

Hartley Pit

I'm running as fast as I can through Delaval, chasing my brother Mark down towards the Hall. We're on the avenue of tall trees beneath a sapphire sky. A fat sun glimmers and we're yelling like foxhounds. He stops and waits for me, grabbing me beneath the arms and swinging me high. I'm exhausted; the breath rasps out of me and my heart hammers into my chest.

"You're as fast as anyone," my brother says proudly with his eyes shining. I know he's lying but it's easier to pretend my right foot isn't crooked and withered. They say it'll have to come off eventually, when the infection sets in, but that day's not today. That day's a long way off.

"Careful, lad. Careful. Mind how you go there, man." Mr Chapman was in a fettle: "You, easy now! Tek it easy, man." I could see Mr Chapman wasn't happy because his face was red and the force with which he was chewing on his pipe looked likely to sever the stem before too many more minutes passed by.

We were replacing the brass on the bearings of the beam supporting the pump engine; they were close to worn through. It had to be done every few years; that engine toiled day and night, sucking the hungry sea out of the pit. That was one of the problems with coal at the coast; there was water everywhere and salt crusted the overalls of every man there.

Mr Chapman was trying hard but it was a difficult job. A dozen men and ten horses had lifted the beam off its perch to let the engineers work but it was slow going. The harsh January snow was sweeping horizontally in from the North Sea. It wasn't even four o'clock but it still seemed dark and the temperature couldn't have been much above freezing. My hands were blue and they were buried beneath thick gloves: every chance I had I thrust them deeper into my pockets, hugging my arms to my chest.

Which Mr Chapman noticed.

Unfortunately.

"Bell, you lazy scrounging fool!" he yelled, looking up from the straining work party beneath him. I know he didn't mean that so I let it go: "Get this yard clear of bloody snow; there'll be men and horses picking their way back up here and they'll not be losing their feet over you!"

Perhaps Mr Chapman had chosen his words deliberately. After all, losing a foot; aye, losing most of a leg was something I knew a lot about. Sighing, I leaned back onto my heavy broom and resumed the battle against the settling snow. And behind me, the mud and dust of the Hartley Colliery Yard was soon covered again.

Typical Sunday I thought: a morning snoring in the pews and then an afternoon grafting at the pit. The connection where the rough wood of my false leg met the numb flesh of my stump, just below the knee, was tight and the leather was stiff. I didn't feel certain in my step so I didn't move far across the yard.

Suddenly, there was a particularly fierce gust of wind accompanied by five seconds of blizzard and hard hail. A desperate yell rent the air and was followed by the shrill whinny of one or more of the horses. Maybe there was a barked warning but it was carried away before a sharp crack and boom shook the air and put me on my backside in shock. My leg was caught in the cobbles and the strapping came away but not before the bottom, the peg where my foot should be, had sheered clean off to rest splintered in the grey ice.

And in the lower yard, above the black maw of the Hester shaft, there was a tangle of twisted rope, two horses flat on their stomachs, writhing and foaming, and a cluster of gesticulating men with Mr Chapman in the middle. The beam had slipped and slammed back into position. They were checking the bearings now; trying to work out what had happened and whether it was salvageable.

My brother Mark found me about half an hour later, covered in snow and shivering. I'd called down to the lads below and eventually one of them had torn themselves away from the beam and fetched him. He scooped me up in his strong arms and fetched me the half mile back to the cottage. I asked him what had happened and whether there'd be work tomorrow and he nodded; he didn't say much, our Mark. He nodded and muttered, "Aye, lad. Think they might have got away with that one. It fell right back into place."

And with that, we ducked beneath the low door: sodden clothes dripping on the floor, Mother's disapproval obvious in her stare and in the cast of her jaw.

I didn't leave the house that week. Da' worked on fashioning a rough splint and extra peg on the Sunday and Monday night so at least I could move around a bit but I couldn't go outside. The snow stopped intermittently but it was replaced by torrential sleet and the wind never died. Da' sometimes went to the workshop at the colliery during the day, just to stay involved. He'd spent fifty years down the shaft and his back was bent and bulging. He was older, our Da'. Just turned seventy last birthday. Mam was younger, in her late fifties, but still older than most of the Mams in the village.

Mark worked the fore-shift: half two in the morning until half ten. He was courting so he often spent time with Mary, who lived over Holywell way, in the afternoons before sleeping through 'til midnight. I liked Mary; she came to the cottage quite often when she was walking back from her work as a seamstress in Delaval. I'd hear Mam and Dad talking about them getting married but there'd been no announcement yet.

Mark left as usual soon after midnight that Thursday morning. I could hear the rain lashing angrily at the windows and I heard him cursing as he peered out into the darkness. I was still awake so I called softly down to him, just to let him know that I felt for him having to go out into the storm. He came back in briefly, whispered a 'Cheerio, bonny lad' and then he disappeared into the swallowing night.

The whole family slept restlessly; I could hear my Mam and Da' moving around the cottage long before dawn. Da' was muttering as he discovered the pantry roof had sprung a leak and would need to be tarred up. Mam was twittering something about no milk and no bread because of the weather.

I was tempted just to turn over but I hauled myself up, strapped on my wooden peg, and limped slowly through to the kitchen. Every wall a support; every handle a handhold.

The tiny old window rattled in its groove and seemed eager to fling itself inwards, welcoming the deluge behind it. Da' peered at it and wrinkled his forehead. Neither of them wanted to go outside; it was a superstition really. Most of the families in the village observed it if they could; if one of them was grafting, scraping at the seam, far beneath the ground, it was better for the women, the children and the retired men to stay inside. It brought fortune. It brought fortune. It was supposed to bring fortune.

The window didn't hold; it couldn't resist the ferocity of the wind or the hail. With a crack and then a dull implosion it bent and shattered. The whistling gale sped in and the bitter hail coated the worktop: splinters of ice and glass mixing together chaotically.

That's when the nightmare began.

First there was pounding on the door; I could hear the neighbours outside. Raised voices. Mam pushed it open though the storm resisted her. There was something wrong. Something had happened. Down at the shaft. Down at the shaft.

Da' grabbed his thick coat and pulled his hat down over his ears, a grim expression on his face. 'Stay here with your mother' he said and then he left. I was hardly going to go anywhere; this battered stump was nowhere near secure enough to manage outside in the maelstrom.

'What's happened, ma?' I asked her. Mam didn't answer but I could see in her eyes that she was scared. And the snow, renewed and redoubled in strength, clustering onto the table, drifting heavily through the stark hole in the wall where the window used to be.

Mam did what she always did when she was anxious. She scrubbed and polished. Soon the sour stench of vinegar filled the kitchen as she attacked the surfaces. It caught in my throat; it always did. My eyes watered so I stood nearer to the open window and let the biting air strip away the fumes. I wrapped a shawl around my shoulders too to try and still my chattering teeth. Mam didn't say a word.

The wind was raging but the sound of our neighbours carried and I could hear screaming and wailing. 'Something bad's happened, Mam,' I muttered and she gritted her teeth. I went to the door and tried to push it open but it was stuck fast. The snow must have built up on the step and the gale was blowing straight into it. With no purchase or grip on one leg, I couldn't budge it and I could see that Mam didn't want to. She needed whatever was outside to stay outside for as long as possible.

We only had a small fire but it was just doing enough to take the absolute chill out of the room. I hunched beside it; it was exactly the wrong place to be as some kind of slip on the roof sent a mass of dirt and ice cascading down the chimney, landing right in the hearth, sending a thick cloud of dust and choking filth into the kitchen. I couldn't breathe for a moment, thrust backwards onto the stone floor, gasping and blind. Mam was the same but further away: spluttering and sneezing, then sucking in air from the window.

The muck settled and we could focus again. So much for the cleaning; everything was black – worse than ever. Mam looked around hopelessly and then collapsed into her chair at the table: tears already forming thin rivers through the dust on her thin cheeks.

I dragged myself over and put my arm around her shoulders. I didn't remember when I'd got bigger than her; she felt tiny that desolate morning. I could hear her muffled sobs and feel them through the woollen scarf she'd wrapped twice around her. She was trying to stifle them but it was impossible. It was the not knowing that was the worst.

The wind breathed in for a second and we could make out words from the road: shouted, gabbled and frenzied. 'Beam's snapped. They're all trapped! Some of 'em dead.' And that last word seemed to echo back and forth from voice to voice, tossed playfully by the arrogant storm and then extinguished, flung out to sea. Dead.

As soon as Mam heard that she was out cold: sparked out by the possibility that Mark wasn't coming home, that none of them were coming home. A shard of glass dug into my palm and as I knelt to comfort her, so much as I could, the scarlet mixed with the ice. Rage in purity. Life diluted by Winter - to fade into nothing.

That's where Da' found us – an hour later: twisted around each other, my head on her shoulders. Breathing each other's air as the breeze swirled the fallen snow about the blackened pots, pans and plates.

Mark never came home.

And neither did another two hundred and three men and boys

The village was decimated that day, thirty years ago. Mark would be past fifty now, with his own bairns and grandbairns. Mam and Dad are long gone. They're all at Earsdon. There's a memorial there now with the names of the two hundred and four inscribed on the sides.

Mary and I were there today with our eldest. We called him Mark: he's fourteen now, the same age I was when it happened. It was the bearings after all; the slip on the Sunday before had weakened the supports. They'd held for four days until that terrible Thursday. And then they'd snapped and everything crashed down into the shaft as the new shift was descending. Three were killed immediately – mercifully perhaps. The rest of the lads died slowly underground, poisoned by the foul gasses, despite the best efforts of those above, Da' and Mr Chapman at the forefront day and night. Eventually they got through to them.

But it was too late.

It snowed again today and the new flakes settled on the memorial. My son stood with us and, as we readied ourselves to leave, he stepped up and cleared the inscriptions with his finger: revealing once again the name of his uncle, my brother, my parents' son and the man who my wife loved dearly when she was twenty one years old.

Mark Bell – Aged 23.