

Write It Now

600-800 word goal, 8-10pm

Rust

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When I was young, father took me to the mines, and put my hand on the rock. I was a wee boy at the time, and my da wanted to teach me a lesson.

"Feel anything, Levin?"

"No."

"That's right, 'cause iron and rock feels not a damn thing for you or anyone else on this earth."

I know why he brought me there, and it was to scare me off from following in his footsteps. He spared me enough to send me off to school, to learn something or other of a trade beyond the pick, and I picked the trade of labor organizing, as scholarly work was never for me.

He got ruined well before rock, iron, or the company man gave a single whit. The last one was a lesson that he didn't teach me, but I learned well at the hands of the Pinkertons.

But I didn't need to see the mines to know going down there would be my grave.

I saw it in the lines of his face, the dullness in his eyes, the rattling in his breath. He creaked when he moved, barely saw anything in front of him. Color clear drained out of him save for his stomach, red and distended. Worst of all, his arms, moving as if he's still swinging pick at rock. Despite all that, he pleaded with me to go back.

Company Doc said it was just old age.

"Some men's place is just to keep going 'til he rusts over," he spoke with a disaffected air, but his eyes never met mine for a minute, and I never trust a man whose eyes don't meet mine.

I know he's lying, 'cause when my father coughs every night, he ain't coughing up phlegm, he's coughing up rust, and I don't know a natural ailment that does that to a man.

So I got Jans, Ketler, and Berg together, like in the old days, and we got to thinking, and Jans, always the clever one, brought something real interesting up.

"See, Boss Lars, he got some callers a couple of months back, say they wanted to invest into the mine or something. Seen him a lot less recently, looks paler, too."

I don't know about you, but when I hear that some business types are bargaining, my hairs go on end, so when I heard that, I knew something was up.

We resolved to drink 'til deep night, and head down to the mines and see what's going on ourselves. The fence wasn't anything at all to Ketler's wire cutters, and we slipped in without any a notice.

The place was real quiet, only a faint moaning sound from the workhouses some of the workers without homes lived in, so we laid low and watched them for movement.

Lovely as the full moon was, it was the only company we had, til a single bell rang and one of the doors banged open. The moaning got louder as a line of folks started shuffling out the doors, hunched over, all going to the Boss' place on site. Something weren't right with the way they were moving, so we crept up closer.

Each of 'em, glassy-eyed and broken-looking, worse off than even my dad. A rusty foam surrounded their mouths as they walked, some occasionally retching off to the side and vomiting up a puddle of the same.

The double doors to the Boss' place opened up soundlessly, as they shuffled in, unaware. We were resolved to sneak in closer til Berg gave out a gasp. "That's my dad over there!"

Now we were in for some shit, 'cause the town knew well that Berg's dad, Anton, got killed in a mining collapse a month or two prior. Nobody had found the body, and nobody talked about what happened in the collapse. Held a ceremony for 10 minutes afore they rang the bell for work again.

I swore to Berg that I'd cut his nuts clear off with a knife if he got us seen now, as he looked fit to start a ruckus. We slunk in closer as the line got closer to Boss Lars' place. Some folks said the whole building was getting repurposed, with the area around the building looking more like a construction site than a home.

We crept up on some scaffolding, trying to get an angle. Most of the windows of the place were boarded up, but one was loose. Ketler pried it free, and we got a good look inside.

The entire floor of the place was wrecked, with a ramp from the entrance dug down into some sort of pit. Boss Lars was inside, standing next to a fellow who didn't look quite right. The workers shuffled in and surrounded this pit, some of them clutching their stomachs as if they were barely holding back what was within.

A voice rose from the fellow, and it didn't sound right either. You know when a man talks, his voice comes from him? His didn't, it came from everywhere. "Ah, splendid, Mr. Garmin. The mines have never been more productive, have they?"

Lars couldn't look him in the eye, and said, "Well, ah, it's just... Some of the workers are... Complaining."

"Complaining you say?" The wrong-looking fellow stretched a limb out to walk around Boss Lars, a limb that looked too large and too black to belong to any man. "I don't hear any complaints."

The only sounds in the room were the moans of debased men. The folks surrounding the pit began to retch, more and more, as whatever was rotten in their guts began to rise from them

They spat up iron. Chunks of fucking iron, from their mouths, like some kind of ore hopper. The sound was filled with tortured cries as shells of men vomited out raw metal into the pit in front of Boss Lars and the fellow. The former could do little but look away, while the latter laughed and cavorted amidst the workers. "Delicious delicious delicious! You see, Lars, you SEE how pure the iron is getting. This will be perfect."

"I.... Don't rightfully see the reason for all this, Mr. Kavanaugh. This isn't right."

The figure stepped across the room to stand right in front of Lars.

"Ah, but you see? Workers are much better when they aren't unproductive. You've seen more than your share of workers become unproductive, haven't you, old chap?"

A hand, black as pitch, with fingers more like a spiders' legs, clutched at Boss Lars' shoulder. "We're just making them more efficient. They can do all the rusting they like, but they won't stop mining, and they won't stop making it."

Mr. Kavanaugh's head, covered up by a broad black hat, slowly rotated to face us, at an angle that weren't human. Underneath the brim of that hat was nothing but a wide, white-toothed smile and glaring white eyes and some kind of indistinction that hurt you to look at.

We ran after that. Something seized us, and we couldn't stand the sight. All of us fled the way we came and scattered into the night.

I got back home to the sight of the lantern burning low on the porch. It was off when I had left. I heard retching coming from upstairs when I came in, along with the clunk of something heavy hitting floorboards, but that didn't matter.

A rusty foam seeped through the ceiling, dripping down to the floor below, but I didn't care, because whatever was making it wasn't my father anymore.

There were some calls to make, this time not to old friends or to old chums. Who could even help with this?

I picked up the phone and went to dial a number, placing the headset up to my ear.

All I heard was the sound of a disconnected line.