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The Smokehouse

Spring, 1941

"Here, Ben," my father said, holding out a mossy stone. "See how it's flat on the top and rounds out real nice on the sides? Get some wider ones shaped this way fer the base, then we'll graduate 'em up to 'bout this size to finish. Yez unnerstand?"

I hoped to hell I did.

"Use the wheelbarra."

We put our buckets and tools and whatnot into the wheelbarrow, and carted everything out to where the woods started – groves of yellow birch, holly and pawpaw, and here and there, a few shagbark hickory. The air was cool, but faint rays of sun sieved between the early efforts of the leaves, and mottled into yellow splotches on the ground. Behind the house, a creek ran heavy in the spring, and dwindled to a trickle when the rains let up. The problem of course was the mud, and it was slow going, mucking along to find the right spot. I followed behind while my father scouted, checking the distance from the house, looking for a place that might have stones nearby to use, to ease our work. And funny if he didn't stop right next to the moss-green log where I liked to sit and smoke. I was glad then that I'd been careful to bury the butts.

"Here's good. Get me that shovel."

"Should I get us a load a rocks yet?"

"I gotta dig the foundation first, er we got nothin' to build on."

I pulled one of the shovels from the wheelbarrow and handed it to him.

"Not the square, the round point, damn it! We'll be here all day diggin'."

He grabbed the shovel and knifed it into the soft ground. Clumps of muddy dirt fanned out as he tossed them. Fat worms wriggled deeper down to avoid the next scrape of the blade.

"See," he said as he moved the earth, "we'll use that square blade to even up the sides after."

I watched him dig, so strong and solid - not a big man, but tough to knock

over. Even the scrappiest miners knew better than to mess with Walter Jabrowski. Working, his muscles looked hard as the wood and steel of his tool. I was fifteen, gangly and bean-pole tall, not yet muscled up enough for the task. I was bound to be setting him off at every turn, yet held out hope that if I made an effort and paid attention, I'd manage to get something right in his eyes.

"Okay. Go get us some stones. Like I showed ya."

I pivoted the wheelbarrow toward the creek. Behind me, obscured by a scramble of hickory and dogwood branches, sat our new house in Miner's

Mills, the house my parents had built for us, for the rest of us left behind without Kaz. Casimir Edward Jabrowski, may he rest easy, two years dead from the mines. We had moved away from our old house in Plains, Pennsylvania that was suddenly brimming with empty places – the chair where he sat, his corner of our room. The sofa where he last lay. We'd gotten rid of his clothes and his bed. But somewhere in the attic, I knew my mother kept a box that held his miner's lantern, his St. Christopher's medal, and a lump of coal he'd picked up – hard anthracite with geometric facets, shaped like a diamond. A black diamond as big as your fist. Kaz had brought that home from the mines one day and told her, "Bury it deep, Ma. Dig it up in a year or two, an' it'll be a real diamond."

Instead of burying it, she had wrapped it in a lace handkerchief and tucked it away. I'd seen her looking at it from time to time. Maybe it felt like a real diamond, coming so sweet from her boy that way. Who knows what people think to themselves, in the privacy of their minds?

I made a picture in my mind of the finished smokehouse, and set about finding rocks that would be a fit while my father dug the foundation. Every rock I picked up felt good in my hands, the roundness and the heft of it, the weight of something solid. The rocks made a nice sound when they hit the wheelbarrow, and though the load got heavy and tough to maneuver in the muddy ground, the work was pleasant. The sun laced through the trees and seemed to warm the air a bit. On top of which, there was the clean smell of the damp earth and the constant call of the birds to enjoy.

Working close to my father this way, I thought of a time I woke up early enough to see him leave with Kaz for the mines. By four in the morning, they were clanking around in the kitchen, brewing their coffee and filling their lunch pails. I thought I heard Kaz curse – nothing more than a hell or a damn, but it seemed to me every boy who worked the mines got hurried into becoming a man. Off they went into the dim morning. I peered through the window and watched them go, their lamps swinging, brighter than what was left of the moon.

I was too young to work the mines, my mother said, though I knew plenty of kids that picked slate or spragged the wheels – poking at the spokes of the mine car wheels with a stick to slow the thing down. The lucky ones kept all their fingers, but some lost a few. I blamed my mother for babying me, and was envious as hell of Kaz going off with my father that way. I wished I could be the one, but of course, once Kaz got killed, there was no chance of that. My father and mother both forbade me from the mines for good.

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I chose stones I imagined only an experienced mason would consider for the job. Once I had as big a load as I could handle, I wheeled it over to the site.

My father picked up a stone, tested its weight. He seemed to like the feel of it, too. "Okay then. Let's mix up some mud. Not too runny, an' not too stiff, either."

The creek ran full, so I dipped a big bucket in to catch some water.

In the dappled light, the water danced around the rocks like quicksilver, cool and clear as mirror where it slowed. If I watched it too long I'd end up hypnotized, which I didn't, since we had work to do. I hoisted up a bucketful and mixed some mortar from the sandy soil I found near the creek bed. I added a little cement and a bit of lime, and stirred it with a trowel till it thickened, smooth as my mother's yellow cake batter. I showed it to my father, and he nodded. Without any further instruction, he began to lay the stones, then I buttered them up with the mud. It must have been going well, because my father began to whistle – a shrill little tune against the back of his teeth, but soothing just the same.

"Be nice to have real smoked kielbasa fer a change," I said.

"Yer mother's been wantin' a smokehouse fer a while now, so here it is."

"It'll be a nice one, all right."

I must have had too much mortar on my trowel – a bit slid onto our finished work.

"Don't be drippin' the mud like that!"

There was plenty I wished I could talk to my father about – Kaz for one, and what it was like down the mines. My father didn't like to talk much about what went on, but once or twice, before Kaz got killed, he'd taken me down. Not to work, just to see what it was like. I remember coming back out into daylight, how my eyes vibrated when the sun hit them, working to close down, and how when I was down the mines, the dark lifted in layers, bit by bit, till I could actually see. I'd tried to find that kind of black again by closing my eyes or putting a pillow over them, but there is no black in the world as black as a coalmine.

My father put all of his attention on his work, his hands feeling the stones, brushing them clean, then setting each one in place. I thought this might have been what he looked like working the mine, drilling out a pilot hole to set a charge, tamping in the powder, lighting the fuse – all with the same keen intent. I wondered if Kaz managed that kind of concentration when he worked.

I tried to picture Kaz's face in my mind. As usual, only bits and pieces came back. The way his front teeth were so uneven on the bottom, and his smile hiked up higher on one side. The way his Adam's apple bobbed around when he sang – he loved to sing in a phony opera sort of way, just for fun. It bothered the hell out of my older sister, Helen, so he liked to kind of chase her around with his fancy singing, and have her swat him away. I conjured a glimpse of his hands combing his hair – his long fingers and knobby knuckles weaving over each other as he ran the comb through and smoothed out his work. And his brown eyes when he winked at me – he liked to wink and give me a little cuff on the shoulder, kind of as a way to show I'd gotten the joke, or knew what was going on. When his fist touched my shoulder, I could feel a spark arc across that welded us together somehow. Even though it was only for half an instant, it felt like a bond had fused between us.

"These rocks sure are goin' together nice."

"Watch yez keep that bucket scraped down so the mortar don't set on the sides. Then we'll have a helluva mess."

I quick tended to the bucket. He went back to his whistling again.

The sound of my trowel scraping over the stones and the burble of the creek beyond made a nice music to work by. The smokehouse took a few days to build, and whether it was the soothing repetition of the task or the fragrant smell of wet bark or what, after a day or two I got caught up thinking here I was getting along pretty well with my father. With the fruits of our handiwork so evident in the progress of the smokehouse, I got lulled into a false sense of serenity that was not to last.

We had finished the sides and were just starting to taper into the chimney, which I suppose entailed a bit more concentration. It was probably not the optimum time to pipe up like I did. But I had been thinking so much about Kaz that the thoughts just fell out of my head.

"Was it the firedamp?"

"How's that?"

"Firedamp. When the gasses get built up in the mine? Is that what made the explosion?"

"What explosion?"

"That killed Kaz."

His shoulders stiffened. "What yez askin' about that fer?"

When Kaz died, it was such a tragedy no one dared speak of it. All I ever got were scraps of details, tough to piece together into any kind of story that made sense.

"I been thinkin' about him is all."

"Yer better off prayin' fer him."

"I do, fer the repose of his soul an' all. Well, maybe I'm not so much concerned wit how he died, but – what was he like? I guess I'm havin' trouble rememberin' him. I can hardly picture his face anymore."

My father, who had been kneeling in the wet loam, sat back on his heels. The weight of all the stones we'd set so far seemed to press on him.

"In a family of any decent size, yer gonna lose a few kids. Nobody wants it that way, but that's the way it goes."

"What d'ya mean? Somebody's bound to drop dead?"

"I don't know what the Lord has in mind, maybe he's lonesome."

"Well, what I'm wonderin' about Kaz is, did he ever mess up? I don't mean in gettin' himself kilt, so much, just in general. When I think back, seems he was kind of perfect-like."

"He was a good kid. He was yer brother." My father stood and blew his nose with his handkerchief, a real messy blow. "Damn shame, is all. If yer so busy tinkin' 'bout Kaz, make it into a prayer. Don't be askin' 'bout him all a time."

"I dint ask till just now."

"Don't be arguin' wit me! Yez want to know 'bout it, I'll tell ya. He was a good kid. He was yer brother. He's wit the Lord now an' that's the end of it. Let him rest, fer cripes sake, leave him be."

"I ain't disturbin' his rest by thinkin' about him, or askin' about him. Hell, Jesus is dead a thousand some years and we can't stop talkin' about *Him*."

With that, my father threw down his trowel. He grabbed hold of my sleeve, and a handful of flesh with it. His grip alone hurt like hell. With his one hand, he had strength enough to hoist me off my heels.

"Blaspheme like that again an' I'll give ya to the Lord myself!"

He gave me a good shaking, and I complied. I turned into a rag doll, and let him have at me. I saw no need to prolong my own misery or add to my list of injuries by fighting back. Somehow my meekness either disgusted him or brought up his grief – pretty soon he pushed me away and mucked back toward the house across the mossy ground.

After he'd gone, I sat down on a stump, too rattled to stand. My arm throbbed where his fingers had dug in. But it wasn't the pain or the humiliation this time that brought the tears. It was a sadness for the big gap I felt between myself and everything – Kaz, my father, my family. I looked into the dark opening of the smokehouse – which by then was headed out but without the chimney – and thought of that black mineshaft that Kaz went into but never came out of. Where the hell did he go? And why did so many memories fall down that hole with him?

After the accident, they carted Kaz back to the house and laid him on the blue mohair sofa in the parlor. He was dead, but he was a boy, so everyone was slow to admit it. He had been laid out as though we meant to nurse him, but he was far beyond any nursing. It was the damage to his head that killed him, but most of that occurred on the back of his skull, so that when he lay there on the sofa, he only looked asleep.

We all sat and watched him, as though by some grace he might wake up. But he just lay there, still. Even with his face black with coal dust, the youth of it showed through, and it was a goddamn shame for someone like that to be dead already, if I let myself think about it for too long, which I didn't.

Seems that when somebody dies, a kind of monument goes up in your mind, and all their misdeeds fall away, leaving only the most stellar examples of their character. The whole family could not come together and think up one bad quality in that guy. He was all good; he was brave to work so young in the mines. He was a good singer. He was good with jokes. He even had dying words for all of us to cling to, according to witnesses. *My lamp went out.*

Now I was fifteen, the same age as Kaz when he died. But here I was alive. The fact of that just added to the load of everything else I had to cart around.

I stared at that smokehouse, deep into the shadowy maw of the firebox, faced off with a coalblack hole that threatened to suck me in. That blackness mocked me, as if it held the answers to all the questions I had

about everything, all the things I didn't know. It goaded at me to come on in after them, if I wanted them so bad.

Then the blackness brought to mind a story Kaz told me once. We shared a room, and liked to talk ourselves to sleep. This night moonlight slipped in through the casement and washed the room in a greenish glow. I could see Kaz's foot poking out from under his quilt the way he liked.

Kaz said, "I asked him one time, what's the most scared yez ever been down the mines?" My father had worked the mines since he was a kid seven years old. He told his stories to Kaz, never to me.

"Yez asked him straight out like that? An' he dint get mad?"

"He was all right. He tol' me 'bout when he worked as a nipper. A nipper's a kid maybe eleven er twelve, who tends the heavy, wooden door in the gangway between tunnels. This is deep down in the mine, maybe five hunnert feet below the surface. The nipper waits by hisself in the dark an' listens for the coal car to come rattlin' down the rail, and then he quick opens an' shuts the door after the car passes."

"Why do they have to keep openin' and closin' the doors like that?"

"Fer the air. To keep the gasses an' whatnot from gettin' in, and to keep the air fresh. It's dangerous. The cars are loaded wit tons a rock an' coal. They come barrelin' fast enough to crash through the damn door if it ain't open. Then the cars might jump the track and crush the nipper, even if the door is open.

"Anyway, he's there by hisself wit only the light a his kerosene lantern, dim as it is, and the red eyes a the rats fer comp'ny. This one day, his lantern goes out an' he can't get it lit again. So now he's trapped there in the dark, listnin' fer the cars to rumble by. Black dark. Like bein' blind. He knew to feel fer the door an' could get it open, but he nearly went nuts that way. Down there in the dark like that."

"Afraid a the dark? Ol' Walter Jabrowski?"

"Listen," Kaz said. "There's tings to be afraid of yez don't know nothin' 'bout."

He shut me up at the time with that remark, but now it came back to me. Plus hearing that something out there could put a scare in old Walter, even as a young nipper, spooked me. Even with a temper as delicate as his, I looked to my father as something solid and reliable. I always figured nothing could scare him. Least of all the damn dark. Hell, that was the same with the lantern lit or not. Did he think the rats would sneak up on him?

I peered into the dark black of the smokehouse again. Just looking at it, I got sore at that damn smokehouse. Maybe not the smokehouse exactly, but all the things I had to wonder about, all the begging questions, the big mess of everything I still didn't know. I thought about kicking the damn thing over, then I got a different idea.

I picked up the trowel and decided I would build the goddamn chimney on the thing myself, despite the small obstacle of the fact that I didn't know how.

I stood up, smoothed out my sleeves, and thought how the chimney on our house looked from the outside; how the bricks had to be laid to support themselves while they tapered inward. I had no experience other than seeing about ninety-nine smokehouses and chimneys here and there. I wiped my eyes clear with my sleeve, and set to work. Worst would be we'd have to knock the whole thing down and start over. Or worse still, he might be riled enough to grind me into sausage and smoke me straight to the Lord. I knew one thing. Worst of all would be laying down the trowel and walking back into that house the same meek son of a bitch my father had just roughed up. That was the last thing I'd let happen.

I worked the rest of the day without a break. I never even stopped to relieve myself – I guess I just sweat it out of me. I worked like that Negro, John Henry, who hammered in all those railroad spikes. Plus I finished the job without dropping dead.

The flat stones I laid on top made a nice cap. I pulled out the Lucky Strikes I kept hidden in a pocket, and lit up a celebratory smoke. By then the day was spent and the light had gone lavender and faint. I blew a slow stream at the chimney, and imagined a fire going, along with the woody, sweet smell that came while the sausage cured. The outline of what we'd built stood out against the trees. The chimney tapered up in proportion to the base. Near as I could tell in the dying light, it looked like a smokehouse.

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My father never said a word. He set up the metal grate for the wood and a tin tray to catch the ashes, and that meant it was done. My mother had the sausage grinder out practically before the mortar had set, and before long she was taking smoked kielbasa over to the Cheswicks across the road, since we couldn't eat it fast as she made it. The smell of smoke always hung in the yard, and whenever I caught a whiff of it, it reminded me of the pure, clean feeling decision brings – how it can lift the weight of a load of stones, and make what was once heavy lighter than air.

KAREN KASABA'S stories, essays and articles have appeared in SWINK, RED WHEELBARROW, SANTA BARBARA MAGAZINE (Fiction Competition Winner), HAWAI'I REVIEW, CHARITON REVIEW, THE SUMMERSET REVIEW, WESTWAYS, BYLINE, AMERICAN CINEMATOGRAPHER, LOS ANGELES TIMES, and the SANTA BARBARA INDEPENDENT, among others. "The Smokehouse" is excerpted from her novel, THE COLOR OF ORDINARY TIME. A member of WGAw, her work as a playwright and screenwriter has earned multiple awards, including an Emmy nomination. She recently adapted Ellen Potter's novel, OLIVIA KIDNEY, for the screen. THE SMOKEHOUSE also appeared in the print journal: RED WHEELBARROW 2008.