

Appalachian High

A Dreamer's Tale

Ed Collins



Fouled Anchor Music

The Mine and the Music

Danny woke choking on a mouthful of blood and coal dust. The blood was his own, from the back of his throat where the tissue had grown thin and raw. The dust was a gift from the mountain, seeping past cheap sheets, shut windows, and the flower-print curtains the landlord's wife swore made the place homey.

He lay still, watching water stains on the ceiling change shapes with the dawn. A gray map of somewhere no one would ever visit. When he finally sat up, he hacked black spit into the tin wastebasket. It hit with the sound of a bug dying.

The clock on the table glared red digits, 4:12, or maybe 4:17. It didn't matter.

His boots were still wet when he slid them on. The guitar case waited in the corner, open-mouthed and empty. He reached toward it, then let his hand drop. The morning didn't want music.

Outside, the sky was stained with first light. Fog filled the valley, swallowing the town until only the neon cross from The Pharmacy

floated above it. From here it almost looked holy, a lie so big you wanted to believe.

At the mine, men gathered by the entrance, their breath steaming white, cigarettes glowing in the half-dark. Earl leaned against the guard shack, one boot propped on the concrete block. He gave Danny a smile that was more confession than greeting.

"Look like death warmed over, son. You been practicing for the afterlife?"

"Just keeping ahead," Danny rasped.

The shift whistle split the air. Boots thudded against the metal grate as the men filed inside. Helmet lamps flared to life, a procession into the lipless wound of the mountain. The light narrowed to a single ribbon, then vanished.

Inside, the world pressed close. The ceiling hunched, the walls pulsed with memory, the floor a hardened scar of mud and rail. Timber supports sweated black tears. A hundred yards in, you forgot the sky existed.

They crowded into the cage, "nut to butt," the old-timers barked. Steel mesh bit through coats. The lever dropped. The cage dropped too, air screaming up around them, hands gripping rail or man, because letting go was not an option.

At the bottom, the mine branched into veins. Danny took his pick, felt its weight, and fell into rhythm. Breath in, pick back. Breath out, pick forward. The clink of steel on coal rang down the tunnel and back again.

He hummed low, almost without meaning to. A tune he hadn't finished, about a willow and a sky. The wall leaned in, listening, or maybe hungry. Sweat blurred his vision, the handle slick under his grip. For a moment, he imagined it was the neck of a guitar, his calluses biting strings instead of stone. He laughed at himself and swung again.

Earl passed with a cart and shook his head. "Sounded like a funeral march," he muttered when Danny's humming reached him. A couple men snorted.

Danny only shrugged. "Maybe it is."

Hours bled away. The mine turned time to syrup. Each swing another note, each breath another beat. His hands split and swelled, stained black to the quick. Still, the tune circled in his chest, stubborn as mule's breath.

When the end bell finally sounded, they shuffled back to the shaft. Faces smeared gray, eyes ghost-bright in helmet glare. No one talked. The cage took them up, shuddering, pausing in the dark just long enough to remind them who owned their lungs.

At the surface, daylight burned like judgment. Men shook themselves out, cigarettes lit before the dust settled. Danny spat black into the dirt and flexed his ruined hands. Once, they'd glided over strings. Now, even the memory hurt.

Earl gave him a look that was part warning, part apology. "Don't let them songs get in your way," he said. "Mountain don't care for melody."

Danny didn't answer. The tune was still there, circling, working its way out from under the day's weight.

He started walking. Each step raised a little storm behind him. The mountains loomed, blue and hungry, and somewhere in the haze of town, a name he couldn't quite let go of waited on his tongue.