PROLOGUE

Into the Fire

Todd Domboski broke into a run. From the front porch of his mother's row house, he cut across Apple Alley and into the yard behind his grandmother's home. Every weekday, he traveled the same route on his way to St. Ignatius School, where he was in seventh grade. Perched near the crest of Locust Mountain, the one-story brick school boasted a baseball diamond in back, a magnet for local enthusiasts. To the east, it looked out over the Odd Fellows Cemetery and, farther east, the hills and ridges of the Appalachians. From his grandmother's slender backyard, flecked with trees and birdhouses, Todd could see into the well-maintained yards of her next-door neighbors, including Harry Kleman's lawn, dotted with miniature wooden windmills. In the woods behind their property, Todd and his friends built forts, shot BB guns, and rode motorbikes. Uptown in Centralia, Pennsylvania, that's what boys did for fun.

Minutes earlier, Todd's grandmother, Carrie Wolfgang, had glanced out the bay window in her living room, gazing out onto South Locust Avenue, the main north-south corridor through town. Just beyond her front porch, Centralia descended into a valley, one mile long and six blocks across, lined with about five hundred homes, most of them twelve-foot-wide wooden row houses. Just wide enough at street level for one window and a front door, they pressed against each other

like kernels of corn, housing the town's one thousand or so residents, many of whom had lived in the same homes all their lives. Pickup trucks and sedans lined the curb, two- and four-door models in 1970s hues such as sea-foam green and metallic blue. At the opposite end of town, near the crest of Aristes Mountain, the turquoise onion-shaped dome of St. Mary's Church towered over black mounds of coal waste, refuse from strip-mining in the 1930s and underground operations dating back to the Civil War.

On this sunny Saturday morning—Valentine's Day 1981—when Carrie peered out the window she spotted a cluster of officials across the street, men in suits and overcoats leaving Tony and Mary Andrade's house, next door to John Coddington's Amoco station. Curious, she phoned her daughter, Flo Domboski, a garment worker who lived around the corner on Wood Street. Flo dispatched Todd, her twelve-year-old son, to investigate.

Meanwhile, Carrie's sixteen-year-old grandson, Erik Wolfgang, crouched over Todd's motorcycle in the backyard. Erik, who had been staying with Carrie while his parents enjoyed a midwinter cruise, was trying—without success—to fix a flat tire. When Todd darted past, Erik called out, asking for help. Todd stopped to watch while Erik strained to rig a hot patch, gluing a rubber strip over the hole and heating the adhesive with a match.

A few yards away, Todd noticed a wisp of smoke floating from the ground, like a smoldering match buried under damp leaves. In Centralia, where an abandoned coal mine beneath the town had been burning for nineteen years, tiny fissures often punched through the topsoil, trailing bands of sulfurous steam—especially in Todd's neighborhood, where an old tunnel from the burning mine sliced underneath Wood Street's south side, below the Gaughans' and Womers' backyards. On a regular basis, Todd watched his neighbor across the street, Carl Womer, pack sinkholes in his yard, filling them with ashes from a coal stove.

Todd stood there, convinced he and Erik had ignited a fire with their matches and glue. And now, on a day otherwise consigned to

roses, chocolate, and construction paper hearts, loomed the prospect of torching their granny's yard—and being held responsible. Todd skirted the edges of her metal shed, crammed with patio furniture and lawn mowers, and crept over for a closer look. Erik, with his back to his cousin, focused on the decommissioned tire. Todd, a thin preadolescent boy with long legs and large feet into which his frame hadn't grown, paused near the puff of smoke to brush away dead leaves. The ground, still saturated from a deluge that had pummeled Columbia County three days earlier, gave way beneath him.

Todd started sinking—first to his knees. He tried to pull himself out but plunged even deeper until he was submerged to his waist. He placed his hands on the ground next to his hips and tried to push out, like someone who had fallen into a frozen pond. But his hands disappeared into the slime, as if he had slipped them into his pockets. The soggy earth kept melting, sucking him in and burying him—to his sternum, his neck, his chin. In a split second, Todd plummeted all the way underground, into a cavity as wide as his chest, a column of hot sticky mud moistened by emissions from the mine fire.

This is it, he thought. *I'm going to die.*

Steam rolled up from beneath his feet, thick and sulfurous. Vapors lapped at his face and clung to his nostrils, reeking like rotten eggs. Every time Todd wrestled for a foothold, the earth collapsed, tugging him down still farther. Below him, gases from the mine fire gushed skyward, fanned by oxygen from the opening over his head. They made a howling sound like the roar of a tornado.

Still foundering, Todd jammed his back into the damp soil. He dug his feet in, too, hoping to break his downward slide.

I've got to get out of here, he thought. *Now.*

Flailing, Todd grabbed at the moist dirt. He latched onto a cluster of tree roots, finally stopping his descent. Clutching the roots, with his back and feet wedged into the ooze, he screamed for help.

Erik heard Todd's cries and looked up. A plume of steam poured from the ground just a few yards from his grandmother's shed—a funnel so dense motorists could spot it four miles away, on the highway

outside Mount Carmel. Erik sprinted over and dropped to his stomach. Peering into the hole, two feet wide and swirling with hot white vapors, he could barely discern the outlines of Todd's orange hat, about six feet down. Erik knew he couldn't reach him.

"Put your hand up!" Erik yelled. "Put your hand up!"

Still pressing his feet and back into the muck to keep from sliding farther down, Todd clutched at the roots with one hand and lifted the other, straining toward Erik. With Todd extending his arm as high as he could, Erik stretched down, about three feet, into the hole. Their hands met in the middle. Erik grabbed Todd's wrist, locking his grip. With a heave, he plucked Todd from the ground like a fresh onion, forty-five seconds after the earth had first begun to swallow him.

Back on dry land, Todd's hooded nylon parka and jeans were caked with sticky, warm mud. Otherwise, he had escaped unscathed. The steam hadn't singed his hair or his clothing. He didn't have any burns. The round-faced parochial student, schooled by the nuns, thought God had saved him.

The boys, numb with shock, dashed into their grandmother's house. Todd raced straight to the sink, a cast-iron behemoth with separate hot and cold water faucets. He opened the cold spigot and started gulping, not bothering with a glass. Carrie found her grandsons in the kitchen and demanded an explanation of the smoke—now billowing from the ground—in her backyard. Erik told her what had happened.

Carrie sent them across the street to the Andrades' to alert the officials who had gathered there. Erik ran over and explained to the mine inspector and the men in suits: Todd had fallen into a hole in his grandmother's backyard. Todd, still coated with dirt, approached Locust Avenue, where workers had drilled into the pavement and installed a series of metal pipes to vent steam from the mine fire. Even after his rescue, however, he hovered near his grandmother's front porch, reluctant to cross the street, afraid it, too, might open underneath him. A reporter for the Shenandoah *Evening Herald* snapped Todd's photograph: arms and legs tense with fear, his half-open mouth turned down at the corners, fighting back tears.

THE TOWN of Centralia sits in a 484-square-mile region of northeastern Pennsylvania honeycombed with vast deposits of anthracite coal. That coal was formed from the carbon of ferns and plants when prehistoric swamps submerged beneath the earth's crust and metamorphosed, under intense pressure and heat, into sedimentary layers of rock and shale. The greater the force generated by the folding layers, the higher the carbon content, and hence the quality, of the coal. On a scale from peat, which hails from swampy bogs, to pure carbon, anthracite falls at the latter end of the spectrum. Bituminous coal, the kind scooped from shallow seams in West Virginia and western Pennsylvania, is somewhere in the middle. Anthracite, so hard and shiny locals dubbed it the black diamond, shatters like glass when it breaks.

Situated at the northern tip of the Appalachian coalfield, which runs from Pennsylvania to Alabama, the anthracite coal region stretches from Forest City in the north to just short of Harrisburg in the south. From a geological perspective, the region consists of four contiguous fields, aligned with the ridges and valleys of the Appalachians: the Northern, the Eastern Middle, the Western Middle, and the Southern. Centralia occupies the center of the Western Middle Field, a thirty-four-mile-long, four-mile-wide strip of rolling terrain hemmed in to the far west and north by the Susquehanna River. During the mountain-building Permian period, the Western Middle Field's coal deposits contorted into flat, deep basins with steep sides that dive under the ridges in V-shaped layers, like graduated upside-down buckets. All around Centralia, anthracite coal seams plunge underground at 33- to 45-degree angles to the surface, bottom out two thousand to three thousand feet below ground, and surge back upward several miles away, often in the next coal town. For the quality and quantity of its deposits, an early mining official observed, the Centralia basin was unsurpassed anywhere in the state.

For millions of years, the area's anthracite lay buried in inaccessible coal seams. After the War of 1812, however, when Philadelphia entre-

preneurs developed an anthracite-fired furnace, the industry sprang to life. Financiers such as Stephen Girard, John Biddle, and Lloyd Wharton invested in mineral-rich coal lands. And, like colonial barons, they siphoned profits from the third-world region that generated them, routing the revenue back to New York and Philadelphia.

In the mid- and late nineteenth century, fourteen mines opened in and around Centralia, each employing up to several hundred men and boys—some as young as nine years old—to unearth, process, and haul anthracite. By 1890, Centralia boasted more than twenty-five hundred residents, most of whom had emigrated from Ireland, Wales, Germany, and, to an increasing extent, southern and eastern Europe. By day, they blasted through coal seams hundreds of feet underground. At night, they crammed into row homes erected on top of the mines. The United Mine Workers of America, which helped organize the anthracite coalfields after labor unrest rocked the region in 1902, maintained three locals in Centralia alone, with a combined membership of more than one thousand miners.

After the 1929 stock market crash, however, one of the town's main employers, the Lehigh Valley Coal Company, folded and never recovered. The regional economy, like the industry that created it, sank into a prolonged decline. Out-of-work miners scraped by on income from bootleg coal holes scattered across property owned by their former employers. Coal companies leased their land to strip miners, who deployed steam shovels into coal seams at the easy-to-reach surface. Where mountains had once stood, laced with pines, birch trees, and mountain laurel, the strip miners left behind piles of black waste, often towering several stories high, and hollowed-out basins, some as long as football fields.

After a brief resurgence during World War II, the industry collapsed for good in the 1950s. Across the coal region, cash-strapped local governments—deprived of their principal source of tax revenue and employment—couldn't afford municipal landfills. Residents dragged their trash—lumber, furniture, petrochemicals—to stripping pits, hollowed-out caverns where bulldozers and high-powered steam shovels had once pawed into the earth for anthracite, like demolishing a cake's

layers to reveal the icing between them. Garbage heaped atop exposed coal seams ignited, setting fire to abandoned underground workings. By 1954, fires raged in seven inactive anthracite mines. One mine fire in Laurel Run, near Wilkes-Barre, had been smoldering since 1915.

Just before Memorial Day in 1962, a fire broke out at a garbage dump on Centralia's southeastern edge, near the Odd Fellows Cemetery. The landfill sat atop an abandoned strip-mining pit, a hollowed-out bowl about fifty feet deep and seventy-five feet wide, where an independent contractor had stripped the Buck Mountain vein—a seven-foot-wide coal seam—in the 1930s. The trash fire swept down the Buck vein and into the defunct Centralia Colliery, abandoned by the Lehigh Valley Coal Company in 1931. As the fire reached the underground tunnels, laden with millions of tons of anthracite, it blazed through the coal like molten lava, spewing methane, carbon dioxide, and carbon monoxide. For years, the mine fire kept burning, defying the government's repeated efforts to bring it under control by digging it out, starving it of oxygen, and pumping noncombustible powder into the workings.

Yet well into 1980, most Centralia residents largely ignored the fire. In a town with a nine-thousand-dollar median annual income, about half the national average, many were preoccupied with working, raising children, and paying bills, or, for older widows and retired miners, stretching Social Security checks and finding rides to doctors' appointments. Of course, Centralians saw steam chugging from the vent pipes in Todd Domboski's neighborhood. They smelled sulfurous fumes there, too, especially on humid summer days when a milky haze coated the mountains, trapping vapors near the surface. Lingering over beers at the American Legion or chatting with neighbors at the post office, they griped about contractors who managed to get rich—by local standards—bilking taxpayers on the government's ill-fated projects.

Still, most Centralians felt safe, particularly ex-miners on the opposite end of town who knew the coal seams lay hundreds of feet below ground—and below their row houses. Even many of Todd's Wood Street and Locust Avenue neighbors assumed the fire smoldered out in the woods on the borough's eastern edge, near the dump. Mine fires were

part of life in the anthracite region, like church picnics, minstrel shows, and high school football games. No one really knew the Centralia fire's precise location or how far it had spread, so it remained easy to ignore.

Like their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents before them, Centralians filed in to Mass on Sunday. The Irish Catholics gathered at St. Ignatius, whose modest white steeple dominated the Locust Avenue hilltop, just up the street from Carrie Wolfgang's house. The descendants of Ukrainian immigrants congregated on the hill that marked the town's northern frontier, climbing the winding road to St. Mary's. Men and women who couldn't find work in the region commuted to state government jobs in Harrisburg, more than an hour away. Ex-miners and their widows lunched on oven-fried fish at the senior center, swapped gossip over porch railings, and bought cigarettes at John Coddington's store for sixty-five cents a pack.

Even the local media had wearied of the underground fire, now closing in on its second decade. The week before Todd fell, even the most banal news pouring off the AP wire seemed more pressing. Polish Defense Minister Wojciech Jaruzelski, newly installed as premier, dispatched a deputy to meet with an independent union leader, Solidarity's Lech Walesa, hoping to obtain a ninety-day moratorium against labor strikes and stave off intervention by Soviet troops massed near Poland's border. Three weeks after taking the oath of office, President Ronald Reagan met with cabinet officials and his budget director, David Stockman, to finalize the federal budget. They gutted $26 billion in Interior Department programs and rent subsidies for the poor and elderly and increased defense spending by the same amount, to a total of $220 billion. And in a Philadelphia trial court, a coal company executive testified that the state's proposed strip-mining regulations, designed to bring Pennsylvania into compliance with federal legislation enacted four years earlier, would devastate the industry.

AFTER SEVERAL DAYS of unpredictable weather, ranging from unseasonably warm breezes to snow flurries and subfreezing temperatures,

February 14 dawned clear and mild in Centralia, with temperatures forecast to reach the low forties. The youth auxiliary of St. Ignatius readied the teen club, located in the old Episcopal church, for a Valentine's dance that evening, featuring music by Audio-Feedback. At the Lynch-Gugie-Cheppa-Liptock Post No. 608 of the American Legion on West Park Street, where residents had buried a time capsule in 1966 to honor the town's centennial, members were gearing up for Whitey's Polka Band, the star attraction at its Valentine's dance that evening.

Meanwhile, down at the municipal building, a squat 1970s structure topped by solar heating panels, federal, state, and local officials and a handful of residents gathered for a morning meeting with Centralia's new congressman, James Nelligan, a silver-haired Wilkes-Barre Republican who had ridden Reagan's coattails into office. Nelligan, flush with victory, had conferred with Interior Department Secretary James G. Watt about the mine fire in January. Before joining Reagan's administration, Watt had headed the Mountain States Legal Foundation, defending western mining, timber, and cattle industries in court and advancing their legislative agenda. And Watt, an avowed foe of federal spending projects, particularly if they harmed the coal industry, had asked the freshman congressman what Centralians wanted the federal government to do.

Inside the municipal building, Nelligan pressured Centralia's mayor, John Wondoloski, and the members of its part-time borough council for guidance about solutions, including relocating the town. Wondoloski, who still eked out a living in the strip mines, favored making the county government decide. The borough councilmen, who earned twenty dollars per month for their services, balked at shouldering responsibility for the town's fate. They knew that Centralians—when they even paused to think about it—did not agree about the mine fire. Roughly half the borough opposed measures, including relocation, designed to provide relief. Exasperated, Nelligan suggested a referendum, letting the borough's citizens determine their fate.

After the meeting, Nelligan and the officials ventured up South Locust Avenue to the Andrades' house. Ed Narcavage, a state mine inspec-

tor with the frame and belly of an aging high school fullback, briefed them on the fundamentals. During the previous month, the Andrades' carbon monoxide monitor had sounded seven times, signaling a buildup higher than 35 parts per million, the governmental safety threshold. One week earlier, the state health department had declared the home unsafe for habitation. But without financial help from the government—which had not materialized—the Andrades were reluctant to move, even temporarily. So Narcavage, who lugged his thirty-pound gas detection equipment into about a dozen houses in that neighborhood every day, testing for carbon monoxide and methane, knew their house well.

While officials huddled outside the Andrades', Nelligan spotted figures running in the yard across the street, where a column of smoke belched from the ground. Moments later, Erik ran over to them. Narcavage thought someone had died.

State Senator Edward Helfrick, a local coal magnate, grabbed an aide and told him to call Governor Richard J. Thornburgh.

CARRIE WOLFGANG picked up the phone and dialed her daughter, Flo, who was upstairs in Todd's bedroom installing wood paneling. "Get over here," Carrie said. "Todd fell in a hole with water or something and he's awfully dirty."

Strolling up Apple Alley, thinking her son had splashed in a puddle, Flo noticed steam billowing from Carrie's backyard. A crowd had already gathered, neighbors and politicians alike, gaping down at the hole, speculating about how deep it was, and wondering how Todd had escaped. As Flo walked up to her mother's house, the bystanders called out to her. He fell in over there, they said.

Realizing what had happened, Flo panicked. She found Todd and tried to hug him, but he pushed her away and said he was okay. Pete Wysochansky, a volunteer fireman, drove up in the town's ambulance and started hooking Todd to an oxygen tank. Mayor Wondoloski, who had a daughter Todd's age, told Flo to take her son to Ashland State

General Hospital, two miles away, to have him tested for carbon monoxide poisoning.

Helen Womer, a plump fifty-two-year-old bank teller with oversized glasses and a helmet of curly gray hair, raced over from her house next door, about 150 feet from where Todd fell. Earlier that morning, she had appeared at the meeting in borough hall, saying she vehemently opposed relocating the community because it simply was not necessary.

Cover that up, she said to the throngs of people at the opening. There's no fire in there.

Womer, a lifelong Centralia resident whose husband plugged sinkholes in their yard, knew the mine fire had smoldered under her neighborhood for years. This new subsidence in Carrie Wolfgang's backyard frightened her, however, and not for the reasons it alarmed so many others. This cave-in, which had just nearly swallowed her twelve-year-old neighbor, might prove irresistible to news-media outsiders. Once they started poking around, interviewing neighbors and shooting footage of the steam pipes, officials would bow to the pressure. Womer, who lived closer to the fire's leading edge than virtually anyone else in town, didn't want the government stirred into action. If it was, it might revive a plan to control the fire by digging a massive trench through the neighborhood, one that promised to burrow through her living room.

Womer zeroed in on Flo.

You keep this quiet, Womer said. We don't need any publicity.

Flo didn't answer. She turned and walked away, more concerned about getting her son to the hospital than about pacifying Helen Womer. Never one to mince words, though, Flo knew she wouldn't keep her mouth shut.

Flo had now crossed an invisible threshold in her head—one from which she could not turn back. Nineteen years earlier, the government could have dug out the fire for a pittance, a mere thirty thousand dollars. But the politicians had never wangled enough money to do the job

right, and the mine fire had kept on burning. Now she had almost lost her son because the bureaucrats still couldn't decide what to do: put out the fire or the people who lived there. She knew she'd do everything she could to keep this in the news. She needed to sell her house and get out.

Narcavage, the mine inspector, borrowed a ladder from the American Legion and laid it across the crater. He eased out onto the wooden rungs, braving a sulfurous curtain of steam, and dangled a thermometer into the void. At the opening, the temperature hovered around 280 degrees. When he tried to take a carbon monoxide reading with his portable monitor, which registered from zero to 30 parts per million, the needle raced to the end of the dial. By the time he erected a slatted wooden snow fence around the cave-in to keep anyone else from falling in, local reporters and television crews had converged on the scene, elbowing the mine inspector aside.

Across the street, outside Chrissie Oakum's house, a cluster of young parents gathered to talk on the sidewalk. Tom Larkin, a beefy short-order cook and fifth-generation Centralian with thinning salt-and-pepper hair and a mustache, chatted with Congressman Nelligan while steam vented from a pipe at Coddington's station down the block and across the street in Carrie's yard. Larkin, a former peace activist who had marched on the Washington, D.C., mall in the late 1960s to protest the Vietnam War, told Nelligan it was the federal government's responsibility to put the fire out. Meanwhile, Larkin knew that the presence of the news media, and their interest in the mine fire, gave Centralia residents unprecedented leverage. In those cameras and notebooks lay the opportunity to make the government do something about the fire—and save the town before someone died.

Later that afternoon, Narcavage saw Todd seated on his grandmother's back porch, worn out from repeating his story. The mine inspector, the only other person in Centralia who had come as close as Todd to the cave-in, feeling its heat and breathing its sulfur-laden fumes, asked the boy how he felt. Todd said he was scared. In fact, he was terrified, convinced another hole would open beneath him, sucking him in all over again.

That evening, in the bedroom his mother hadn't finished paneling, Todd couldn't sleep. After surviving a plunge into the ground over the mine fire and feeling the hot mud press against his chest, he couldn't even stand to have a blanket cover him.

As Valentine's Day settled into evening in Centralia, Catharene Jurgill ducked into a meeting at a neighbor's house on South Locust Avenue, about two blocks from the bedroom where Todd Domboski lay awake. Catharene, a nineteen-year-old housewife four months pregnant with her second child, had grown up in Ringtown, an agricultural village just a few miles to the north, picking tomatoes and gathering chicken eggs and earning 4-H Club ribbons for cooking and sewing. A former Girl Scout and cheerleader with wavy brown hair and large hazel eyes, she had married her boyfriend, Leon Jurgill, Jr., in October 1978, a few months after finishing high school. Hours after their wedding, they moved into a row home next to St. Ignatius Convent, just a few doors from the church.

Catharene had heard about the mine fire as a student in Ringtown, which shared a school district with half of Centralia. When she settled in to her new home and learned the fire had been blazing since she was one year old, she started pressing her neighbors for information. That afternoon, when Todd dropped into his grandmother's backyard, she realized she no longer had the luxury of idle curiosity. Carrie Wolfgang's house sat just down the block from the Jurgills', on a route Catharene walked every day, with her one-and-a-half-year-old daughter in a stroller. She knew she had to protect her family.

Looking around the room, Catharene recognized the dozen or so neighbors who had gathered, mostly young parents who lived nearby, on the 100 and 200 blocks of South Locust Avenue: Mary Theresa Gasperetti, a waitress and mother of two; Eleanor O'Hearn, a bank teller and mother with two sons at St. Ignatius School; and Dave Lamb, a father of two who owned a motorcycle shop called the Speed Spot at Locust Avenue and Center Street, the main intersection in

town. The mine fire no longer felt like a distant nuisance to them, burning out in the woods near the dump somewhere. That afternoon, it had invaded their neighborhood, drawing in one of their own. Now, they feared, they couldn't let their children play outside. They didn't even feel safe inside their houses, which hugged the same network of mine workings as Carrie Wolfgang's backyard.

What they would learn over the next few days, as test results trickled back from a West Virginia federal laboratory, would confirm Ed Narcavage's initial suspicions: The temperature inside the hole had measured 160 degrees Fahrenheit, and the carbon monoxide level had registered 1,154 parts per million, more than thirty times the federal government's recommended exposure threshold, and 96 percent—a mere 46 parts per million shy—of the concentration deemed immediately threatening to life and health. If Todd had remained trapped just a few minutes longer, he would have died. The doctors and nurses who examined him in the emergency room couldn't fathom how he had escaped without so much as a steam burn.

For weeks, people in Centralia marveled that Todd hadn't been killed by carbon monoxide poisoning. That he had saved himself by clinging to a tree root, with his cousin's help, was a virtual miracle. Those forty-five seconds Todd spent inside the cave-in shook the town like a minor earthquake, jolting residents out of nineteen years of paralysis and denial.

IN THE LATE nineteenth century, my great-grandfather James Quigley raised seven children in a row home at East Center and Wood streets in Centralia, in a neighborhood called the Swamp. My grandmother Helen Laughlin Quigley grew up a few blocks uphill on Wood Street, in a tree-lined enclave a few hundred feet from the strip mine that became the dump. My great-aunt Kate Quigley taught first grade in Centralia's public school for thirty-seven years, educating generations of immigrant children and their siblings. When she died in 1940, the school board passed a resolution closing classrooms for her funeral at

St. Ignatius. Her younger sister, Annie, a seamstress, operated a dry cleaner's out of the family homestead into the late 1960s.

My grandfather, also named James, was born in Centralia in 1881. After third grade, he quit school to work as a breaker boy, the entry-level rung on the mine labor hierarchy. For the next five years or so, he crouched over chutes in an aboveground processing hub, logging ten hours a day, six days a week, picking out pieces of slate and refuse as the coal swept past on its way to waiting railroad cars. For his efforts, he pocketed about forty cents a day. Still, he belonged to a lucky minority—he stayed alive, avoided injuries, and rose into management's ranks. In his early thirties, he snared the position of fire boss, an official whose expertise supplanted the proverbial coal mine canary, descending into the workings alone every morning to ensure that flammable gases, such as methane, had not accumulated in the mine overnight. At forty-three, he replaced his older brother as foreman at an eight-hundred-employee Mount Carmel colliery, promoting the mine's safety, efficiency, and profitability.

In 1926, after taking night school and correspondence courses in engineering and calculus, my grandfather passed the state mine inspector's exam, won an appointment from the governor, and began touring mines in his district. Inside the workings, he tested for toxic gases, scouted for hazardous working conditions, and investigated fatal accidents. Day after day, he enforced state safety laws designed to temper the industry's profit motives and keep miners alive.

As a state employee with a middle-class salary, my grandfather also sent each of his three children to college, a feat many of the region's residents still struggle to achieve today. My father, a World War II Army Air Corps pilot, received the Distinguished Flying Cross and two Air Medals in the China-Burma-India theater, air-dropping supplies to General Joseph W. Stilwell's troops, who were fighting to open the Burma Road. After the war, he earned a Phi Beta Kappa key at Bucknell University and moved to New Haven, where the G.I. Bill funded his studies at Yale Law School. Three years later, he moved to Cleveland, joining several Yale law alumni—and at least one other Air

Corps pilot—at Squire Sanders & Dempsey. His older brother, my uncle Jim, graduated from Villanova and Dickinson Law School and served two terms in the U.S. Congress, representing a district near Harrisburg.

Over the years and decades, my father specialized in litigation and labor law, representing management for corporations such as Union Carbide and General Electric. He joined corporate and philanthropic boards, strengthening his ties to the community. He enrolled my brothers and me in private schools, relegating our doctrinal edification to CCD classes every Sunday. And during my freshman year at Princeton, he escorted me—to my mortification—down the Union Club's red-carpeted stairs in a post-Christmas debutante cotillion sprinkled with the female progeny of some of Cleveland's oldest families.

When I was growing up, a suburban child of the seventies in Danskins and Topsiders, my dad rarely spoke of his Quigley forebears or his father's experience as a breaker boy. He didn't talk much about his work or military service either. Like many of his peers from the so-called Greatest Generation, he considered himself lucky to be alive. Perhaps because of his reticence, I always wondered about my Quigley ancestors, especially the grandfather I never knew. One of his mine safety lanterns, a six-inch metal canister sheathed in a wire mesh screen, lay in the kitchen junk drawer with pencils, emery boards, and binder clips. A black-and-white photo of him—clad in shirtsleeves and seated at his desk with mining treatises—sat on the antique desk in my father's book-lined study. By all other accounts, he remained a mystery.

In some respects, so did my father, the ex-pilot who navigated cargo planes in the Himalayas during the war and retained traces of solidarity with the coal region long after. He relished visiting former neighbors, who still called him Tommy, when he returned for brief stays. He ate sticky buns and pretzels, followed the Phillies, attended Mass every Sunday and holy day, and for the most part, at least until the Reagan era, voted for Democrats.

Throughout my childhood, we piled into our wood-paneled Ford

Country Squire and drove across northeastern Ohio and western and central Pennsylvania to Mount Carmel, my father's hometown, where we visited my grandmother in her Chestnut Street row home. Weather permitting, my brothers and I played in a park near her house for hours, climbing on a cannon that had rained firepower on a distant conflict. From the park, we gazed out on the surrounding landscape. Like Centralia, Mount Carmel sat in a coal-rich basin, encircled by the Appalachians. The vista from the cannon supplied me with one of my most vivid childhood memories of the region: black mounds of coal waste, shorn of vegetation. These tar-colored heaps, mountains turned inside out and stripped of their latent anthracite, did not look like anything I had ever seen before.

In May 2000, I took a leave of absence from my government-lawyer job in Washington, D.C., and started knocking on doors in Centralia. All but a dozen or so houses had been torn down a decade earlier, leaving about as many residents, known locally as the holdouts. Grass grew in the vacant lots like playing fields, and the remaining row homes, now uncoupled, relied on brick support columns to keep from falling over. At the main intersection in the valley, the Speed Spot stood forsaken and alone, its display windows cluttered with motorcycle parts and racing trophies. A single row house, with green Astroturf sheathing the front steps and a Notre Dame Fighting Irish sticker in the parlor window, remained on South Locust Avenue, where scores of families once lived. Just beyond the chain-link fence surrounding St. Ignatius Cemetery, steam trickled from a former stripping pit ringed by charred trees and littered with garbage and branches.

Helen Womer's red-shingled house still graced Wood Street, an oasis of propriety surrounded by overgrown lots where black-eyed Susans and Queen Anne's lace sprouted with abandon. One afternoon in late July, I swung by and rapped on her front door. No one answered. A few days later, I called her from a pay phone outside a Turkey Hill Minit Markit in Mount Carmel. She said she wouldn't cooperate with

anyone who was trying to make a buck off Centralia and peppered me with questions for thirty minutes, until I exhausted my supply of quarters and the phone company severed the connection.

Two months later, I climbed her front steps again, a legal pad at my side, and knocked. Helen appeared at the screen door and stood behind it, pointedly breaking with coal region hospitality by not coming out on the porch or inviting me in. She looked younger than I expected, with her blue flowered T-shirt and curly gray hair. I introduced myself. She glanced at my notepad. It was a bad time, she said, her voice brisk and authoritative. I asked if I could come back. She said no.

I tried another tack: Father Anthony McGinley, an eighty-year-old priest confined to a Danville nursing home, where he cuddled a velour blanket and watched televised Mass, had told me to appeal to her vanity, saying she was the best source. She smiled slightly, nodding in agreement. Then she said no again. It was very painful, she said.

"I know," I said, nodding my head, trying to project empathy.

"You couldn't know—unless you lived through it."

I wanted to argue with her as I stood on her steps near the three plastic deer pretend-grazing on her lawn. I wanted to tell her that after dozens of interviews, I had a pretty good sense of how the mine fire had polarized her ex-neighbors. I wanted to tell her that I, too, had family from Centralia, several generations of Quigleys and Laughlins buried across Locust Avenue in St. Ignatius Cemetery.

Eventually, the narrative spilled out from every corner. In its details, it reveals the legacy of an environmental catastrophe, its human tolls and triumphs, its corporate greed and indifference, its governmental lapses and neglect. In its historic sweep, it stands as a cautionary tale—timeless and time-bound—in a country divided by class and religion, buffeted by corporate misconduct, and dismantling its environmental protection laws. This is the story of a dying coal town ensnared in the Reagan Revolution's afterbirth, of a small community rent by one of the mining industry's worst disasters, and of the irreplaceable bond of home.