

# MINER HYMNAL

*Brenna Maxey*

They kept the windows open for a week after Ira died.

Catherine didn't understand the custom. She watched with thinly veiled disdain as they hung a sheet over the single tarnished mirror in his room, the bottom of the discolored fabric swaying in the November breeze.

The morning after he died, John woke her and told her to dress; they were to go to the camp and pay their respects to his widow. Catherine hadn't wanted to—she'd seen too much death in recent months—but her husband was insistent. Ira had been in the mines since John was a child, and his wife had always been kind to Catherine. It wouldn't be proper for her to hide away in her house on the hill forever.

She insisted on taking the car down, as her shoes were not meant for the uneven terrain of the Appalachian mountains; the instability, of course, had nothing to do with the glass of brandy she had downed at breakfast. John had only given her a tired look.

Vernon, the foreman, drove her down.

They'd opened all the windows in the house before she'd arrived, all wrapped in sable, half-lidded, hanging off of her husband's arm. Her face bloated with the sun—it swelled in the morning with her

brandy and set with the number of cold creams she rubbed into the skin of her face and neck before bed. At night, she studied her face at the vanity; the months of furred brows and the ritual puffiness had creased thin lines into her fair skin at only thirty-two.

"It's freezing, John," she said, tugging his arm, "can't we close the window?"

He shook her off gently, "It's custom, Catherine. The windows will stay open for a week, so his soul isn't trapped."

Catherine only pressed her lips together. A useless practice, she thought—Ira had died in the mines, what good would windows do his soul now? His widow, an old woman with a pinch pot mouth, dabbed at her wrinkled face with a ratty slip of cloth.

"I'm sorry, Omie," John said, offering her his handkerchief. Catherine caught a glimpse of the embroidery as it switched hands, the initials 'CL' and 'JMC' entwined with painstakingly stitched flowers. She'd recreated her wedding bouquet on the fabric: lilies, baby's breath, violets artfully arranged on the muslin square.

"He wouldn't've wanted it any other way," the widow, Omie, sniffed. "My Ira knew what 'e was doin'." She wiped her nose with the initials; the 'C' came away smudged with mucus and coal dust.

“My condolences, Mrs. Slacum. I will pray for you both,” she forced out.

“Thank you, Mrs. McCannon.”

“Cat,” John’s hand slid to her lower back, giving her a gentle push forward, “would you walk Omie down to the hall? The women are gathering to cook a dinner in Ira’s honor.”

Catherine’s jaw clenched, but she gave a stiff nod. Vernon opened the door for her, and the two women filed out into the brisk morning air.

The walk would’ve been easy for anyone else, but Omie’s joints were stiff and the chill wasn’t helping, and Catherine’s little heeled boots caught every rock in the ground. They moved at a glacial pace, made slower by Omie’s droning. She prattled on about Ira and lanterns and the proper way to peel potatoes, as if Catherine would ever deign to pick up a knife and toil over vegetables.

When they arrived, Catherine excused herself as Omie hobbled into a chorus of sympathies from the women. She dug around in her little purse until her fingers wrapped around the ornate cigarette case she’d inherited from her grandmother.

“Catherine!” Eula called, waving her over. “Come sit a spell.”

Catherine bristled at the unwelcome familiarity. “Mrs. Dawkins,” she greeted, striking a match and lifting her cigarette lamely in excuse. Eula, it seemed, took the gesture as welcoming, and joined her on the porch.

She took a drag to hide an exasperated huff, her eyes lifting to the obnoxious shade of blue on the porch. “An interesting choice,”

Catherine mused, smoke curling around her fingertips as she gestured to the ceiling.

“Y’all don’t paint your porches in New York?” Eula leaned over the railing, stretching herself out like a cat. She was pretty, if in some simple way. Her dark hair needed a trim, but it was full and long, and her coal-black eyes swallowed all light. She was the foreman’s wife, and a bit daft, in Catherine’s opinion, but the closest thing she had to company.

Catherine sniffed. “No, we don’t have porches.”

“It keeps haints out,” she explained, straightening up. “The blue,” she waved her arm, “is like water. They can’t cross it. They’ll put up newspapers, sometimes, too. They read and forget what they’re doin’.”

“Haints?”

“Spirits,” Eula mused, a wry smile on her lips. “There’re lots in these hills. Women who wander the mountains at night with lanterns, lookin’ for dead husbands. Miners, too, whose souls got lost tryin’ to leave the mines. People who haven’t fully gone to God, y’know? We open the windows and cover the mirrors so they ain’t trapped here.”

Catherine flicked the ash off onto the railing. “A priest would serve just as well.”

“Our reverend drinks shine and stumbles into Sunday service. You won’t find God when you’re diggin’ to hell.” Her voice got low. “They won’t tell you this, because it’s against God, but they take tins of morphine down there. Just in case.”

“Are you implying that Ira—,” Eula cut her off before she could finish.

“Might’ve. Better that than whatever else’s down there.” A woman inside called for her, and Eula pulled away from the railing, smoothing out her dusty skirt. “Don’t tell Omie,” she added, turning back to Catherine. “She’s a woman of God.”

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John stayed down in the camp to handle the day’s paperwork, but Catherine fled to her secluded house on the hill as soon as she was able. The sun was low in the sky when he finally returned, finely dusted in a layer of black powder.

“Change,” Catherine didn’t even glance up from whatever she was pretending to read. “I will not have this house covered in coal.”

John didn’t fight, just kicked his boots off at the door and trudged into their bedroom. She took a drag from her cigarette. The ornate gold bangle on her wrist clinked. It had been her mother’s, once, though she had no memories of her wearing it—jewelry was prohibited in mourning at that time.

Her mother had endured a rest cure when Catherine was still a girl—melancholia, she heard them whisper, while hidden at the top of the staircase. She couldn’t have been more than seven, but she remembered watching the Lady Linton descend the staircase in the foyer for the last time. Her beautiful mother, with her fair hair and sculpted wrists... Catherine had few memories of her from before the dark mourning veils took her face.

Was this what her mother had felt? This deep, gnawing despair, a despondency she could not drink away. Catherine glanced up at the painting on the wall, her mother’s work. She shared her face, her grey eyes,

her fair hair; would she be damned to share her fate?

Her eyes flicked downward when she heard his footsteps returning, and only lifted when he turned his back to her to pour himself a glass from the crystalline decanter. It clinked softly when he set it down.

“I know this has been hard on you,” he finally said. Catherine tapped her thin cigarette on the lip of the ashtray.

“You moved me away from my daughter. From my family, my friends, my home—”

“We didn’t have a choice. My grandfather gave us a good price on this—”

“My father would have given you another factory if I had asked. We could have stayed in New York, with Eleanor, with—”

“What were you going to do, waste away at her grave until we put you in next to her? She was my daughter, too.”

She half coughed, half choked on a sob, dropping the cigarette into the ashtray as she seized. John was kneeling at her side in a heartbeat.

He carded his fingers through the loose strands of her fair hair, careful not to catch the tangles too hard. She had grown thin in the past few years—she never truly recovered from the birth of their daughter—but she was near frail now.

He could still remember the night they met. How she’d danced in the ballroom, her father’s only daughter, the diamonds at her throat glittering in the candlelight. At twenty-six, she had been late to wed, and then there was talk as to the punctuality of their wedding—in the end, it hadn’t matt-

ered, they had lost the child a month later.

“We’ll take some time off, take a train to Schenectady, see your brother and father. I promise.”

Catherine only sank forward, resting her head on his shoulder. They stayed there in silence for a few moments, til their breathing matched. He led her to their bedroom, watched her plait her hair, and stayed with her til she was sleeping.

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She dreamt of the miner’s widow.

Her face was shrouded by a black veil, but the hunched back and short stature were unmistakably Omie’s. In her liver-spotted hand hung a lantern, much like the one her husband would have brought down to the mines with him. She wandered the woods on the hillside, her lantern lighting the way.

Compelled to follow, Catherine did, trailing after the woman at a distance. She prattled as she oft did, but only about Ira. His bootprints, she said, were in the dirt. He had been here. He wasn’t gone. Catherine couldn’t see any bootprints; the world around her was hazy and tinged with shadows.

The shade rounded a tree and shed the widow’s form, taking the tall and austere shape of a Victorian woman in deep mourning. Catherine could still remember how the stiff crepe of her mother’s dark veils scratched her cheeks when she went to hug her as a girl.

The late Lady Linton lifted the light to her veiled eyes. She didn’t speak, only spread her arms to her daughter. Catherine nearly threw herself into her arms. She held her,

clung to the fabric of her mother’s dress like a child. The fabric grew softer and the frame shortened as the shade took a new form. Catherine stiffened, tried to pull away to look at the new form, but could not break its grasp.

Eula, beautiful, black-eyed Eula, sank her fingers into Catherine’s arms. Again, she tried to wrench herself away, to escape the woman’s suffocating embrace, but she would not release her. She only smiled before shoving Catherine into the mines below.

She woke clutching at the bedsheets. John didn’t stir, just shifted deeper into the pillow. She watched his chest rise and fall beneath the blanket, a slow, steady rhythm. She could count it like a waltz—inhale, two, three—accompanied by a symphony of cicadas—exhale, two, three. How long had it been since she saw him sleeping? He always rose before she did, and she was always too busy reading before bed to mind his sleeping form.

She would watch Eleanor sleep. That first night, after everyone left, they hadn’t known what to do with the swaddled baby in their home. Catherine had spent every waking hour at her cradle, counting her breaths for fear she’d suddenly stop. She did the same in the days before her passing, when Eleanor couldn’t breathe without coughs racking her tiny frame. It was all so sudden—John took the first train home, but he arrived hours after her passing.

She couldn’t imagine a world without him now. She fought the urge to run her fingers through his dark hair, smooth the sleep-tousled curls against his forehead, but she didn’t dare wake him. It was only twilight, she would leave him another hour of peace.

She rose silently and took her coat and cigarette case to the porch.

It was colder than she would have liked, the coat not enough to keep the chill from sinking through her white nightgown. It took her two tries to light the cigarette; her hands, stiff from sleep and cold, fumbled with the lighter.

In another life, they could have been happy here. She could have been like Eula, content to gather stinging nettle to make tea for the arthritic women and black psyllium for snake bites, peeling potatoes til her hands were cracked and bloody. Would John have loved her if she had calloused hands? She thought of Eula's, her spindly fingers, tree sap running down the rivulets of the bones of her hands as she collected the soft inner tree bark.

The image dissolved with the curling smoke from the butt of her cigarette. It twisted upward, mingling with the breath she exhaled til the vapors entwined. A strange stillness settled over her, watching the smoke climb the sky. The sun was beginning to spill over the horizon. She let her gaze fall.

Eyes. There, in the trees, shimmering like emeralds in the light. A large feline form slunk just out of the tree line. It sprang forward on six legs, not four.

"John," she called, "John!" She flew away from the railing and into the heavy door. It yowled behind her as she slammed it shut. "John!" She screamed again, throwing herself into their bedroom. She shook his shoulders with such fervor that her hair came loose from her braid.

"Christ, Catherine," he groaned, shaking her off.

"John, there's something out there. It was a cougar, or a panther, or something, but it had six legs. Six! And the eyes," she gripped his shoulders once more. "It was horrible. Horrible!"

John just pressed his hand to his eyes. "Cat, there are mountain lions in the hills, but they won't come this close to the camp. It's early, it's dark, you imagined it."

"I know what I saw. Get your gun, I want it dead."

John only sighed and shifted her off of him. To Catherine's chagrin, he took his time shrugging on his coat and lacing his boots. He took the rifle from the wall and sleepily trudged through the house. He pushed the curtains back, cringing at the light, but looked out before opening the door.

"Nothing, Cat," he said, looking out into the placid morning. Beneath him, her half-lit cigarette blossomed where she'd dropped it in her panic. He smothered it with his boot heel. "You could've started a fire."

"I swear to you, I saw it—"

"You haven't been sleeping, it was a trick of the light." He ignored her further protests. A sudden flash of movement from the corner of her eye had Catherine reaching for the barrel of his gun. It was only Vernon, smudges of coal already painting his face. When John looked at her hand, wrapped firmly about the gun, there was nothing in his eyes. He shook her off, taking the gun down the stairs with him to speak with Vernon.

She had seen that look in her father. It was her father that sent her mother away. Was John capable of the same? Ship his sick wife away to rot in isolation, take a new one,

one who knew the hills? Would she wear her things? Talk of his melancholic first wife down at the camp while Catherine's bracelets clanked on her wrists? Sleep in *her* bed, smoke *her* cigarettes...

She watched white-knuckled. Vernon shook his head, John said something, Vernon shook his head again. Were they talking about her? Deciding what to do with her? The two men nodded, and John returned. Vernon stayed below.

"The cage is broken," he huffed, rubbing his temples. "I've got to go down and look at it, see if we can't do anything to fix it."

She only nodded. He looked as if he were going to speak again, but he said nothing. John only pressed his lips to her temple and told her he'd be back in the afternoon.

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The mine collapsed shortly after ten.

A worker struck a pocket laced with pyrite, and his pickaxe sparked, igniting the firedamp in the cavern. Afterdamp came from the firedamp, rich in carbon monoxide, strangling the oxygen from the lungs of the burned, twisted men who weren't lucky enough to die in the initial explosion.

The camp was pandemonium: men ran with damp rags held to their mouths, watching the plumes spiral into the sky like God had put out a cigarette on the side of the mountain. When the papers were drawn up, they counted sixty dead. Fifty-nine miners, and John McCannon.

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Her fingers trailed absently over the stit-

ches, the flowers of her thread bouquet preserved forever. The last time she'd embroidered had been for her Eleanor, an everblooming garden to follow her into the earth and clothe her in petals for eternity. Would she have to do another, a handkerchief to place in an empty coffin?

Vernon waited for the other shoe to drop, for her to wail and throw herself to the ground, but she only clutched the cloth with shaking hands. She set the handkerchief aside only to down the rest of her glass. Wordlessly, he poured her another.

"You know why we left New York, don't you?" Catherine asked, gingerly lifting the crystal glass—a wedding gift from her aunt, the finery now out of place in the Appalachian forest.

"I don't, ma'am."

"The factory went under. We took what was left of my inheritance and bought this godforsaken place before she was cold in the ground. Our daughter passed in early spring. She was four." She watched the dark liquid swirl in her glass.

He had known, of course. "I'm dreadful sorry, Mrs. McCannon."

"My family has always had ill luck, I suppose. I had a brother who died in infancy from diphtheria. It destroyed my mother. As a girl, I never understood why she had changed so suddenly. But," her fingers tightened, "I lost my Eleanor, and I knew why my mother was the way she was."

John didn't like to talk about it."

"No. He wasn't there." She drank deeply, bitter notes in both the whiskey and the words. "We had too much grief in too little



time. The factory burned down two days after Eleanor died. And, now he's moved us here. There isn't even gold in these mountains," Catherine sniffed. "I had gold from my grandmother. Earrings, necklaces, all sold for this."

He remembered how out of place she'd looked that morning on the train platform: a tall, austere woman in cleanly pressed linen, everything about her severe. John had been friendly, happy to be back in the mountains he'd grown up in, and Catherine was an afterthought, luggage brought along on a rickety train. Eula'd brought gossip home that night about the new lady of the camp: the former Miss Linton had grown up in a mansion in Manhattan with maids and coaches and valets. Rumor had it that her father made \$192 a week off of his factories, and that wasn't counting the generational wealth the Lintons apparently held.

How small she looked now, a diamond set in cheap metal, clinging to her crystal glasses as if they could restore her to her former finery.

"It doesn't matter now," Catherine conceded, setting the glass down with a clink. She fidgeted in her seat, shifting her weight uncomfortably as she struggled to settle into the cushion. "Clinging to the past will not bring it back. My mother died shortly after Thomas did, and I thought I'd die with Eleanor. I begged them to bury me with her. 'Put me in with her,' I said. 'She doesn't like the dark, she needs her mother.'"

The silence lingered.

"John wanted us here, and here we are."

"We'll try, Mrs. McCannon." He stayed intentionally vague—they might be able to

recover his watch or his boots, but Vernon knew there wouldn't be a body.

Catherine hummed a single note in response, but it was clear she wasn't listening. Her gaze had fallen on the window.

The mining camp had settled into an uneasy sleep, half of the inhabitants somewhere below, blanketed in soot and lulled by the bell-like sound of drops of water falling from stalactites. She remembered what Eula said, about miners and morphine...

He wouldn't, she decided. He would return as a Lazarus, back from that sweltering underground hell.

Faint lights—lanterns, she supposed—danced in the trees. They wove through the spruces and the hickory trees as if to taunt her, winking as they passed behind the leaves.

"I thought you weren't sending any men out tonight?" She asked, watching the lanterns wind up the side of the mountain.

"I didn't." Vernon rose from his seat an inch, peering to where Catherine's gaze was fixed. "Why d'you ask?"

"The lanterns."

"It's just the candlelight, Mrs. McCannon, from your table." He lingered in wait for a response, but the woman said nothing. She watched the window with an unreadable countenance, one that unnerved Vernon, though he couldn't say why.

He took his coat and left her to her thoughts.

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It was Eula's idea to visit Catherine the next morning. She packed a small basket with bundles of sage and maypop and a jar of a honey and whiskey tonic that she had mixed that morning to soothe the poor woman's nerves.

Vernon, without realizing it, had consented to join her over breakfast; he'd been chewing a particularly thick piece of bacon and nodding along to whatever Eula was saying without truly listening. In truth, he hadn't wanted to see the widow again. Her face in the window haunted him; he could still see the candlelight dancing in her grey eyes, and something in his bones told him she had stayed there even after the wax had burned out, til nothing was reflected in those eyes but the dark mountainside.

Eula wasn't perturbed—she'd helped many a miner's widow through the weeks following a death—and had him shooed out the door moments later, still working on that piece of bacon.

They meandered up the path, stopping every so often for Eula to sift through the foliage for anything she was low on. There was a doctor in town, but no one in the camp could afford that. He was only called for in dire straits, and even then, there was oft little he could do. Eula filled that gap. The women of her family knew the land and had passed their knowledge down through the daughters, leaving a wealth of herbal knowledge.

Vernon had seen her talk warts off of hands and break a baby's fever with boneset, and many a miner had benefited from a bundle of ginseng and tobacco that was believed to help with black lung, but he wasn't sure that her tonics would save Catherine. He tried to warn her of this on their walk but she wouldn't hear it.

Eula was on the third verse of a somewhat flat rendition of "Lorena" when they rounded the path up to the house. All the windows were swung open, with no sign of the heavy curtains Catherine had brought from New York to keep out the chill. Vernon frowned, gesturing for Eula to stay back. She furrowed her dark brows but took a step away from the porch.

The stairs groaned under his boots. The door, slightly ajar, creaked as he pushed against it. There were papers everywhere. Torn from books, magazines—Vernon recognized a passage from the Book of Mark—even letters, all plastered on the walls. John's handwriting, in ledgers and notes, and what could only have been Catherine's: a thin, sprawling script whose ornamentation was near illegible to him. Diary entries, maybe, dates scrawled on the upper corner of each page.

"Mrs. McCannon?" Vernon called, taking another step into the foyer. He was careful to avoid the overturned bookshelf at the entrance to the living room.

The room reeked of cigarettes. Books were everywhere, discarded like old toys around her. She was at the center of it all, an ill-fitting evening gown slouching off her shoulders. It was wrinkled, a gaudy blush color, and the force with which she moved threatened to rip the fragile fabric. She had done her hair at some point, it seemed, but the pins were loose and strands tumbled from the updo. Her beautiful copy of *Dracula* was her current victim. She wrenched the pages from the spine with fervor, tossing them into a pile to be put on the wall.

"Mrs. McCannon," he repeated. A pin flew from her hair as she whipped around. It landed somewhere in the graveyard of books sprawled about her. He knelt slowly,



arms out so as not to startle her.

“Don’t just stand there,” she snapped, shoving the crinkled papers up at him. “Put these up, now. They were here last night,” she whispered, her nails digging into her arms. “That damned widow. Your witch of a wife. They won’t leave. Where is my rosary?”

Vernon lifted a book and pushed the beads towards Catherine. She grabbed it, pressed the cross to her lips, and reached for another book.

The door creaked. Eula had crept in, basket tucked in the crook of her arm. Even she could not hide her shock at the state of the widow’s home. Catherine’s eyes slid from his and landed on his wife. Her face took on the glassy countenance of the night before.

“Get out. Get out!” She screamed, hurling the carcass of a hardback at the woman. “Get out!”

A book clipped Vernon’s shoulder. Eula tried to move closer, but her husband stopped her, pushing her out the door just in time for another book to sail past them.

“I’ll take her to town in the morning,” Vernon’s voice was low. “She needs a doctor.”

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It came as a surprise when one of the workers pounded on his door late in the night. Eula stirred beside him, mumbling if everything was okay, but he quieted her. At this hour, it was likely only a drunken fight between miners, especially with tensions running high. A small crowd had gathered around the canteen near his house, all half-dressed and half-asleep.

Mrs. McCannon, clothed in a dressing gown and silk robe, thrashed against the hold of two of the workers. Silver glinted in the moonlight at her feet—John’s knife, he realized, from the carvings on the handle.

She struggled weakly, her narrow chest rising and falling sharply with her shallow breaths. He had seen this look before—a doe, wounded, not yet dead, in the moments of madness before the hunter delivered the final shot. Her grey eyes, so often half-lidded and glazed over, sparked with an inhuman disquiet.

He held out his arm, gesturing for the crowd that was beginning to gather to disperse. “Mrs. McCannon,” he started, extending his free arm to her, “it’s alright.”

“Let me go, I need to go to him,” she thrashed against their hold again. Vernon nodded and the men released her, though warily.

“Mrs. McCannon,” he said again, taking another step closer. He moved again, finally catching the blade of the knife under his boot; if she reached for it again, disarming her wouldn’t be trouble, but it would only serve to stress her out more.

“No,” she snarled. Her fingers bunched in the fabric of her robe, her skin nearly translucent in the moonlight.

“Catherine.”

“I can’t, I don’t know, I, it was there, and,” she couldn’t find the words to finish. Her eloquence, her propriety, all had escaped her.

“Let’s get you into the office, it’s too cold,” Vernon said, taking her thin arms and steering her away from her ramblings.

“We’ll get you home soon.”

“I can’t,” she repeated, “it’s gone.” Weakened from the struggle, she allowed herself to be led away.

When he had her safely in the office, sat in one of the old chairs, he called over another man. “I’ll get Eula to come down and stay with her,” Vernon muttered, glancing over to where the slip of a woman sat. “She ain’t well.”

It wasn’t long before Eula swept into the room in a flurry of ‘oh, Catherines,’ and sighs of sympathy that would have normally driven the woman mad. She let her rub her arms and brush her hair back and spew her sympathies. Catherine wanted to snap, to shake the woman and tell her she was wrong, that John had escaped through another exit, that he was coming home, but words did not come. A strange silence had settled over her. Eula finally released her an hour or so later, settling to sleep on the chair opposite her.

There were no lanterns dotting the side of the mountain tonight.

John was still out there, and there was no light for him to follow. They’d damned him to die in the dark, the fools, why hadn’t they sent anyone? It didn’t matter—Catherine knew. Her light would guide him down the mountain, back to the house they shared. They’d be back before Eleanor woke, and if she did, Catherine would brush and braid her hair and send her back to bed. Everything would be as it was.

Her bare feet made no sound on the wooden floor of the office. Eula slept in the old chair. A train sounded in the distance, the wampus cat snarled. The world moved as it always did. Catherine wrapped her

shoulders in the sable she’d gifted him the day they married.

She took the lantern from the porch and walked into the woods.

