

Burning Underground: Commentary on “Taboo King”

In December 2014, I stood looking at the broken and abandoned portion of Route 61 in Centralia, Pennsylvania. This highway was permanently rerouted when the town’s long-burning underground coal mine fire damaged it beyond repair. It was my first visit to Centralia—at my husband’s suggestion, we made a side trip there on our way home to Ohio—but this ghost town had been a part of my consciousness for years. I’d grown up in Lancaster, only about two hours from Centralia, and my grandmother and great aunt lived in Pennsylvania coal country. To get to their town, my mother drove through Tamaqua and Coaldale, where I gazed out the car window to see a landscape overwhelmed by towering mountains of coal. My great aunt’s house had a coal shoot in the basement, with shiny black coal still spilling out of it, and my grandfather had been a coal miner. He died before I was born from health complications caused by mine work. As a child I never visited Centralia itself, but I understood it was a fiery, toxic place, and that coal mines in general were synonymous with danger. For years, I imagined Centralia as a town burning above ground. One could drive past, I thought, and see flames licking the sky.

In reality, Centralia is not particularly extraordinary on the surface. Unless you’re on the abandoned stretch of Route 61, the area appears innocuous. But in cold weather, you can catch glimpses of steam rising from sinkholes, and there’s an eerie quiet that betrays the town’s ruin. A scarce handful of residents refused to leave Centralia, but none of them made appearances on the day my husband and I visited. Instead we wandered along the damaged landscape, stepping carefully and trying to imagine the underground fire that burned somewhere beneath us and would continue burning for hundreds of years. I could see how someone might come to be obsessed with this place—specifically, how a child could become obsessed with it. And so my character Lolly was born, a little girl who discovers her dark love for Centralia and refuses to let it go even when her parents demand it.

But the origin of my story “Taboo King” dates back to a few weeks before that Centralia trip. At the time, I started the story not with Lolly’s character, but rather with her father, Shane—a successful advertising executive who creates campaigns for taboo products. I’d recently read *Taboo in Advertising* by Elsa Simoes Lucas Freitas, which served as inspiration for Shane’s career. Freitas’s book showed me how taboo functions in the advertising industry; in particular, I learned about the tricks advertisers use to present taboo products in a palatable way, such as employing euphemisms, humor, cartoons, children, animals, or visual metaphors in ads. Sometimes, advertisers will go in the opposite direction and use taboo imagery to humorously promote a non-taboo product. While these details inspired Shane’s character, it wasn’t until I visited Centralia and found Lolly’s voice that I was able to uncover the heart of the story.

Advertising taboo and Centralia are two distinct story elements I never imagined putting together, but once I did, it made sense. Centralia is all about the underground, the hidden, and the dangerous. It’s fire and coal and steam and abandonment. I like to think “Taboo King” is not just about Centralia, advertising, or father-daughter relationships, but rather about everything we keep below the surface—all that we try to hide or run from but that keeps burning anyway, steadily surviving even underground.