

*In this scene, Väinö Toivola, a farmer and musician in the Finnish community of Chisim, makes up a runo, or verse, in the style of The Kalevala as a way to warn a new arrival from Finland about the perils of life in America. The two characters are at a meeting of labor agitators being held around a bonfire in the forest outside of town.*

Väinö tucked his bearded chin into his chest as if conjuring up the story from deep within. He began speaking in a rhythmic style Lasse recognized from back home, as a way the old people used to tell stories. Soon the words took on a melody, and others standing around stopped talking and listened to Väinö sing the story in the old Finnish style.

“I have this story in my mind, I have this tale in my mouth, clawing to get out, trying to escape, to warn this new fellow and tell this new friend what kind of place he has landed in. Pilgrim, you should know. Newcomer, we should tell you. Ignorance only makes fear. Lack of knowledge sparks disaster. So I let the words climb out, up from my belly, through my throat, to tumble onto the ground. I tell of thick-handed Harkkinen, steadfast Finlander, hard-working Finn. From the motherland he sailed, from the fatherland he flew, with his apple-cheeked wife and his braid-headed daughters to this difficult new land, to the tricky new place.

“Everyday Harkkinen went down, everyday the steady Finn descended, with his fellows and his friends, into the shaft, into the drift, next to a lake, near a pond. Harkkinen with this bear paws, young Finn with his boulder hands in his pockets. One hundred, two hundred, three hundred, four hundred. Five hundred feet into the earth the thick-handed Finn went, a rope tied around his waist, a string tied around his wrist,

attached to a bell up above, connected to a whistle on the earth's surface. Down in the drift, they broke rock and shouldered iron toward the surface. Iron to build a country, to create a new land. Down in Harkkinen's drift, the iron was as pure as a braid-headed daughter, and soft as a wife's pink cheek. The more silver iron to the surface, the more silver coin in the pocket of Harkkinen and his fellows. Deeper and deeper Harkkinen and his fellows dug, Harkkinen with bare paws and gloveless fingers, for the pure silver iron. Closer and closer they got to the bed of the lake, to the bottom of the pond, where the soft iron waited, where the valuable metal hid. Five feet, four feet, three feet, two feet. One foot of rock between him and the water. Harkkinen grasped that last piece of iron, so soft it was like dough, and he pulled it out with his hard paws, with his thick fingers he yanked it free.

“And a blast of wind, a tornado underground, blew through the tunnel, whistled through the shaft. Candles flickered, then went out. Lights tried, and failed. And blackness fell, darkness descended, on Harkkinen and his fellows, on the Finn and his boys. Down in the drift, deep in the ground, the steadfast Finn pulled his rope with his heavy hands, the doomed man yanked his string with his strong claws, to set off the whistle and ring the bell, so the others in the darkness, fellow men in the blackness, would know, would guess, would run and climb out. Suddenly, there was a rumble. Quickly, there was a roar, and water flowed in, mud ran through, like a plug in a pipe. Like a stop in a drain, entombing thick-handed Harkkinen, encasing the steadfast Finn. And thirty of his fellows. Forty of his friends, deep in the earth, down in the ground.

“Up above, on the earth's surface where men and women were made to walk, Harkkinen's apple-cheeked wife and his braid-headed daughters heard the whistle, heard

the bell. And they ran to the hole, they flew to the shaft with their fellow apple-cheeks and braid-heads. And they saw the water gurgling, they beheld the mud bubbling, and they knew their steadfast Finn was no more. Yet still the whistle blew, still the bell rang, attached to thick-handed Harkkinen, tied to the hard-working Finn, entombed in the mud, buried in the muck. Four hours the bell clanged and the whistle shrilled. Five hours the bell rang and the whistle blew, until young Harkkinen's widow, his berry-lipped wife, cried for it to be silenced, begged for it to be quieted, as she and her braid-heads and her fellows and their braid-heads walked the streets all night long, marched the roads through the night, crying for their steadfast ones entombed in the mud.

“Now my new friend, now our new fellow, you see that in this new place, on this new shore, that the luckless flounder and the offspring weep. And when in the nighttime, when the darkness descends, you hear the faint toll of a bell, you hear the ghostly moan of a whistle, think of Harkkinen pulling the rope with his boulder hands, with his bear paws. Be warned of his doom and thoughtful of his memory. For these are still difficult times, there are still hours of woe, even in this new land, even in this promised place.”