

Double Jack Slip Jig

LORI ANDERSON MOSEMAN

I ver Svenson, the shaker, squats. Bare-handed, he pins a steel rod in quartz and waits for Hank Cornish, the driller, to strike with his twelve-pound maul. Their hole, only eleven inches deep, needs to double in length before they can fill it with black powder. When they blow ore to bits, this tunnel will reek of sulfur and arsenic.

The duo, Morey Mine's double jack champs, can sustain a strike per second when prize money is at stake. Today, Hank's blows fall slow.

"Double-time it," begs Iver.

"Patience, boy. You'll get to stand for hours when we drive the iron dogs."

Their task—setting timbers to shore up the newest shaft in the Magnolia vein—is not a simple job in swelling waste rock. The tunnel, over 200 feet down, is hotter than the Nevada desert above them, so they work shirtless.

In the candlelight, Hank's sweat glistens as if his torso has been slathered in wound honey. Iver watches Hank's gut muscles struggle: without the momentum speed affords, Hank shakes to control his sledgehammer for each full arc.

A lesser man could not hit his target at such slow speeds.

“Show-off!” Iver yanks the drill rod out of position so Hank has to quick-jerk his maul upward before it hits the ground.

“What is eating you, kid?”

“Time’s passage,” says Iver. “I am eighteen years old today.”

“So, you’re a man now. Like me.”

Hank, a virtuoso fiddler, won’t risk his hands with any double jack except Iver, who is agile enough to foster: Iver can rotate the drill rod, release it, pick his own sledge—poised to swing before Hank’s last blow rings out. Changing places every thirty seconds, they can keep their pounding damn near continuous.

Iver watches a sweat bead run across Hank’s chest. “I don’t want to *be* you, fool. I want to be *with* you, to keep time.” He whistles the hornpipe they played—with mandolin and fiddle—for the finale at last Saturday’s fandango.

Smiling, Hank takes off a felt skullcap and runs his calloused hands over his thinning hair. Balding young, he keeps his stance broad and brawny even when underground.

“You ever work on the surface, Hank?” Iver asks, “Ever hydro-mine? As a kid, I watched water drop a thousand feet, then funnel into a spout that pummeled igneous. Nozzle’s fickle force ripped tendons from my pa’s wrist back in ’63. That’s why he quit mining. You ever think of quitting, Hank? Your dirge-slow hammering makes me think you are winding down to quit for good.”

“Set that steel. Don’t spook my sledge by talking of the dead.”

“*Stocks up, stocks down / I owned three feet in the Old Dead Beat,*” Iver sings a miner’s brag, tapping his toes while keeping his hands steady.

In a long, brute stroke, Hank swings his hammer up, holds it high, letting the maul menace overhead.

The pause causes Iver to look up: Hank’s ears have gone as red as a Tommyknocker’s. His eyes ignite like matchsticks flashing: *danger, danger*. Iver scours the candle’s radius for rats. If ground is shifting, rodents will race the shaft. He listens for their scurrying on the bedrock beyond. He sees nothing, but Hank’s face remains alarm red.

Then, nine whistles signal mine collapse.

Ready to be rescuers, the duo balances six timbers on a crude wheelbarrow. If there's fire, they'll build a brattice in the drift to close off the winze above the blaze. Iver pushes the wheelbarrow from behind, steers; Hank stabilizes the lumber load. They can't yet hear miners pounding for help; they can only follow faint smoke that taints a billowing dust.

If only some fool hadn't left tools on the track . . . Their wheelbarrow jams, jolts, tumbles. Iver's body falls on top of Hank's. Contact is brief, fully charged.

"My leg is trapped," Hank voice is tenuous.

Iver springs to his feet, flails to free him by tossing timbers carelessly aside. Then the rock roof caves. Rubble buries them both, sucks air out of sound. Ribs crack. Hank's lung now a bucket with a hole. Punctured, Iver's right arm could bleed a river.

Nine whistles blow again.

Only Iver hears them. Clapper bolted in a bell, Iver's tongue clucks a jig to drown out the knowledge that Hank is dead. Dread sinks Iver into a sea shanty: "*Schooner's stranded, mate, between surf and reef. Pump her dry.*"

Tucking Hank's hands heart-height, Iver pulls his torso to his own. Then, by force of will, Iver stands up—four-legged beast.

Swinging his right foot outside Hank's feet, Iver gathers Hank's legs together. Then Iver kicks Hank's boot onward with his left foot. Over and over.

Four feet down the shaft, Iver hums a Swedish hambo, a lilting couple dance that limps, rests, limps. As the gent turns, his partner holds, waits—a dip, then a lift. A sudden sorrow. A lunge.

Push, lift, pivot on a heel, clockwise, turn, turn. Iver spins until Hank's body's sways light as a willow sapling.

