

Meg Flannery

## The Frank Slide

*A month after the devastating rockslide hit Frank, Canada, Charlie the Horse was found alive in the mine having survived on rancid water and bark from the timbers holding up the passageways.*

—“Frank Still Reeling,” May 1904

Glenn Carter said he lost his wife in the slide. Nobody questioned him. It was a sad time for everyone and the rockslide had been unpredictable—Sam Ennis and his family were trapped in their house, which rolled over three times, but they escaped with only a few bruises and an overturned house. The three Clark girls came out alive too, but their mother, father, and four brothers were lost.

Glenn was lucky; he was supposed to take Charlie the Horse up into the tunnels to collect the chunks of stockpiled coal, but he didn't go to the mine that morning like he said he would. He didn't see the slide or hear it coming like some others said they did. Glenn remembers feeling it though, that's what he said.

He was down at the saloon. It wasn't open at that time in the morning, but Bart kicked him out around two and he spent the next two hours passed out in the alley, head slumped on the boardwalk. Glenn doesn't like to drink. And he knows that the others don't like to drink with him because he's a sad drunk and

they don't need a sad drunk complaining about his wife, life, and the bitter taste of bourbon when they are trying to forget about the same things. Mickey Baker was the only one that ever sat with Glenn willingly. He had come in with the group from Calgary and had known Glenn for a while. He left for Seattle the morning of the slide, actually making through on the plan they all had when they came to Frank.

Glenn had taken in the surprised faces when he walked into the saloon around eleven that night. He started with a straight whiskey and kept going until Bart wanted to close. He told Glenn to go home to his wife.

But Glenn was lucky. He didn't go home and he didn't go to work that morning at four like he was supposed to. He lied in the dirt with his head against the boardwalk. That's how he felt the slide before he heard it. The vibrations woke him up. It was still dark, the sun hadn't come up yet and Glenn was still drunk. He thought something was coming out from the ground—that the earth was splitting and he would fall in. He opened his eyes and saw dark shapes. They were sporadic. Running around the just empty streets. Dark shapes that were screeching and moaning things he didn't understand. His hands felt numb and his legs cold and itchy, like his feet were being rubbed with the dandy brush he used to brush down the horses. He watched the shapes. His head lolled against the boardwalk and the vibrations stopped. A shape started for him, tall and lanky, moving fast. The prickling in his feet moved up his legs and his body seized up.

“Carter! Carter! The mountain—there was an explosion or something,” yelled the company store clerk. He was half-dressed, hair askew and shaking Glenn. “Get up, do you hear me? There was a rockslide.”

Glenn was still confused. It was dark and he was drunk and sad and mostly asleep. But the shopkeeper slapped him and told him to get up. His head hit the boardwalk when the clerk let him go. Glenn could hear him yelling something about the mine. The shapes started to look like people he knew. He blinked, a lot, and

struggled to get up. The tingles left his body in prickly waves. He used the boardwalk for balance and pulled himself up and out of the alley where the air was dusty and people were still running around. His head hurt.

Glenn heard snippets of conversation: *Westside of the mountain. The tracks are under. Men trapped. Johnny! Has anyone seen my Johnny? Eastside is buried.*

Glenn and his wife lived on the eastside of town. He started running. The dust was bad and the air was thick and gray with it. His feet still felt numb, as if blunt needles were brushing against his soles. He tripped, hitting the ground faster than he thought he should. It was rocky and crumbling beneath his weight. He'd reached where the slide had stopped.

"Carter! Stop, don't go over there," someone yelled from behind him. Glenn had started climbing up the rocky slope at that point—reaching out and grasping for leverage, but he kept slipping on the limestone. He heard people yelling for him to stop, but he had to see if the house was still there. He felt someone pulling him, tugging at his shirt and arms. Glenn kept climbing and fighting and felt his elbow hit something hard. The tugging stopped and Glenn tried to look out over the rubble and dust. He couldn't really see anything, but Glenn wanted to know if his house was still there. He wanted to know if his wife was still in it.

"Carter!" He heard someone yell from below. "Carter—you have to come down, it's all gone."

Glenn looked down at one of his neighbors. He was standing with his wife. She was crying and he was rubbing his jaw. Glenn looked back towards the debris and dust that littered his neighborhood. The sun was coming up and the orange streaked over the gray landscape and seeped through the dust in the air.

"Mabel was in there," Glenn called down to the couple. He wanted them to know that she was buried in the house. Not because he wanted them to understand his grief, but because he didn't want them to know that he had killed her the night before.

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Glenn Carter's wife was from Calgary. He met her when he moved there from a small farming town. He didn't have any family, never did really. His mother died when he was born and his father spent the rest of his days farming and dying slowly.

Glenn never wanted anything much out of life. He wasn't very good at farming and people were getting tired of helping him so he moved to the city. He found simple work in a canning factory and stayed in a boarding house next door with the other workers. That's where he met Mickey. Tall and sharp, Mickey saw a project in Glenn.

"You coming out tonight, Carter?" Mickey had asked Glenn one night. Glenn only shrugged.

"Yeah, you're coming out tonight, Carter."

That was the night Glenn met Mabel. Glenn was shy, but Mickey knew her and Mabel gave Glenn some attention.

"So you're friends with Mickey?"

"I guess."

"Well, he's a good one to know," Mabel said looking around the bar. Glenn hummed into his drink. He'd only had one and it was half full and the glass was warm under his palms. He was hunched over, elbows on the table. Mickey had told him to lean forward, look interested, but he kept looking at the scuffmarks and rings that charted the table.

"You know, I don't need to wait around for this. There are plenty of others I could talk to tonight or any other."

“I’m sorry.” He waited for her to leave, expected it really. He was built like a farmer, brawny and callused. He wasn’t as tall as the other guys. Glenn thought that she was sort of pretty with her dark hair and big eyes. Her lips were thin and made her look angry and they sort of disappeared when she smiled, but still when she smiled, Glenn was pretty amazed.

“Just get me another drink.”

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After the dust cleared, Glenn could see a hill of limestone and dirt in place of his house. He waited there until he was sure. The dust had settled for the most part and Glenn could feel it sticking to his skin. His head was itchy with it and his eyes hurt, but these were things he was used to from working in a mine—it was just intensified.

Glenn waited longer than the others. Most went looking for help and a clean cloth. Some were dragged away crying and others walked away with wide eyes and blank expressions. When he was sure, Glenn made his way down to the street, careful this time of the slippery limestone. He found himself around other people soon, surrounded by apologies and subjected to pats on the back. It wasn’t till later that Glenn asked about the stables.

“They’re gone, yeah, lost,” answered a man nearby. Glenn saw that his hands and face were smudged clean, but his shoes and clothes were still coated in dust.

“And the horses?” coughed Glenn.

“Assumin’ they’re lost too.”

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Glenn had always known that Mabel hated Frank. She'd told him plenty of times that she wanted to go to Seattle. It was why she agreed to go to Frank in the first place. She said it was closer to the border and, therefore, closer to her goal of moving to America.

The Canadian-American Coal and Coke Company had just opened the plant and had other mines in Northwest America. It was Mickey's idea to go. He'd heard about the mine needing men and convinced some of the guys from the cannery that this was their chance. Glenn didn't want to go. He didn't like the idea of working in a mountain. But Mabel thought it would be better than working in a factory.

"I told you I wanted to go to Seattle."

"Mabel..." Glenn had sighed. He'd just gotten back from a late shift at the factory and she was waiting for him in their room in the boarding house.

"No, I told you I wanted to go to Seattle. They have streetcars there and—"

"They're building streetcars here—"

"Was I done talking, Glenn?"

Glenn's face burned.

"Seattle is more established than Calgary," Mabel had started again. She was sitting at the small table she fit in the corner by the window. Glenn thought it made the place more cramped. She put doilies on it and a mirror. There was one chair.

"It's Fancier. I heard they might have one of those big expositions in a year or two, you know like the one they're having in St. Louis? We don't do stuff like that up here. And they have timber and mine work there, a lot for a man like you to do, simple easy work. Will you stop twisting that damn hat, Glenn, you'd choke the thing if it had any breath."

Glenn put the hat on his head.

“We’re indoors, Glenn.”

Glenn took the hat off his head and put it on the dresser. His hands were moist and he cracked his knuckles.

“I hate it when you do that,” Mabel groaned. “It’s too loud in this little room. A man and wife should not have to live in such a dingy hole. When we go with Mickey to this Frank place, we’ll have a house and you’ll have a good-paying job and we’ll save and go to Seattle. I already told Mickey you’d go.”

“Mabel—”

“No, Glenn. I want to go to Seattle. I am going to Seattle.”

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Glenn had never minded the work too much. Mabel was right, it was easy and he fit in the tunnels better than the others. He didn’t have to bend over as much as them, but the dark still got to him. He liked working with the horses, though. The boss had him do that a lot. He steered them through the tunnels and jimmed the carts they dragged back into place if they got stuck.

He’d had a bad day in the mine two days before the slide. The boss had him working farther in where the light wasn’t as strong. Glenn normally didn’t mind if he had a horse with him, but he was sent alone. He didn’t show up to his post. He tripped and his lamp shattered and his hands and knees hurt from where he scraped them. He could feel the gravel sticking to his sweaty palms. It wasn’t loud where he was, but the random knocks and the soft whistling of the wind creeping through the mine kept him on edge in the dark. Glenn wasn’t sure how long he sat huddled against the wall until the group of men found him, but when he

looked up and saw their dirty faces staring down at him, white eyes popping out beneath black stains, he didn't want to move.

Glenn's boss had told him to go home after they got him out of the mine, but Glenn didn't want Mabel to ask why he was back early. Instead he walked to the stables and came up behind them. For a moment he wanted to punch the wall and let the wood splinter his skin and split his knuckles. He wanted to be unpredictable, but instead he turned around and sank back against the wall. He slid down into the dirt and leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

Glenn hadn't been sitting there for long when he felt and heard a thud against the wall. He thought one of the horses might have kicked it, but then he heard muffled grunts and rustling fabrics. The grunts were quick and unsteady and when lighter notes joined in Glenn felt warm. There was a squeal. Another grunt. Everything felt tight. Glenn flexed his fists and held his breath. The pounding stopped with a long groan and a whimper. A light sigh and a low chuckle followed. Whispers were exchanged and he could hear fabric brushing and being rearranged. Glenn peaked through a slit in the panel. Mabel smiled her thin-lipped smile. Mickey buckled his pants.

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Frank lost sixty people in the slide. It demolished the mine, railroad tracks, and most of the east-side homes. Seventeen miners were rescued after hours of digging and a couple of families were found trapped in their houses. Glenn's house was buried too deep. The houses closest to the mountain were unreachable.

Glenn didn't do much to help the town rebuild. The town left those in mourning alone for the most part. Glenn was glad for that. After he realized that the house was buried for good he spent the better part of

his time in the saloon. Glenn had a corner all to himself in the back. People left him alone and he liked it that way. Bourbon wasn't so bitter anymore and he wasn't as sad, just more resigned.

Most of the men left worked at reopening the tunnels. A month after the slide a few men found Charlie the horse in one of the passageways. He'd survived on gritty water and support beams. It was the miracle Frank needed. A makeshift stall was built for Charlie—a lean-to against the company store. It was in the middle of town so everyone could stop by and see him. The group that found him, men that Glenn knew, celebrated that night. They brought drinks down to Charlie's lean-to and all squished in to share stories and congratulate the horse with toasts of brandy and oats.

Glenn went to see Charlie after they all left. It was late, but he wanted to see the horse that survived. He wasn't too far gone, but he was at that point where his chest was warm with whiskey and his head was light. He started collecting the leftover bottles on the floor when he found a mostly full one in the corner. He thought about emptying it, but instead took a pull.

“No use wasting it, right Charlie?” Glenn said holding the bottle towards the horse, “Why don't you join this party?”

Glenn lifted the makeshift drinking trough off the wall and dumped the water out. He poured a generous amount of brandy into the bucket before hanging it back.

“Drink up, buddy, you deserve it,” he said guiding the horse to the bucket. Charlie sniffed it before testing the taste. Glenn was glad when the horse began drinking. He turned another bucket over and sat against the wall. He took a drink, wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

“You're lucky,” Glenn said sloshing the brandy in the bottle. “They said I was lucky too.” He watched the liquid move in the glass before taking another pull.

“I was supposed to work that day, take you up into the tunnels, but I didn’t show up.” He looked up at the horse and reached out to rub his head. “I was supposed to be with you, but someone else took you in and lost you in the fright. I wouldn’t have lost you, Charlie. We would have figured it out together.” He took another drink.

“But I wasn’t there and you were fine without me. Not needed anywhere, am I?” He let out a dry laugh and took another drink. Glenn looked at Charlie then and his big dark eyes were staring back at him. Glenn saw a bag of oats against the wall and reached for it. He reached in and let the oats run through his fingers. He felt Charlie nudge his shoulder.

“Hungry?” Glenn chuckled, “haven’t had quite enough yet, huh?” Glenn knew the others had been feeding the horse. Since he was found, Charlie had been pampered more than a workhorse was probably ever used to. Glenn held out a handful of oats to Charlie, who quickly lapped them up. Glenn gave him some more.

“You were there when I caught them,” Glenn announced rubbing the horse’s head. “Just two days before the slide. They were in the stable.” Glenn wiped his hand against his trousers before grabbing the brandy and taking a swig. He felt the sweet burn crawl down his throat to his chest and spread from there.

“My wife was having sex with my *friend* in the stable, while you were in there. I’m such a fool,” he muttered shaking his head. He took another drink and stared at his hands holding the bottle. He squeezed one around the neck. Glenn brought the bottle back to his lips, hesitated, and took another drink.

“I choked her.”

Glenn waited as if Charlie would answer. Waited for the horse to judge him and call him out on his sins.

“They think she died in the slide. I mean, the house is gone, buried somewhere under the mountain. No one needs to know what I did, right, Charlie?” He paused and looked at the horse. Charlie was looking at the bag of oats. Glenn opened it wider and pushed it towards him.

“It’s getting harder, though. I feel like I’m still there, in the house and in the kitchen. She said she was going to Seattle without me.” He leaned forward, elbows on his knees and the bottle hanging between them.

“I didn’t say anything, Charlie. She asked me to say something. She told me to stop fiddling with my damn hat and to listen to what she was saying. I was listening, though; I always listened to Mabel, always did what she told me to do. I stopped handling my hat and even stopped myself from cracking my knuckles because I knew that bothered her, but she was going to Seattle. She sat there and told me she was going to leave me and meet Mickey in Seattle the next day.” He stopped, took a drink, and leaned back with his head against the wall.

“Well I’m talking now. Probably more than I ever have. Wouldn’t she be surprised? She was surprised when I was standing over her. She was still in her chair, but my hands were around her neck and her eyes were so wide and her mouth was open, but nothing came out but a cracked whimper.” He hit his head against the wall. “Her nails scratched me, she always kept them neat and filed.”

Glenn looked up and could see a slit between the board and wall that made the lean-to. It was dark, but he could see the faint glow of a streetlight peeking through the crack. It reminded him of the sunrise the day of the slide, striving to make it through all the debris and horror of the early morning to shed new light on the day. He hit his head against the wall again. His voice choked up as he spoke.

“I was unpredictable for a moment, and in that moment I killed her,” Glenn winced. “Who knew I had it in me, eh, Charlie?” He looked over at the horse, who was munching happily at his oats.

“I don’t think I can do it anymore,” Glenn whispered looking down at his hands. He glared at them, holding that bottle tightly, white knuckles straining and fingernails discolored from years of meaningless work.

“Tomorrow,” he said, “Tomorrow they’ll know.”

Glenn got up and turned to leave when he felt the weight of the bottle in his hand. He looked over at the horse still eating and moved back towards him.

“Thanks for listening, Charlie. Enjoy the rest of your party,” he said patting the horse’s side. He poured the rest of the brandy into the bucket and left. He went back to the shelter some officials set up and carefully made his way through the aisles to his cot. It squeaked loudly as he sat down, making him cringe and look around. Glenn unlaced his boots and placed them under his cot before pulling the blanket back and slipping in. The blanket was itchy and a nondescript brown that, for some reason, made him uncomfortable. Glenn turned onto his side and the cot creaked loudly again. He still felt that familiar warmth in his chest and his head was fuzzy. He closed his eyes and felt the weight of sleep seep into his bones and spread.

Eventually Glenn’s breath evened out and when he turned onto his back an hour later, the responding creak of the cot didn’t wake him. And when a little girl woke up from her nightmare and her mother shushed her back to sleep, Glenn dreamt of doilies and an empty chair. And when Glenn woke up the next morning, a little hung-over, but surprisingly well rested, he heard the news about Charlie the Horse and how he died from over-indulging in brandy and oats.