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Compensation for a Native Mineworker

Henry Trotter

Section 8.4.1—Company Policy Regarding the Death of a Native Mineworker: In the case of the accidental death of a native mineworker (e.g., by cave-in, asphyxiation, gas poisoning, drowning, machinery malfunction, electrocution, etc.) . . .

The boss locks the safety rail and signals the operator to lower us in the winch. Under iGoli, the city of gold. The steel cables, guided by iron pulleys, creak and jitter as we rapidly lower into the pits. This shaft is a thousand meters deep, running vertically through three seams of gold that we blast, chisel, and shovel. It is all we do. The men talk less and less as we descend, getting re-accustomed to breathing without air and seeing without light. And each morning, as if in ritual surrender, we look heavenward while we fall deeper and deeper into the earth. We stare up the snaking, writhing cable to the diminishing sky. Then we light the lamps and resume our chatter. The apprehension fades and we gear up for yet another day of travail. The winch comes to a halt, the cable flexes and we proceed to where we left off yesterday.

We walk through a tunnel from which others branch off. Three-man teams break off to crawl into the many little burrows. They will continue digging and drilling the rock face until they can establish a crevice in which to place dynamite. That is where I come in. The boss and I work together in the blasting, first securing a bundle in the rock, then laying out the fuse cable, and then making sure it's clear to detonate. And mind you, not just anybody gets to do this job. Either the boss has to like you a lot or fear you. Perhaps my case is different though because I inspire only shame and humiliation in him, something that he's eager to control and contain.

. . . the company shall compensate the worker's family with a reward of four rand per month for three years, but only if . . .

You see, seven months ago, the man who used to hold my position was accidentally blown up and buried by the boss who hadn't done his usual security check. The boss had assumed the guy was out of the way, when in fact he was making his routine inspection of the fuse cable near the dynamite. Boom, and down went a man who had given eight years of his life for the Company. The boss covered his negligence to the managers by stating that the worker wanted to commit suicide. He said that the worker was already dying of miner's disease, silicosis. Management bought the story, put the boss back on the crew and refused to pay the worker's family any money for his death, claiming it was his own doing. But I know what happened and the boss suspects it. Of course, no one cares if I know the truth. I cannot change anything. But I nag the boss's conscience, so he keeps me by his side. He never detonates the charge without me right next to him. But his measured severity with me is meant to be a warning, perhaps a threat, of what may come if I don't keep quiet.

We go together to work on the first charge cavity. We finished preparing it yesterday so that now all we have to do is position the bundle of dynamite sticks in the hole and blast it. I pack them in tightly and apply an adhesive to the side to keep them snug against the rock. My breathing is strained and I stifle the urge to cough. The boss watches me closely as he sips from his canteen. I reach for the fuse and look to him to see if it is OK to proceed. He nods and looks at his watch. "Ten minutes," he says.

We lay out the fuse and put ourselves at a safe distance from the charge. He sounds the horn to warn the workers to stay away from our section. They were all briefed this morning on where the explosions would be and know well enough to keep away. I pace out the length of the line back to the dynamite, checking the integrity of the fuse and its distance. When I return, the boss asks me if it is all ready. I nod. He checks the handle of the detonator and hands it over, signaling that it is time for me to connect it up. As he checks his watch again and is about to start the countdown, I start to cough violently.

I gasp for air as I lean over, searching for more oxygen. Dry heaves rack my body, my muscles tense and tingling. As my throat reaches out for breath, I extend an arm toward the boss for support. My hand finds a sweaty navel, but it is immediately thrown off by the boss who then pushes me, sending me tumbling. I hit the jagged rock floor and lay there for a moment, allowing the coughing

spell to pass. I close my eyes and slowly let my breath in out in come back.

... it is verified that the family is living in the proper tribal area and not in a township (as stipulated in the Native mineworker's contract, Section 4.1). This compensation will only be granted...

He bellows, "Fuckin' bloody Kaffir, what the hell's wrong with you?! Tryin' to touch me, you goddam monkey! I don't want any of your bloody bush diseases!"

I could feel the boss's burning eyes as he hurled his words at me. But I take my time getting up, pausing to kneel and recuperate. After a moment, he continues in a lighter tone. "You should make this your last day Kaffir. You knew this day would come, didn't you. It always does. All you Natives get miner's disease because you stay too bloody long. You spend your whole damn life in the pits just to grab a little money. And for what? To send home a blanket to your mother, a bag of snuff to your uncle, and a goat for your wife and kids that you never see anyway. What a fuckin' waste man!"

I feel the boss smile with derision as he ponders my condition. I slowly get myself up and stand again over the detonator box, a little wobbly from exhaustion. My stomach and arms are cut and bruised from the fall. The boss laughs as he steps closer and holds the lamp up to my face. I close my eyes.

He is right. I have finally gotten the dreaded sickness. *Isilikhosi*, we call it. The other workers said something about sharp underground dust that we constantly breathe in. I have known for a month now.

... after a thorough investigation has been carried out concerning the mineworker's death and only after it has been established that the death ...

I open my eyes and look at the boss who is shaking his head, illuminated by the lamp. He smirks. I glance quickly at the swinging lamp he holds high in his hand, then back to his eyes. He stops smiling and stares at me. My jaw is clenched. We face each other,

conscious of the slow passage of time.

In one quick movement, I grab the lamp he is holding up and slam it into his face, breaking the glass and slashing his temple. He is sent reeling, tripping backwards to the ground. Darkness visits immediately, the lamp extinguished, shattered. I can't see him but I hear him groaning and twisting around. One of his hands is scratching at the rock, digging his fingernails into the mountain. I reach down and search for a hot shard of glass next to the broken lamp, then move closer to where he lays. I stand over him, trembling with anxiety. I kneel down and find his face which I squeeze with my left hand. He grips my wrist with feeble might, muttering and moaning curses and appeals. I take the shard and press it to his neck and whisper, "Fuck you boss-man. This will be the last day for both of us."

With that, I bury the crystalline blade into the boss's neck and twist it back and forth. He squirms and resists but loses blood quickly. Words sputter and blood spatters from his throat. I feel his life seeping through his neck onto my hand.

When I become aware of the quiet in the inky tunnel, I know that he has passed. I hover over his body, sweating profusely. I am extremely tired. I try to relax a bit while I sit with the boss, his hand still limply holding my wrist.

After a few minutes, I get up and grope for the horn and sound it again. The second and final warning to the men. I take the boss's body by the ankles and try to drag him. He is quite heavy. I pull him down the tunnel, step by black and backward step, along the fuse line. We move back to the dynamite. I lay the boss next to the charge and go back to retrieve the detonator box.

. . . did not occur as a result of suicide or a preventable physical condition, such as silicosis, tuberculosis, etc. Compensation will only be awarded if the death is proven to have been the result of an on-site accident.

When I return and sit next to the boss, I begin to cough again. It takes a few minutes for the attack to clear. As I settle down, I think about my family in the Reserves that I have left behind. My family that I haven't seen for the past ten months. My wife who just gave birth to a child I shall never see. The other three that I've only seen

a couple of times as well. What will they think when they hear the news? I think my brother will understand. We talked about this scenario once, though fleetingly. Something winked at more than spoken. It is something that we all privately think about here on the mines. Here below the earth. Here in the maze of gold. And now, all I want is my little carat to send home.

I realize that tonight, the boss's wife will learn the news about this accident in the Company mines. They will tell her in person. A knock at the door. An apology. She too will get her compensation for her man. But she will find another to replace him in time. So will mine.

I cast a glance in the direction of the boss though I cannot see him. I put my hand on the detonator lever and smirk. I push.