

An Unhealthy Profession

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It's more than a job.

Some might think, "That's not so bad. At least you're not working out under the bright, beating summer sun".

Truth is — you come to miss the daylight. After awhile my eyes just see a black hole, a tunnel to nowhere.

This was my father's profession, as it was my brother's.

It's an honest living and a way to provide for my family.

My family.

They weren't happy with picking up and moving. My little boy misses his playmates, and my wife misses her friends. I need to provide for my family, and if that means that we need to move to a different part of Pennsylvania, by God, that is what we are going to do.

Funny that I don't get to see my family much anymore.

I am at work before anyone wakes up.

Many days I get home after my little boy has fallen asleep.

When I get home early, I'm too tired to play. I just set down my old black bag of equipment, hang up the coat, and wash my hands. But, no matter how hard I try, it's like I can never get my hands clean.

Truth is — growing up, I didn't appreciate what this profession was like. I resented my father for not spending time with me; instead he "chose" to work. Those were thoughts from my 10-year-old self.

Now, walking in my father's footsteps, I hope my own little boy doesn't grow to resent me.

It's a shame having my work controlled by others who don't do what I do for a living. How do they know my worth? Reimbursement for my time seems to be getting tighter, even with the knowledge and experience I gain.

When I am at work, I get the feeling that some people would do just about anything for a scrip. It's kind of scary seeing my peers deal with twisted arms and threats, empty or otherwise, all for a scrip.

None of my friends growing up thought it would be like this.

Jimmy was always good with his hands: taking things apart, understanding how they work, and fixing and putting things back together again. Last I heard he was out in Maryland and works on a big vein. I guess he's somewhat of a vein specialist now.

George was another good fella growing up. He was always a talker. He isn't out in the field like the rest of us. He oversees us. An authority. A foreman. We don't have much in common anymore.

Funny what you end up doing on a daily basis. I've put my hands in places that most people wouldn't dare. I've been exposed to the kind of vitriol that people should never be exposed to.

I spend what seems to be never-ending hours on my feet. Rushing from spot to spot, rarely getting to sit. Conversations are kept short. Going full steam all day with precise attention-to-detail, because missing something... well, that something just might end up killing someone.

Many think they understand what I do, but they only assume they know what it's like.

Assumptions can be dangerous no matter the profession, whether you're a farmer, a doctor, or a miner — whether you're out in the West or right here in Appalachia.

As long as the bird keeps chirping, I'll keep working. Mining coal is a thankless, hard, and dirty job. It has done my body and mind no favors. It's an unhealthy profession. But scrips are better than starving, and I need to provide for my family.

I hope my little boy doesn't grow to resent me.

- Appalachian Man (1884-1927)