

## **The Foreman's Other Diary (Third prize, Berkhamsted Writing Competition, 2014)**

### **Day 3**

The men are quiet now. Panic has faded, replaced by acceptance of a long wait. But we have faith we will be saved. We work as teams, searching for escape; rationing out the emergency supplies; sorting out the sanitation. We try to keep too busy to think. But when we rest, the scene replays in many minds: a crack of stone, a groan of splitting timbers, a warning shout, far too late, and then the roar of falling rocks. The cloud of dust choked our nostrils and we were blind for many hours. The noise seemed eternal, although it lasted just seconds. A deep silence followed, until José started wailing. Such bad luck that his first day's work might well be his last.

*My darling Sofia, I cannot bear the thought that we parted in such a way. In the three days I've been trapped here, my anger has cooled in the darkness but still I struggle to understand. Why do you want me to give up this job that makes me what I am? You were proud of your Mario when he first became foreman. 'My Mario is so good to the men,' you would say. So why should I stop while I still have the strength to earn money to feed my family?*

### **Day 10**

All thirty-three men are healthy, although their spirits fail at times. There's been no sign that rescue is possible. Is anyone even looking for us? Some talk about the company's safety record: too many accidents, too many deaths. Why were there no ladders in the ventilation shafts? But it's my duty to keep them strong. Today we made a shrine in one of the passageways. Some of the men scoff; but others need a place to pray. Young José spends a lot of time in there.

*Dearest Sofia, do you think badly of me? When I reached the corner that day, after we argued, I looked back as always, but for the first time, you were not there to wave me on my way and I realised I had not kissed you goodbye. Maybe you're tired of me, of this body, no longer as straight and tall as when we met. Do you regret the years you've spent with me, washing my soiled clothes, watching me sleep in the chair by the fire each night? I wish I could talk to you and be sure you still love me.*

## **Day 17**

The humming which has been with us for days finally became a roar today as the drill from the surface broke through. There were tears, there was laughter; hope returned to our little band, two days after the rations finally ran out. We had a service at the shrine and thanked the Virgin Mary for keeping us safe this long. We gave José the honour of writing the note we taped to the drill bit. It's the first time I've seen him smile since we left the surface.

*Sofia, my love, it is killing me: the thought that you are so close and yet we cannot touch. I imagine you waiting with the other women, your arms crossed, holding yourself tightly against the cool of the dawn and your fear. Or are you there at all? Has your anger turned you against me? My darling, I would give anything to be back with you, watching the sun go down over the Atacama Desert as we did when we were young. It seems so long ago.*

## **Day 40**

As the wait continues, our health suffers: toothache, irritations of the eye; a case of pneumonia. We are all skinny, dirty, shirtless and unshaven in the heat and humidity. But the tedium is worse. The excitement of the drill appearing, more than a month ago, has now waned. Even the joy of the rosaries from His Holiness has dimmed. Someone pointed out today that Our Blessed Lord only spent forty days and nights in the desert. They tell us we could be here another month at least. José has been running backgammon tournaments to pass the hours away.

*Dearest Sofia, I'm so tired. I have to be strong for the men; they look to me to give them comfort and tell them it'll be alright. But all I really want to do is crawl into your arms and weep, and sleep. What joy I felt to get your letter and to know our silly fight is forgiven and forgotten. It gives me strength to whisper that you could be right, as so many times you have been.*

## **Day 65**

The capsule is here. Our plans are made. God willing, tomorrow we will leave our underground prison and return to our homes once more. The sick will go first, and then one by one, the rest according to the lots they drew. I will go last, like the captain of a ship, not sinking but rising to the surface, and carrying the Virgin's statue. José refused to join the

draw. He insists he will go just before me; keeping me company to the end. He will make a fine leader, that young man.

*Sofia, my darling, there's just a few hours left until I hold you in my arms once more. And tomorrow I'll be sixty-five. I've never cared about birthdays, since I was a child, but you always make a fuss of mine, the children's and your own. We will party this year like never before; and there will be thirty-two other guests of honour. I do not know what your gift to me will be, but this time I have a gift for you. I've worked here in the dark, since my father took me down the copper mine when I was just fifteen. This is not an old man's life. It's time I came back into the light and began to live my life with you, my love.*