



Into The Mine

A shrill whistle bounced around the walls of a deep shaft and broke the silence of the dawn. A young boy, no older than eight or nine-years-old, shivered and pulled his woollen cloak tighter around his shoulders. It was scant protection against the lingering frost, but he knew he'd be sweating soon enough.

He'd never been down into the mine before. This was his first day, and he couldn't have been more nervous. His older brother, his father and even his grandfather had made this journey every day of their lives. Until they'd been cut short.

Jeremy, his father's friend, looked over at the boy and gave him a wink. The boy smiled weakly; he knew he couldn't show any weakness here. He was here as a favour, a promise made to his father before the collapse. There were a hundred others just like him in the village who'd take his place and his shilling given a chance. He couldn't let that happen, he told himself. He was the only one left now. His mother needed him.

The strangled groan of the pulley meant that the bucket had arrived. It was bigger than a normal bucket; after all, it was mainly used for bringing coal back to the surface. "Sooner take a ride down on the bucket than walk for miles underground," his older brother, John, used to say.

"Af'er you, kid," a gruff older man said, his face black with coal dust.

Tentatively, the boy extended a leg. The bucket seemed to swing and roll like a barrel on the ocean, but he managed to grab hold of the chain and fall into it gracelessly. Belly-laughs erupted from the other miners, not a good start.

It didn't take long for the other men to pile into the bucket, two of them held on to the chain and wedged their feet against the metalwork. With a sickening jolt, the pulley lurched into life, and they began their descent into the bowels of the Earth. Every inch downward seemed to lift the temperature by a dozen degrees. No wonder the other men hadn't bothered with cloaks.

Over the years, the boy's father had told him tales about how dark it was down in the mines, of how your other senses kicked in and you felt like you could hear for miles. He lay awake at night with his eyes closed as tight as possible, the threadbare blanket pulled over his head. None of that prepared him for the utter absence of light in the shaft.

He didn't know if it was the rocking motion of the bucket or the disorientating effect of the darkness, but the boy felt his breakfast rise in his throat. The other men laughed again when he retched over the side.

Eventually, the squeak of the pulley stopped, and the bucket crunched to a halt. A pinpoint of yellow light turned out to be a man bringing a single candle to lead them to their coalface. The boy looked around at the pale white eyes blinking in the cloying dust, the only pinpoints of light in the dust-covered faces.

All he could do was think of his father, his brothers, and his mother alone at home with no money. He willed himself forward into the mine.

INFERENCE FOCUS

1. Why was the boy shivering in the first paragraph?
2. What information in the second paragraph might also explain his shivering?
3. What had happened to father and brothers?
4. What is important about the job to the boy?
5. Why hadn't the other men worn cloaks?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

- R** What was covering the men's faces?
- E** Why does the author repeat the fact that the boy's mother is alone? What impact does this have on the reader?
- V** What does the word "lurched" tell you about how the pulley system moved?
- V** Which of these words is an antonym for "descent"? **climb** **fall** **down**
- P** Describe what the boy's first day in the mine was like. Think about the conditions and how he would feel.

Answers:

1. There was a frost/it was cold
2. He was nervous
3. They'd died
4. Getting paid so that he can help his mother
5. It was far too hot to wear them

R: Coal dust

E: It reminds the reader why the boy is doing it and what is at stake

V: Jolting/uneven/not smooth or comfortable

V: Climb