

THE SHAFT

Here, in the cold,
DARK AND DEEP,
I offer you
ETERNAL
Sleep.

A prelude by Rob Steele

THE SHAFT

By Rob Steele

I'll tell you everything I know. I never did like the name. I mean, I know that's what it is, and all. Dictionary says a "shaft" is "a long, narrow hole that gives access to a mine," but that's just doesn't do this one justice. It's not just a long, narrow hole. It's dark. And not just dark but soul sucking dark. The kind of dark that scares you as a little kid.

And this did scare me as a kid.

I grew up here in Shafton, Kentucky.

I'm told it's always been a mining town. Pop said that the founders wanted to call it Shafttown, but they were all so poor, they couldn't afford a "W." And most of the people here worked in the mine. Most of the people I knew, anyway. Not the kids. I'm really glad we had laws against that.

Because that shaft.

I always felt like it was a living thing. Just waiting to swallow people up. Sometimes it did. They'd always call it a "cave in" or "mining accident." I knew that it didn't make any sense. Why did some people just go in and

never come back out again? No body or nothing.

Randy Cartwright always tricked and teased me about it. I guess some would say bullying me. He would tell me stories about the monsters that lived in the shaft. Some scared me more than others. He was older than me. About three years. His family was just as poor as mine. And when he was old enough, he went to work in the mines. His third day, there was one of those “accidents.” They said that Randy was caught in a blast meant to make the mine bigger. It just made *him* smaller.

Even the word “mine” is wrong. It’s not mine. It’s not even theirs, the people who work in it. It belongs to the Silvers family. Most of what’s around here belongs to them. The McDonald’s. The K-Mart. The Piggly Wiggly. People around here work in the mine and bring up tons of coal. None of it they get to keep. The Silvers pay them. And then the money gets spent at the local stores where it goes right back into the Silvers’ pockets. Doesn’t seem right, does it?

It’s not a mine. It’s theirs. The Silvers. And it’s not a shaft... it’s a demon.

That's why I was dreading my 16th birthday. People thought I was weird because they thought I liked school. I didn't really like school, that much. I liked that I got to go there, instead of the shaft. Becky Danvers knew how I felt. I always thought she was lucky. They didn't let girls work in the mines. I envied her. I don't think I wanted to *be* a girl. I just wanted to opportunity to not work in the mine – and have to travel down the shaft.

But when my 16th came around, I accepted it as much like a man as I could. I didn't go to school. I got “permission” from the Silvers to work

in their mine. They needed more coal and I was of age. I was given three coal miners outfits, a pair of gloves, and a helmet as a “present.” That’s all they gave you when you start in the mines. If you needed more, you had to buy them – from the Silvers, of course.

The pay – it’s all an illusion. Everyone in the town knew that. But no one could afford to move anywhere else. I guess it’s like slavery, just with money you get to hold for a very limited time. I guess there’s very little in the way of whipping so it’s a little better in the short run. But working in the mine, with the blackness and disease the

people get from working down there, black lung, mostly, it's the long run that will kill you.

My first day, standing in line at the entrance to the shaft, I tried to be calm. I tried to be cool. But inside, I was scared to death. I guess it showed since Mr. McTierney started teasing me. He was telling me that the shaft was just going to gobble me up. He said I had no business in the shaft. I was too young. Too green, whatever that means. He said I should take the easy way out and go into the army. Maybe go off and fight in a war because only *men* go down into the

shaft and I was just a boy.

A man I had never seen before stepped between us. He wasn't wearing a miner's outfit. He was wearing a suit and tie. And he was clean. No one else here had a clean suit. Even my suit had scuff marks on it already, and it was new – first time wearing it. He told McTierney to back off, and, surprisingly, he did. Backed right down. After he gave McTierney a good dressing down, he left and the whistle to start the shift began. We all began to march into the shaft. Behind me, I heard someone say that I was “lucky,” and “Mr. Silver never does that.”

So, that was Mr. Silver. I'd never met any of the Silvers before. I felt good for a moment. Maybe there was something about me that was special that the Silvers saw. Maybe I wouldn't work in the mines forever. Maybe there was a way out.

Then I saw the door to the shaft. I'd never been this close before – I was too scared. There were double doors and the right side was open to let us in. The left side was still closed.

Someone painted on the door, "Here in the cave, dark and deep, I can offer you eternal sleep." All of the sudden, I didn't feel so good anymore. I knew

that something was going to go wrong. I just felt it. I started sweating. I mean sweating a lot! February be damned, and it was cold outside, but I was sweating more than ever before. I heard McTierney joke about me being white as a sheet and that maybe they could use me for light down there.

As we passed the entrance and went into the shaft, the temperature changed. It was dark, so I was expecting cold. Dark is supposed to be cold, right? But it wasn't here. Hot air rushed up to greet me. That didn't help my sweating. I felt my gloves getting damp as the sweat ran down

my arms. But that wasn't the worst of it.

It wasn't completely dark. The lighting on the walls barely illuminis... illumin... I can never get that word... it lit up the shaft. We kept stopping and I didn't know why. I didn't know a thing about mining. I'm supposed to "learn on the job." It never occurred to me that there were different levels in the shaft. We kept stopping because there was an elevator. We were going deeper. And the edge of this rickety looking elevator had a draft that felt like the devil's breath.

When my turn came, I got on the

elevator with 15 other guys and down we went. There was some light coming up from below, wherever we were going. But the light from above faded quickly. It got real dark. That soul sucking dark. This time, despite the increasing heat, I felt *cold* sweats.

Maybe they were cold before. I don't know. I just knew they were cold, now!

When we hit bottom, I heard McTierney shout everybody out. Since I was one of the first ones in, I was one of the last ones out. But I never made it out. The guy in front of me, I think it was Jason Baird, big, fat guy, stepped right through the floor of the wooden

elevator. One big creak and a snap and we both went through. I think there might have been a third guy, but I'm not sure.

It felt like we fell forever. Maybe we did. It wasn't long before I lost sight of the big guy. I don't know if he hit a ledge or what. I knew that if I hit ledge or a wall, I was done for. I had to be going pretty fast. I mean, there was plenty of wind in my face, or my back, or whatever. I was tumbling! I was also wondering how deep this shaft could possibly be. It couldn't be miles deep, could it? I was doubting kilometers. (We learned those in

school. It's so much easier than miles.) Then I saw this light, at the bottom, I guess. It was getting bigger so it couldn't be that I was falling back up. I tried to stop tumbling and point myself at it. Then I thought, I should probably go feet first. So, I flipped over.

Part of me wasn't expecting to survive this trip through the shaft, but I wasn't scared. I'd been scared since I got the uniform this morning, but now, I was calm. I don't know what came over me. I don't know if it was the light or what, but it felt good. The light was getting bigger, or closer, I couldn't tell

since I couldn't see the sides of the shaft. Then it hit me – or I hit it. Whatever.

And I was on the lawn of the school. I don't know how I got there but there I was. I was sitting on the playground, but it was different. The slide was all rusted. So were the swings and the see-saw. I stood up and looked at the school. It looked different. Older. Then I passed out.

I don't know what hit me but I woke up in the hospital. It was fancier than I remembered it. I mean, out the window, it still looked like Shafton, but brighter somehow. More electric signs,

I guess. And there was this woman sitting by the edge of my bed, she said her name was Becky Coulson, but that I knew her as Becky Danvers. That didn't make any sense. I saw Becky just the day before. I didn't know who this woman was... but I suppose she did look like she could be Becky's mom.

She kept saying she knew me a long time ago, but that didn't make any sense either. I just had this feeling I needed to get away. I took those sticky things off me and pulled out the IV and just left. Look, I know this sounds weird but when you brought me in... I'd never even seen a police car that

looked like that. So, officer, please. That's all I know. Can you tell me what's going on? All I can tell you, that I know, is my name is Simon Bosko. I was born February 19th, 1960 in Shafton, Kentucky. Becky said something about it being 2023, now. I don't know what's going on anymore. Can you please tell me? Where's my mom and pop? I just want to go home.