horrible things seen and endured. A line of beer mugs stood along the wet bar of an alehouse, imprinted with the black half-moons of the miners' lips; the kisses they would bestow on their wives' and children's faces also would leave such prints: of moons, in eclipse. One of the men smacking his lips upon the froth with his buddies was Hughie Guthro. He was a rubbery-limbed, rubbery-faced, smiling, accommodating, kindhearted man. He had a round, gleaming head with a high creased forehead. He and Margie had two children, Jerry, five, and Linda, seven. "He never complains about anything," Margie told her friends. "If I want to get mad at him about something, he goes and sits in a chair in the front room and doesn't open his mouth. He won't fight back."

Hughie enjoyed a gentle, rather pointless kind of humor. "Dot!" he called teasing to their neighbor across the road. "The door blew out at the post office!"

"Oh my goodness, oh my, what happened?" Dot would cry.

And humble, round-shouldered countrywoman Margie, with a head covered with busy tight brown curls, would cup her hand over her bad teeth and laugh. "Hughie, stop tormenting her! Dot! You *know* what he's like."

Hughie was quiet, though he'd listen attentively if one of his pals spoke an opinion on something. He'd weigh it first, and then agree—"Yup, that's it, eh?"—if there was sense in it. If there was no sense in it, Hughie would duck his round head and dunk his lips in his brew again and say nothing.

"To tell you the truth, I'm never scared in a coal mine," Hughie had said a few years earlier. "Lot of people are, but I like the work. You know what you have to do, you go down, and you do it."

But Hughie Guthro had been caught by the twentieth century's worst disaster in Springhill: the 1956 Explosion. Now he found that the trouble with beer was that if he sipped enough of it to loosen the knot he kept on his stack of memories, the awful images would start to stir and swirl about. It was why, without a word to anybody, he sometimes shoved off from the bar, grabbed his cap from the hat rack, and trudged home alone, his sad round head yo-yoing above his chest. If the children clamored about his legs when he stepped into his yard, he set them aside—"Not now, eh?"—and closed himself into the bathroom, where he'd stand and look out the half-open window onto his weedy back lot and try to go blank again.

On Thursday, November 1, 1956, a section of the coal train had broken loose on the Back Slope and rolled backward into the depths. The steel boxes, carrying tons of raw coal, whirled faster and faster until they launched into the air and scraped an electric cable strung along the roof of the tunnel. Sparks ignited the standing haze of coal dust. A roaring fireball bellowed all the way up out of the mouth of the mine. It swallowed everyone in its path and shot men sky-high. The fiery sphere billowed up into the air and turned inside out like a mushroom cloud. Half the town saw it, the other half heard it, and all came running.

Margie Guthro was standing among the scratchy weeds of her backyard, taking clothes off the line. She looked up and saw men in the distance somersaulting high in the air. "It's Hughie's shift!" Hurrying to the pit, Margie learned instantly that her two uncles, surface workers, had both been caught and burned to death.

The emergency whistle was screaming. All the buildings that covered the No. 4 mine portal were burning. The wives of some of the men trapped in the burning buildings had always

corrected anyone who referred to their husbands as "miners"—as if, if a wife could emphasize, "No, dear, my Leonard is a *surface worker,*" she could keep her man out of danger. But, this time, surface workers were killed.

"Our generation has never had anything like this," said miner Bill James, standing near Margie in the red heat of the disaster. "Mine officials, either."

After the fires were quenched, volunteer rescue workers called draegermen, specially trained in the use of gas masks, began groping their way down the Main Slope from the pithead. They moved heavily, clumsily, as if in diving suits on the ocean floor. Several staggered and slowly toppled forward as the afterdamp penetrated their gas masks. From the portal on the surface, other miners watched the draegermen fall, but dared not descend. Two finally were dragged to the surface by their fellow draegermen, but they were dead already.

Meanwhile, miners on the deepest levels hadn't heard the explosion. They knocked off work and walked right into the gas on the Back Slope. They choked, dropped to their knees, and died. The carbon monoxide standing in the depths was invisible and odorless, but the experienced men could taste it. Those who tasted it waited behind it for help to come.

Hughie Guthro, who'd heard nothing, tasted the gas in the air—it had a metallic tang to it, as if he'd bitten down on a paper clip—and he went no farther. "Stay calm," he told a large crew of men who had gathered. "This is like in a war or anything. Try not to panic. It's the panic that'll kill you." His neighbor Alec was among the group.

"No sir," said Alec, "I walked in that level and I'm going back out that level." He could see the way clear to escape.

"I know it is hard to stay put," Hughie said. "You need that willpower. Use your head and try to think out what to do."

But Alec couldn't stand it. Inexperienced and young, he shook free of Hughie's thick hand on his shoulder and ran up the slope, betting that he could outrun the gas. Margie Guthro would see Alec again before Hughie would, when rescuers brought up his body.

Hughie slithered, with the others, across the floor under the standing gas, crawling like soldiers under fire, keeping their heads down. The overman, Conrad Embree, was telling the fellows to get themselves to one of the compressed-air hoses. The miners' power tools were driven by compressed air coursing through air hoses that resembled those at gas stations for filling tires. Embree unsnarled one of the air hoses and punctured holes like snakebites in its flank, then put his mouth to it and sucked in the half-decent air. The others did the same.

Con Embree then crawled away from the air hose long enough to build a stopping, a barrier made of debris and cloth, to divert the inflow of gases. On the outside of it, he wrote, FOR GOD'S SAKE COME AS FAST AS YOU CAN—47 MEN ALIVE HERE.

At the surface, black smoke and poisonous gas billowed out of the mine, showing the authorities that the depths were on fire. On Friday morning, General Manager Harold Gordon was obliged to seal the entrance to the mine to reduce the oxygen feeding the fire. Only after the fire was extinguished would it be possible to descend in search of survivors.

"But the hand is fluctuating on the compressed-air machine," protested an engineer on the surface. "I think there's men alive below, using that air."

"No," a manager said. "In all probability, the fluctuation is

caused by falling stones. In all probability, there is no life left in the mine."

"They're closing No. 4, sealing her up with a big seal of cement!" cried Margie Guthro. "They can't! Not until they get them out of there! There are a hundred and eighty-eight men down there!"

She felt quite baffled and unable to absorb this challenge to everything she thought she knew about the Miners' Code, including never abandoning trapped men. A sweet and obedient woman, she tried to accommodate herself to the new rules. "We have no front step on our bungalow!" she cried to her brother. "Buddy, you'd better build me a step, because with no funeral home, and I figure they're all done for, they'll be bringing Hughie's body to the house."

Deep in the pit, below the fires, Kenny Melanson yelled, "There's water running down the mine!" He was a gangly kid, nineteen years old, still living with his parents. "We're being sealed off."

"Yup, we're being sealed off," agreed Hughie Guthro. " If they turn off that air compressor, we'll be dead in ten minutes."

Conrad Embree wrote in his book, "I am writing no more in this book," and he passed it around with a pencil to the other fellows. Some wrote out their wills, some wrote farewells to their wives.

"Dear Marilyn," wrote Charles Michielson, "Make sure you look after the kids. I guess this is the way it has to be. Tell Nan and the rest of the family it couldn't be helped. Love, Sonny." Then he added, "Please see this note gets to my wife. Sonny."

"I'm too scared to write," Kenny said. He lay down, crossed

his hands under his head, and said, "If I could just see a piece of blue sky again.'"

"Lord," a man prayed aloud, "let me see the light one more time and you will never catch me in a coal mine again."

When the fire and smoke diminished, the seal over the mine was pulled away and rescue crews, who'd driven in from across the province, tried again to descend.

"Nobody could have stood that blast," said a draegerman from the town of Stellerton. "There's no one alive."

"That's where you're wrong," said Cecil Colwell, a hometown volunteer. "There's a different breed of men in Springhill to what there is in Stellerton, Westport, *or* Cape Breton."

Saturday night, two and a half days after the explosion, a team of draegermen reached the stopping erected by Embree, and the trapped men were saved. They fell into the arms of their rescuers and cried. An oxygen tank was set up and everyone got a good whiff. The Main and Back Slopes were still thick with gas. It was Monday morning before the survivors could be brought out.

Kenny Melanson ducked into the daylight, squinted in search of his parents, and heard a manager boom out, "Kenny Melanson!" The emerging survivors were so encrusted with coal dust, they were unrecognizable to the waiting crowd. Just behind Kenny, as another survivor appeared, the manager announced the man's name, then intoned, "Last man out!"

"So that's how folks are told their loved ones are dead," Kenny thought as he pushed into his mother's arms. "They didn't come out and that's it. If he's not out by the time they call 'Last man out,' he's not coming. That's how you find out."

Joe McDonald, a gentle man devoted to his wife and two