'em they should have bought property somewhere else." He was agitated now. The Old Pansboro Mine closing had been a real blow to the city, at least as far as he was concerned. Even though he retired years before it happened, he really felt for the young kids who had to transfer to the valley to stay employed. "Besides, I just finished that one at the Elementary School. I think I want to take a break for a little bit."

"Oh yeah! When is the grand opening?" Missy asked, "I heard the big news station from Philly is coming and everything." Chuck felt his face turning red. He wished that people wouldn't make such a big deal about it.

"It's next week. I wish they would stay in Philly."

Missy laughed. "Face it bud, you're famous." She glanced down at her watch, "and I am going to be late getting back from my break. Do you want some more coffee?" Chuck's cup was already almost empty. Would this be number 3 or 4?

"Maybe just one more."

Missy stood up and headed back towards the counter. As she walked out through the archway that divided the counter area from the dining area, two young men walked in with large coffee

cups and dusty work boots. They claimed the booth next to Chuck, despite the fact that almost every seat in the dining area was available, and starting talking animatedly about what Chuck surmised to be a job they had just completed.

“Come on, man, I know they aren’t all that easy, but you can’t beat it!” the man with the green flannel shirt said, slamming his coffee onto the table for emphasis.

“I know, I know. And the payoff is so much better. I might actually have a shot at breaking even at the end of the month.” The second man was wearing a blue work shirt. Rather than slam his coffee down, he took a long drag from the cup and held onto it. From this close, Chuck could see that they were both covered in a thin layer of dirt that was only patchy around their eyes and hands.

“Maybe I’ll put my two weeks in at the mine,” Green Shirt said, shrugging. “At least I’d get to see the sun with Ridge Vista. Contracting is where it’s at. Even in the rain, you’re still above ground.”

“That’s true, but what about your insurance? Your pension?”

“What about it? They’ve cut our benefits so much that the insurance is barely good for anything. I’m sure Ridge Vista could get me some eventually. I’ll do the pension buyout. What good is that money to me if I can’t pay my bills now?”

Chuck was really listening now. These men were obviously miners. He could just see the edge of the Blue Anthracite logo on Blue Shirt’s dusty hat. They must have been moonlighting for Ridge Vista Contracting. Chuck had heard that they were the ones handling the road repair on the north end of town. The debate between Green Shirt and Blue Shirt escalated until Missy reappeared with a fresh pot of coffee and a warning. The entire time, Chuck had been absentmindedly sketching. He had given up on the gate for the day, and instead switched his

focus to an action shot of a runaway donkey cart. During Missy's interruption, he realized that the two coal miners in the cart were starting to look an awful lot like Green Shirt and Blue Shirt.

"Listen, man, you can do what you want, but I heard last week that they were going to open up a new section on the other side of the valley soon. The engineers have been around to look at it and everything. Sure, we're part time right now, but who knows what could happen."

"I do. They'll hire more people at part time. OR they'll bring people in. Foreigners. They'll work for less. And then they'll fire us all and then we'll really be in trouble. I'm sick of it, man. I can't do it anymore."

A few moments of heated silence passed between Green Shirt and Blue Shirt. Chuck sighed but covered it with a deep, phlegmatic cough so they wouldn't think he was eavesdropping on their conversation. Even towards the end of the career, uncertainty had started to creep its way into the mine management. Despite continuous advances in technology and safety, profits were consistently down. The Old Pansboro Mine never recovered its momentum once coal started losing ground to other energy sources. When it finally closed, it had less than half the miners working there than there had been when Chuck retired. Now that Blue Anthracite was no more, these men must have been employed by the Valley Mine.

"Just ask yourself," Blue Shirt finally broke the silence that had settled in between the three men. His voice reminded Chuck that he was supposed to drawing, not staring into space waiting for them to start talking again. "Is it really worth it? All of this and we could still end up dead. Crushed by a coal cart. Caught in machinery. Do you actually want to do this for the rest of your life? Stuck on the hamster wheel like like... like those guys."

Chuck looked up from his drawing to see that blue shirt was pointing at the mural. His mural. Green Shirt turned around to see it too.

“Eating... are those donuts? Yeah right. Try dusty sandwiches or lukewarm chili. Donuts. Ridiculous. And look how happy they look. Happy to be slaving away just to not be able to pay your mortgage at the end of the month, let alone afford a decent meal. Whoever painted that mural is seriously out of touch.”

Chuck pushed his coffee off the edge of the table as he stood up to face the men. It splashed across the aisle and pooled around Blue Shirt’s boots.

“Sir...” He started to say, but Chuck cut him off.

“Don’t sir me. I will have you gentlemen know that I put 30 years in the mines before either one of you could walk. And I made a good living. An honest living, but a good living. And I will also have you know that I painted that mural. Yes, I did. And those men are eating donuts because this is a damn donut shop. Now. You two do what’s best for yourselves and your families, but don’t you dare disrespect an honest, noble profession that has put food on the table in this city for generations.” Chuck broke off and started coughing deep coughs again, only this time they weren’t a cover for anything. Missy rushed in brandishing a steaming pot of coffee.

“What in the good Lord’s name is going on in here!” Blue Shirt and Green Shirt, still speechless from Chuck’s outburst, regained their composure and started stuttering apologies.

“Oh uh, sorry, ma’am, we were just leaving, and uh the coffee spilled, and uh sorry for the trouble.” Missy shoed them out the rest of the way, not setting the coffee pot down the entire time. By the time she returned, Chuck had recovered from his coughing fit and was wheezing in his booth.

“What the hell was that?”

“Oh, them? Nothing really. Just a lively debate. How about that fresh cup of coffee?” Missy stared at him for a few seconds to see if he was going to say more before sighing, pouring the coffee, and heading back to the kitchen to grab a mop.

Chuck looked down at the sketch. The two miners on the runaway cart had the exact same expression on their faces as Green Shirt and Blue Shirt did when he had started speaking - admiration for the force before them colliding with the determination to survive.

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Academic  
Vita of:

# SARAH WILLIAMS

## EDUCATION

**The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA**

**Graduation:** May 2020

**Schreyer Honors College**

**Majors:** B.A. English & B.F.A. Stage Management

M.A. Creative Writing

**Minor:** Spanish

**Paterno Fellows Program**

*Honors Program including advanced academic coursework, thesis, study abroad, internship, ethics study, and leadership/service commitment.*

## PROFESSIONAL HISTORY

**Penn State University Libraries Peer Research Consultant**

2015-Present

*Responsible for assisting students in navigating library resources, structuring/developing projects, and collaborating with other student consultants to provide a wholistic research experience*

**PSU Short Stories Editorial Board, University Libraries**

2015-Present

*Worked with other board members to develop contest guidelines and prompts, as well as to judge stories for publication on our website and/or in story dispensers <https://short-edition.com/en/community/psu/>*

**Freelance Writer | Writer Access | [www.writeraccess.com](http://www.writeraccess.com)**

2015-Present

**Summer Program Leader, Walk In Art Center**

Summer 2016

*Developed, organized, acquired materials for, and instructed summer day art programs for community children (5-10yrs)*

**Learning Edge Academic Program (LEAP) Mentor, Penn State**

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*Supported 24 students during their transition to Penn State while developing & coordinating a 6-week program schedule, managing a budget, and collaborating with other mentors/supervisors.*

## ACTIVITIES

**Stage Manager, Penn State School of Theatre**

2016-Present

**Penn State Movin' On Music Festival, Production Core**

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*One of the 5 largest annual student-run music festivals in the country - Production Core works directly with companies to coordinate equipment rentals, facilitates loads in/strike, and runs the show*

**Penn State Dairy Science Club**

2015-Present

*Social & Community Service Chair (2016-17); Yearbook Editor (2016-17)*

**THON Rules & Regulations Committee**

2016-2017

*THON is a student-run philanthropy committed to enhancing the lives of children and families impacted by childhood cancer.*

## HONORS / AWARDS

**Cantwell Liberal Arts Scholarship**

2016-Present

**Society of Distinguished Alumni Scholarship**

2016-Present

**Rein Trustree Scholarship in Liberal Arts**

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**Academic Excellence Scholars**

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**Dean's List**

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## Skills:

- Spanish - Fluent
- Advanced Piano
- Basic Livestock Handling
- Vectorworks
- QLab
- Basic Sewing
- Basic Woodworking
- Advanced Word Processing
- Advanced Writing
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- Adobe Creative Suite
- Google Drive
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## Certifications:

- CPR
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