

Chapter 16

Fateful Tumble

(Abridged)

Carrie Wolfgang looked out her front window and saw a large group of men coming out of Tony Andrade's house. It was Valentine's Day, 1981, a Saturday. She decided they looked like government men and telephoned her daughter, Florence Domboski, who lived a block away on Wood Street, to tell her about it. Mrs. Domboski dispatched her twelve-year-old son, Todd, to find out who the men were. Todd took off on a run, cutting through the large yard between Eleanor Tillmont's house and Rita Kleman's. As he passed near his grandmother's house, which adjoined Mrs. Tillmont's, his sixteen-year-old cousin, Eric Wolfgang, called him over to show him a problem he had found in Todd's motorbike. Todd stopped briefly to view the work, then was off toward the Andrade's home once again.

He didn't get far before something caught his eye. It was a wisp of smoke rising from some sticks and leaves on the snowless ground a couple of feet from a big ash tree. His curiosity compelling him, he walked up to the smoke, which he could see was coming from a small hole. Without warning, the ground gave way and he found himself up to his knees in a smoking hole. Todd tried to climb out, but the bottom dropped out once again and he sank to his waist. He yelled for help and tried to push himself out of the hole with his arms. That ground gave way, too, and Todd dropped out of sight, continuing to scream for help. A dense, foul-smelling cloud of steam and mine fire gases shot up out of the hole.

Todd's head was about three feet below the surface, but he felt himself sliding down further. He grabbed a thick tree root from the ash tree and hung on as the ground around and beneath him continued to collapse. Because of the steam, he could not see out of the hole. Todd could hear "wind," a strange whooshing sound caused by the mine fire far below sucking air. Whenever the "wind" blew, the ground beneath him collapsed a little more. Todd tried to pull himself closer to the surface, but his arms seemed paralyzed.

Eric, startled by Todd's frantic screams, sprinted to the edge of the hole and peered down, ignoring his own safety. There was no sign of Todd, but he could still hear his cries for help. The plume of steam was growing larger. It was hot and smelled like sulphur. Eric dropped to the ground and

stuck his head and shoulders into the hole, marveling at the strange wind noise he heard. Suddenly, he saw a patch of red, and remembered his cousin was wearing a red hunting cap that day.

“Grab my hand,” he yelled. Gripping Todd’s hand firmly, he dragged his cousin out of the hole and pulled off his jacket, thinking Todd might actually be on fire. Eric was well aware of the mine fire problem and almost immediately surmised what had caused the hole to open. Todd’s jacket was caked with warm mud, as were his jeans, but there was no fire. Eric tried to calm his hysterical young cousin, who had been in the hole about 45 seconds, and pushed him into their grandmother’s kitchen. Mrs. Wolfgang, after extracting from the pair what had happened, told Todd to run across the street and tell the men. She still did not know who they were.

It wasn’t just any group of men Mrs. Wolfgang had spotted. This was the day Congressman Nelligan had picked for his meeting in Centralia to discuss the mine fire. With Nelligan were State Senator Edward Helfrick, State Representative Ted Stuban, State Representative Robert Belfanti, Andrew Bailey, acting director of OSM since the resignation of Walter Heine at the end of the Carter Administration, Beasley, Biggi, Ivor Williams, and several county and borough officials. That such a stellar collection of officials was nearby when Todd dropped into the subsidence had people in Centralia shaking their heads in wonder for months.

The officials had concluded their meeting with Centralia Council and were partway through a tour of the mine fire impact zone. DER gas inspector Edward Narcavage was explaining the gas problem at Andrade’s house when Nelligan noticed several persons running into the yard across the street. At that moment, Todd Domboski reached Locust Avenue and shouted to them that he had just fallen into a hole from the mine fire. He was still covered with mud and still very upset. The officials saw the steam billowing out of the hole and rushed to Mrs. Tillmont’s yard. Senator Helfrick grabbed his aide, Frank Lawski, and told him to get Governor Dick Thornburgh on the car telephone.

Todd was rushed to Centralia Ambulance headquarters at the municipal building and given a dose of oxygen by a local paramedic. One of the officials urged Mrs. Domboski to take her son to Ashland State General Hospital for a blood test, which would determine if he had inhaled a dangerous quantity of carbon monoxide while in the hole. Fortunately, the

blood gas test showed there was not a harmful amount of carbon monoxide in Todd's system, although he was hyperventilated.

Someone in the crowd that gathered in Mrs. Tillmont's yard dropped a cinder block into the subsidence hole. No sound was heard as it struck bottom. Centralia's tiny police force finally shoed the citizens away for their own safety and stretched snow fence across the entrance to the yard. State Department of Environmental Resources gas inspectors were ordered to mount a 24-hour watch at the site. Narcavage tested the steam with his portable carbon monoxide monitor and watched the needle zoom off the end of the dial. Todd would have died of asphyxiation had he been trapped in the hole for very many minutes.

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What caused the subsidence that almost claimed Todd Domboski's life? Mine maps of Centralia show there was once a sloping mine shaft at that location. Long ago, it had been filled with dirt and rubbish. Hot steam from the mine fire gradually moistened and softened the mixture until its own weight made it collapse. In an interview with *Associated Press* a few days after the incident, OSM Region I Director Patrick Boggs said simply that the fire caused a mine chamber beneath Mrs. Tillmont's yard to collapse.

James Paone, chief of the Bureau of Mines' Division of Environment, had warned Centralia residents in 1978 that "serious subsidence problems all over town" would occur in "fifteen to twenty years" if nothing further was done to halt the spread of the mine fire. Only Paone's timetable was incorrect.

The impact on Centralia of Todd Domboski's near tragedy cannot be overestimated. For days afterward, the people spoke of little else. Todd's accident also forced Pennsylvania and the U.S. Department of the Interior to acknowledge the Centralia mine fire for what it was—a great public danger. The extensive press and television coverage now made it impossible for them to do otherwise. The real question was whether government would do the right thing—stop the mine fire once and for all—or simply appease Centralia with a showy gesture. Senator Helfrick said that day he considered all the state and federal Centralia projects from the past to have been mere

appeasement.* He was certain, though, that his fellow Republican, Dick Thornburgh, would not equivocate.

* That apparently included his own. Helfrick's construction firm, K&H Excavating, did the second state project at Centralia in 1962. Helfrick was not an elected official at the time.