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Coal Country Hero

by Danny F. Scalise, II

Renda, West Virginia is in Coal Country. Coal Country isn't a real place, of course, it's just part of Appalachia where coal has been king for generations. "Coal is West Virginia" is a familiar phrase on radio ads no matter what station you listen to there. Renda is a coal town, but has the only Amtrak platform for miles. The passenger train is an almost unfamiliar sight on the railroad tracks in the state, yet coal cars are ubiquitous. A driver could be sitting at a railroad crossing, listening to the competition from the 200 overloaded coal cars moving too fast on the rails, the dinging of the crossing signs, and Friends of Coal radio ads.

The men who've worked in the mines their entire career earn a good living when coal is up, and have to get by when it's down. They have the coal tattoo where their skin is darkened from decades of exposure. Each trailer has a bathroom for the miner that has a dark ring around

the bathtub that won't come off, no matter what someone scrubs it with. But those moments of the past are fewer and fewer now that underground mining is simply too expensive.

In the same house with the dirty tub, the water has a smell to it. Used to be like rotten eggs, but even that has changed to smell like things that don't make it to the slurry pond. People in certain places even see color in their water. Word around is up the holler from Renda, people can even light their water on fire from the tap. (Holler is Appalachian for hollow, meaning the area between two mountains that usually forms a creek.)

The air around such areas is thick from the black dust. Those living here really don't notice after a while and a black haze ebbs and flows with production. The problem is worse when they blast. No need to dig coal from the ground any longer. You can just blow off the mountain top and grab the bounty, leaving the slurry. That's when the air is thick. The explosions can be heard and felt for miles around. If a person stands on a mountain top adjacent to the one being blasted, that bystander can feel it hit their chest. The detonation creates an awesome force that is invisible but is heard and felt.

The slightly screeching sound of a spring-loaded screen door always ends with a smack. Others in the house always know when someone comes in the front door and that sound is the last thing Blake hears before his walk to school in Renda.

The steps of the rickety porch built, but not truly attached to the single-wide, are meant to assist a person down the four feet or so from the door to the ground. Blake has taken that path so many times that the walk up or down is as subconscious as breathing. Tap, tap, tap, then onto the gravel drive and up the gravel road. Gravel roads in this part of West Virginia are three gravel

lines with indentions made by the trucks that have traveled them over the years. It was probably all gravel at one time, but no one has seen that for some time.

The poor boy had to wake himself and search for something that resembled breakfast before his walk. Patty Sue fell asleep in a chair, half dressed, syringes and cigarettes in front of her showing the type of night she'd had. Blake didn't need to see those things to understand. He was in his room the entire time. Unfortunately, this was a repeat of morning after morning at their home.

One year left. One year of football. One year of classes. One year.

The mail in Renda isn't delivered to your house as in the rest of the country. The post office is a central location where the resident picks it up. Across the tracks from town hall, the post office is a small, unassuming structure that looks as though it was something else before being a post office. The poorly done stucco on the outside belies the age, but the white and black checkered asbestos tile floor and cast iron mailboxes says this building has been in use for some time.

The two postal clerks put up the mail and work the counter. They sell stamps, but most importantly they are the flow of town gossip. Blake has to come to get the mail, usually junk, but also bills, never much of interest. His cadence is to stop by once a week on the way home from school. Football makes that harder, so the box ends up full sometimes.

On game day, he has time to grab the mail and throw it in his bag. No time to read it. He has to go.

A whistle is a sound every kid loves to hear on Friday nights. In southern West Virginia, the town's people don't have much to do. The entire town of Renda is going to be at the field to

watch Renda High School play. Even Patty Sue stays sober enough to go watch. Once those whistles start, the familiar voice of the PA announcer can be heard all over town, but that won't matter, because no one else is anywhere else. They are all at the game.

Renda plays hard, but isn't successful this time. They lose to a big city team. Blake played poorly, and doesn't really want to go home. He knows he's either walking into something or walking into nothing when the screen door slams. Tonight he's lucky that Patty Sue found someone who wanted her elsewhere. Blake can be alone.

After settling in, he opens his bag to see the mail he had retrieved. He mostly finds advertisements. Rent-to-own scams popular in this area and car dealers advertising no credit, no problem. Blake starts to throw it all out, then sees the two letters addressed to him, one from the Department of Athletics at West Virginia University, one from Dartmouth.

He opens correspondence from Morgantown, WV first. The content hurts like a Dear John letter. Blake isn't going to play football for his state's university. He just lost out on the dream every kid has in coal country. His acceptance was a given, but playing football was not. He's small for a Division I football player and while a star in Renda, he isn't even mediocre in Morgantown. The highlights he sent the coach probably didn't even get a look. He briefly thought of the coal mines.

The second letter from New Hampshire is different. It didn't read like anything he had ever read. Acceptance felt good for a minute, then he noticed the syringes still sitting beside the ashtray. He'd have to say no. Patty Sue wouldn't be alive in four years if left alone.

Addiction is a funny thing. It's not like other diseases. People suffering from substance use disorder have what is called a moment of clarity. Patty Sue's moment timed perfectly with

her son's acceptance to an Ivy League school. She knew if he were to leave Appalachia, the curse from which she suffers could be broken. Her legacy would be that Blake could change some things.

The Ivy League sounds weak. Nothing is physical there. Just old buildings and young people. It wasn't like television. The old buildings have new interiors. Laptops are the tool, not notebooks.

Blake can't sleep the night he reads the Dartmouth letter. He lay on the thin mattress in his room, the letter unfolded beside him like a roadmap out. The stains on the letter from a couple of tears or the rain, he didn't know. He stares at the ceiling and listens to the sound of coal trains as they came closer to the house, the slow rumble of coal cars screeching across tracks that have long since rusted at the edges.

He doesn't need to decide that night.

The next morning, Patty Sue was different. She isn't better. That takes time. But her hair was brushed, and her shirt was clean. She had even made coffee, weak and burnt, but hot. When he walks into the kitchen, she stares at the floor as if something was there. Silence that seems like hours. Then she speaks to him in a calm tone, not something Blake hears often. She read his correspondence from the north.

He waits. Uncertain as to her response. Mercurial? Baptist guilt? The usual waterworks? She can't do it without him.

With her cigarette-toned rasp, she said, "You gotta go." He isn't certain he'd heard her correctly and requests a verification.

She looks up. This was the most focus he's seen in her gaze for years. She lets him know this is his opportunity, the one she herself never received. He stares at her. He has a dozen reasons he could give to stay. Some of them were noble, and the reason so many stay in this holler and others throughout Appalachia. But none of them outweigh the quiet way she said it: You gotta go.

He nods in acceptance with a feeling that starts in his gut. His reluctance squeezed his shoulders and chest. Then came relief in a small stream of tears. He is proud of her, she of him.

The summer passed in fits and starts. Blake works mornings at the local pool doing maintenance and mowing yards when he could, saving every penny. His coach lets him keep his equipment bag from this past season and requests they stay in touch. The school librarian looked into and ordered books from the Dartmouth Freshman English syllabus and commanded him to make Renda proud.

Even the mail ladies gave him a hug the last day he stopped before leaving.

Patty Sue said she'd started going to her meetings. She had relapses, and let Blake know about them. She started writing letters to him and has a mantra written on notebook paper mounted on the fridge by a magnet from some souvenir shop in Myrtle Beach.

The Amtrak train pulls away on a typical humid sunny August morning in southern West Virginia. The train stop is just an old concrete pad and it only stops once a week. Mosquitoes are everywhere and Blake could almost taste the heat. Patty Sue stands by the sign that said "Renda Population 932." She watches the train go down the track until she couldn't see it or hear it anymore.

Blake settles into the blue seat that isn't uncomfortable. He has a small backpack, his equipment bag with clothes, many of which say property of Renda Football, and the letter from Dartmouth folded in the front pocket of his jeans. He pulls it out once as the train climbs into the hills and around the curve. He reads it again, unnecessarily. He knows the words.

When he looks up, the mountains begin to thin, turning into long ridges and wide valleys. He is leaving Coal Country, but it is still in him.

At Dartmouth, nothing feels familiar. The buildings are old, but the people are young and confident in a way Blake doesn't understand. He walks past conversations about internships, sailing clubs, and summer trips to Europe. He doesn't speak much at first, part because he didn't know what to say but also because he is self-conscious about his accent.

But he goes to class. He sits in the front. He takes notes until his hand cramps. And when the time comes to introduce himself in a seminar, he stands and says his name is Blake. He tells them he is from a town in West Virginia none of them will ever hear of. Renda is a dot on a map and locals just call it Coal Country. He states he is here to learn something different and is never gonna forget the place where he came from.

At that point nothing but a long pause.

Then the professor nods to let him know that is why he is there, why they are all there.

Back home, Patty Sue has her picture of Blake hanging right above the TV, where the clock used to be. He had sent her a Dartmouth pennant, which hangs there too. Blake gives her a smile every morning.

And on the rare days when Blake became homesick, he would listen to music that reminded him of home. Almost Heaven. Not that he was going back there, but because he needed to remember how far he'd come.