

Polaris

by Amanda Deo

The iron letters on the hospital entrance stain the doctor's teeth. When we get sick from the mines we drive to the centre of town, turn to the left and cough twice. Some days they won't see us at all, like today.

I'm not really sure how we all end up here. The air is polluted enough to cause a fetus to disintegrate inside a womb before reaching the second trimester. And when the flesh and the cells and atoms break down inside a body, they get flushed into copper and zinc conduit that flows back into the same soil we keep living off of. It flows back into the same soil we keep kneeling and praying on. When we kneel and pray we wish to get the hell out of Flin Flon, Manitoba. I know everyone prays for the same thing by the way I am forced to stare at their crooked mouths in universe-shattering holes and from the way we all carry our lunch pails down a buck hoist into something we may never escape from by four o'clock.

Every day, when I get into the elevator, Big John McKinley shuts the metal shaft door and locks us all in. I think this is part of his other duties as assigned. Big John is a tidal wave. He crashes into your chest by merely looking in your direction. There is simply nowhere else to look depending on how close he is to you. His capacity somehow rivals the mine's. Sometimes I drop my loose change and half-lit cigarettes down the smelter to keep my insignificance in check. Things get lost in Big John, too. I see the other guys throw jokes about his size at his body that wedge their way into his armpits or into the wrinkles of his laugh lines and disappear. I'm not sure if it all disappears to remind us how small we are, or because Big John is a massive part of something that is much more constellate than all of us.

Big John's been really happy lately. His wife found out she was pregnant a few months back and all he has ever wanted is a daughter. I've seen how Big John interacts with other women; his wife, his mother, his sisters and some of the girls that work in the

mine. He's a kitten with them. He paws shyly at their sentences and they take care of him when he's exhausted. Somehow he becomes feather-light in their company.

As we descend into the mine I interrupt Big John from whistling *Livin' on a Prayer*.

"So, John, how's your wife doing?"

The other guys begin to scratch at the metal capsule like I had just woken a bear and risked being pushed out into the abyss. Someone has to take the lead on this, though. Someone had to break Big John at some point.

"Pretty good, Paul, pretty darn good. Got some mornin' sickness but other than that, the rounder the better."

"Glad to hear it, John. Did I hear right that you're having a girl?"

Big John's face was like Christmas Eve, his eyes twinkling like a television holiday special.

"Sure am. Don't know what I've done to be so lucky."

When we reach the bottom of the mine the dust I breathe in doesn't hurt so bad. Big John pats me on the back and shrugs because he knows it's just another day of black noise. He half-smiles like he knows something I don't. I can't remember the last time that wind or sun or rain sighed and slept on my skin.

When we go through the front door the nurses laugh and turn the chairs in so that the seats face the wall. Everything we touch turns to refined copper and that still doesn't work. Nothing shocks the nurses anymore; they've seen it all. Big John stomps on the gravel in the ambulance bay with a broken leg that he got from kicking the inside of the buck hoist over and over again. He pulls up all the flowers growing wild next to his wife's gurney. When he drops to the ground in pain a plume of grey smoke mushrooms around his mouth and eyes. I kneel next to John and tell him I'm sorry. I stroke him like a dog that's been hit by a car.

"I keep on kneeling and praying that everyone gets the hell out of Flin Flon, Manitoba" I say.

John's face is like a bruised cantaloupe. This morning, going down in the hoist, he was ripe and had something. By lunch time, he

was forced to remember where he came from. He runs his fingers through the stones and mutters *shit hole, shit hole, shit hole, shit hole*.

