Two thousand feet belowground, men covered in soot noted a wailing rumble in the distance—the sound of many tons of rock falling in caverns deep inside the mountain. “The mine is weeping,” they said to one another.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MOISES SAMAN / MAGNUM

The San José Mine is situated inside a round, rocky, and lifeless mountain in the Atacama Desert, in Chile. Once every dozen years or so, a storm system sweeps across the desert, dropping a torrent of rain. When that happens, the dust turns to mud as thick as freshly poured concrete. Charles Darwin briefly passed through this corner of the Atacama in 1835. In his journal, he described the desert as “a barrier far worse than the most turbulent ocean.”

In the deeper desert, miners are the only conspicuous living presence; they ride in trucks and buses to the mountains, which contain gold, copper, and iron. The minerals draw workers to the Atacama from all over Chile. On the evening of August 3, 2010, Juan Carlos Aguilar began a bus journey of more than a thousand miles to reach the San José Mine, leaving from the temperate rain forests near Valdivia. Raúl Bustos left for work the next morning, from the port city of Talcahuano, eight hundred miles south of the mine. He travelled along a flat landscape filled with greenhouses, tractors, and the cultivated fields of Chile’s agricultural heartland, passing through the town of Talca, where José Henríquez, a tall, devout Christian, boarded yet another bus. Mario Sepúlveda, a forty-year-old father of two, took a bus from the outskirts of Santiago, five hundred miles away.

When the men reached the port city of Coquimbo, nearly two hundred and fifty miles from the San José Mine, they joined the path that Darwin had followed. In Darwin’s time, the country was only twenty-five years old, and his
small expedition rode overland with four horses and two mules, making notes about Chile’s geology and its flora and fauna.

In the village of Caleta Los Hornos, the men on the buses glimpsed the Pacific Ocean as the Pan-American Highway passed along the beach. While travelling through the region, Darwin saw a hill that was being mined, “drilled with holes, like a great ants’ nest.” When he rode north, he came upon the funeral of a miner; the pallbearers were dressed in long, dark woollen shirts, leather aprons, and bright-colored sashes.

The men of the San José Mine had also mourned the loss of fellow-workers, and seen friends maimed by sudden explosions of seemingly solid rock. Deep underground, they had built a shrine to one of the victims. Bustos, a relative newcomer to the San José, carried a rosary with him.

In exchange for good wages, the men accepted the possibility of death. Each miner made at least twelve hundred dollars a month—triple Chile’s minimum wage—working seven-day tours, divided into twelve-hour shifts that kept the mine producing around the clock.

At the bus terminal in Copiapó, the city closest to the mine, the men unloaded their bags and took a short ride in communal taxis to the rooming houses where they were to sleep for the next seven nights. The following morning, they headed on buses toward the inner Atacama Desert, finally coming to the cutoff for the San Esteban Mining Company and the San José Mine. The buildings on the hillside came into focus: administration bungalows, locker and shower rooms, cafeterias—corroded structures of wood, tin, and steel.

The stone that forms the mountains north of Copiapó was born of the earth’s magma more than a hundred and forty million years ago. For aeons, a mineral-rich broth rose up through the fissures of the Atacama Fault System. Eventually, the broth solidified, becoming ore layered with interlocking veins of quartz, chalcopyrite, and other minerals.

The San José Mine was nearly as deep as the tallest building on earth is tall. From the surface, the drive to the lowest part was about four miles. Underground, where men had been digging for gold and copper since 1889, the mine expanded like an iceberg city. Roads led to interior spaces carved out by explosives and machinery, pathways to man-made galleries and canyons. The city had its own weather, with temperatures that rose and fell, and breezes
that shifted at different times of the day. The mine’s byways had traffic signs and rules. The central road linking all these passageways to the surface was called the Ramp.

“Two eggs, any style? My mind is reeling.”

In the early-morning hours of August 5th, two thousand feet belowground, the night shift was finishing its work. Men covered in soot and drenched in sweat gathered in one of the caverns, waiting for a truck that would take them on the forty-minute drive to the surface. During their shift, they had noted a wailing rumble in the distance—the sound of many tons of rock falling in forgotten caverns deep inside the mountain. The noise and the vibrations caused by these avalanches were transmitted through the mountain much as lightning strikes travel through the air and the ground. “The mine is weeping a lot,” the men said to one another. A few mentioned the rumblings to the men on the next shift, but there was no sense of alarm. The thunder always receded and the mountain eventually returned to its steady, quiet state.

The entrance to the San José Mine was five metres wide and five metres tall, and the edges that faced the outside world resembled stone teeth. Inside, sea level was the point of reference. The entrance was at Level 800—eight hundred metres above sea level. The Ramp descended into the mountain as a series of switchbacks. Men in dump trucks, front loaders, pickup trucks, and other machines drove down past Level 200, where there were still minerals to be brought to the surface, working in passageways that led from the Ramp to the veins of ore-bearing rock.

Two men were working at Level 40, twenty-four hundred and ninety vertical feet below the surface, loading freshly blasted ore into a dump truck. Another group was at Level 60, fortifying a passageway near a spot where a man had lost a limb in an accident the previous month. A few men were resting briefly inside or near the Refuge, a room about the size of a classroom, carved out of the rock at Level 90. The Refuge was supposed to be a shelter in the event of an emergency—it had a heavy metal door—but it also served as a break room; fresh air was pumped in from the surface, offering a respite from the humidity, which often reached ninety-eight per cent, and the heat, which could reach 104 degrees Fahrenheit. Geothermal heat emanating from the bowels of the earth made the mine hotter the deeper the men went.
Juan Carlos Aguilar, Raúl Bustos, and two other mechanics found respite from the heat in a workshop at Level 150, in a passageway not far from a vast interior chasm called the Pit. Air circulated through the Pit, and the faintest hint of a breeze flowed from the chasm into the workshop.

Around 1 P.M., a fifty-two-year-old driver named Franklin Lobos left the surface in the personnel truck, with Jorge Galleguillos riding shotgun; they were heading down to pick up other miners to bring them to the surface for lunch. Galleguillos, at fifty-six, was one of the oldest men in the mine. He had been filing safety complaints with the mine’s managers, his own addendum to a long chronicle of problems at the mine. In 2007, the Chilean government ordered the San José Mine closed after an explosion killed a geologist’s assistant. The mine reopened after its owners assured the government that they would take a series of steps to improve safety, such as installing systems to monitor the constantly shifting rock inside the mountain. Many of the steps were never fully carried out.

The personnel truck that Lobos was driving did not have working headlights. Lobos, a retired professional soccer player and a onetime local celebrity, had taken a job at the San José to help pay his daughters’ college tuition. He used the truck’s fog lamps on his descent. The low beams illuminated a sinuous gray tunnel. Suddenly, a white streak moved past the truck’s windshield from right to left.

“Did you see that?” Galleguillos said. “That was a butterfly.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Lobos answered. “It was a white rock.”

Lobos said afterward that the collapse hit the miners as a roar of sound, as if a skyscraper were crashing down behind them. The vast, haphazard architecture of the mine, improvised over the course of a century, had given way. A single block of granite-like stone called diorite, as tall as a forty-five-story building, had broken loose and was falling through the layers of the mine, knocking out sections of the Ramp and creating a chain reaction as the mountain collapsed. Stone and ore were pulled downward to crash against other rocks, causing the surviving sections of the mine to shake violently.

In the workshop at Level 150, Bustos, who was forty and had survived an earthquake and a tsunami five months earlier in his home town of Talcahuano, scurried under the chassis of a Toro 400 loader as stones the size of oranges fell around him. So did Richard Villarroel, twenty-six years old, whose wife was six
“I guess I just like living out under the stars and hunting for what I eat. Plus, I had a lot of credit-card debt.”

The blast wave continued to race downward, past a group of workers at Level 105. Just before it hit Level 100, Alex Vega, a native of Copiapó, who was waiting for the personnel truck, chatted with Edison Peña, a thirty-four-year-old Santiago native and mechanic. Someone shouted, “The mine is pancaking!” Minutes later, there was a gust of wind, and then they saw a cloud of dust flowing onto the Ramp from tunnels leading to abandoned sections of the mine. The cloud raced down the Ramp, showering the men with dirt and stones as they ran to the Refuge.

About ten vertical yards below, Samuel Ávalos, a forty-three-year-old father of three, was waiting for the personnel truck with a group of miners near the Refuge. The Refuge had a white tile floor, a cinder-block wall, and a steel door. Ávalos had taken off his sweat-soaked overalls, wrung them out, and hung them on a water pipe to dry. He was putting them back on when he heard the thunderclap.

Victor Zamora, thirty-three, sat on a stone that served as a bench, smoking a cigarette. Later, he remembered this moment as one of contentment and brotherhood. The men referred to one another as los niños, and Zamora liked working with them in the mine, where the boys all treated one another as equals, “no one better than anyone else.”

The first blast wave knocked Zamora off the stone bench and threw open the heavy metal door. In the minutes that followed, Vega, Peña, and several other men ran into the Refuge, joining Ávalos, Zamora, and the other miners. Soon, about two dozen men were huddling inside. The mountain was caving in.
Luis Urzúa, fifty-four, wearing the white helmet of a shift manager, was at Level 90 when he heard the first crash. Mario Sepúlveda, who was driving a front loader nearby, stopped the rig and was removing his ear protectors when the pressure wave passed through the tunnel and plugged up his ears. Florencio Ávalos, the shift’s foreman, arrived in a pickup truck and announced that the mine was collapsing. Sepúlveda and Urzúa jumped into the pickup and the three men drove toward the Refuge.

Thirty metres farther down, at Level 60, Carlos Mamani, a twenty-four-year-old Bolivian immigrant, was at work in a front loader. It was his first day at the mine: just that morning, he’d passed a final exam underground to operate the loader. Mamani had grown up on a farm on the desolate Altiplano. In his early twenties, he joined the immigrant stream to Chile to pick grapes and work construction; he dreamed of being a police detective.

A four-man crew working with him included fifty-year-old Yonni Barrios and forty-eight-year-old Dario Segovia. They were drilling six-foot-long metal rods into the stone to hold up steel mesh that was meant to keep slabs from falling on the people working below. At this spot, a month earlier, a miner had been hit by a falling slab of rock weighing three tons, and his left leg had to be amputated.

Inside the cab, Mamani noticed a cloud forming around his loader, as the miners gestured for him to back out of the tunnel. He waited for Daniel Herrera, a twenty-seven-year-old driver, to climb into the cab. When Herrera opened the door, Mamani could see people’s lips moving but couldn’t make out words. One of the workers started to move his flashlight in circles, a signal that meant “Evacuate the mine! Get out now!”

Mario Gómez, working at Level 44, some twenty-four hundred and eighty vertical feet from the surface, felt a puff of air against his face. He thought it was odd, because the windows of the truck’s cab were closed. Then he felt a burst of pressure between his ears, as if his skull were a balloon being inflated. The truck’s engine stopped. After a few seconds, it started again, on its own. Gómez began driving toward the surface, but the tunnel was filling with dust. When he lowered the window, he was assaulted by a deafening noise: the rumble of many simultaneous explosions, the sound of rock splitting. The stone walls around him seemed to be cracking, as if they might burst open at any moment.
Did you remember to turn on the alarm?

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The men jumped into the bed of the truck. “Go! Go! Let’s get out of here!” they yelled. The pickup, a Toyota HiLux, sagged under their weight. Mamani stood on the back bumper, wrapping his arms around the legs of the others. The dust became too thick to see. Sepúlveda got out and walked ahead with his flashlight, guiding the driver. They met Bustos, Aguilar, and the two other mechanics who were at the workshop at Level 150, and the men joined them. They came upon the personnel truck with Franklin Lobos and Jorge Galleguillos, who had been closest to the collapse. Sepúlveda shone his light in their faces and saw the blood-drained look of mortal fear.

Some of the men got into the personnel truck, and the vehicles proceeded up the Ramp until there were too many rocks to drive any farther. The men got out and walked fifty yards or so. The beams of their flashlights struck a bluish-gray surface of diorite, a smooth wall of rock that now blocked the Ramp completely. To Urzúa, it looked like “the stone they put over Jesus’ tomb.”

The rock had fallen in a single piece. It was later estimated to weigh seven hundred thousand tons, twice the weight of the Empire State Building. The men couldn’t see the extent of the slab, but some could sense the enormity of the disaster. They calculated, roughly correctly, that at least ten levels of the Ramp had been wiped out.

“We’re fucked,” one miner said.

For some of the veteran miners, the sight of the stone brought an overwhelming sense of finality. Many had been trapped in mines before, by rocks that were cleared by a bulldozer in a few hours. This rock was unlike
anything they had ever seen.

Urzúa was pretty sure that there was no escape, and little prospect of rescuers reaching them. He broke the silence by counting the men. Raúl Villegas, an ore-truck driver, was missing, but Lobos and Galleguillos said that they had seen him on his way to the surface. (Villegas was the only one who got out that day.) Urzúa’s count came to thirty-two men, but he was not confident that the figure correctly reflected the shift, because in the San José Mine the lists of workers changed from one day to the next.

The men split into two groups. One, a small escape party that included Urzúa, Sepúlveda, and Bustos, would search for an opening to the surface. The second, about two dozen men, headed back to the Refuge to wait. Florencio Ávalos, the shift’s foreman and the second in command after Urzúa, spoke privately to Yonni Barrios, who was among the oldest and most experienced in the group. “Down in the Refuge, take care of those provisions,” Ávalos said. “Don’t let the boys eat them yet, because we may be trapped for days.”

When the men reached the Refuge, they discovered that all connections to the surface had been cut: the electricity, the intercom system, the flow of water and air. Still, some continued to believe that they would be rescued soon. In order to save their batteries, they turned off their headlamps.

Higher up in the mine, the escape party reached a chimney at Level 180, one of numerous cylindrical shafts that ran between the levels of the Ramp and contained the mine’s electrical lines and other cables; the chimneys also were supposed to provide an escape route. In theory, it should have been possible to climb them and bypass the collapsed sections of the mine. Sepúlveda, five feet six inches tall and a bit overweight, was lifted up into a hole in the ceiling and found a ladder, built from pieces of rebar driven into the rock. Bustos followed him. It was a hundred feet or so to the next level, and the humidity and the dust made it hard to breathe.

When they reached the next opening, they started to walk up the Ramp, but the beams from their flashlights soon struck a curtain of rock identical to the one they had seen farther below. “At that moment, I put death in my head and decided I would live with it,” Sepúlveda said. In the next chimney, there was no ladder, just a cable dangling.

“What are we going to tell the boys?” he asked.

“It’s hard,” Bustos said. “But let’s tell them the truth.”
The two men climbed back down to deliver the news to the others. Urzúa took it hard. There was little they could do, he thought, other than wait for rescuers to reach them. It’s a bitter truth of mining that sometimes men are buried alive and die of starvation, their bodies never recovered. A few hours later, Urzúa went off to his pickup truck and lay down in the front seat.

_The collapse hit the miners as a roar of sound, as if a skyscraper were crashing around them. Some tried to escape, but the mountain had become a pulsating mass, and boulders emerged from the blackness and bounced downhill._

Sepúlveda’s response was different. He summarized his attitude toward this predicament with a vulgar Chilean phrase: *tomar la hueva*. Grab it by the balls. His life had been one struggle for survival after another. His mother had died giving birth to him, and his rural childhood had been marked by violence. He felt most like himself when he was fighting to stay alive. He was especially close to his younger son, thirteen-year-old Francisco, who had been born premature, tiny and frail. Sepúlveda’s nickname was Perri, short for Perrito, the diminutive of the word *perro*, or dog. He was called Perri because he had two rescued strays and because, he said, “I have the heart of a dog.” He was loyal, he said, but if you try to hurt him “I’ll bite you.”

To the other miners, Sepúlveda often looked like a man possessed. Despite his lack of standing in the mining-shift hierarchy, he decided that he would take control of his fate and that of the men around him. “The only thing I do is live,” he said.

“We have to break it open!” one of the men called out. “We’re hungry!”

They were gathered around a locker in the Refuge that, in the event of an emergency, was supposed to contain enough food to keep twenty-five men alive for forty-eight hours. Many hadn’t eaten since dinner the night before, to avoid the vomiting caused by working underground in intense heat, humidity, and dust. Barrios said they should wait until the shift manager, Urzúa, came back. “We don’t know how long we’ll be down here.”

Barrios watched as Victor Zamora took a screwdriver to the locker’s hinges and to three metal strips banded around it. Others joined in. “There were just too many of them,” Barrios said, of the men determined to get at the food.
Zamora led the assault on the food supply. His father had died when he was eight months old, and his mother abandoned him. He was raised by his mother’s sister, but when he was nine she sent him to a home for street children, in the town of Arica, on the Peruvian border, where he lived until he was sixteen. As a child, he'd wanted to be part of a family. “I could see that everything was for everyone else and that I would get what was left behind,” he said.

He retrieved a bolt cutter, used to cut rebar, and snapped the metal bands on the locker. He was about to break the lock when Lobos stepped forward with a key. Lobos was taller and bulkier than most of the others, but at that moment he decided that giving in to the hungry men was his only recourse. “I wasn't going to fight five or six of them,” he said. “In the state that we were in, fighting didn't make any sense.”

Inside the locker were several dozen packages of cookies called Cartoons—chocolate- and lemon-flavored sandwich creams. Each package cost a hundred Chilean pesos, less than a quarter, and contained four cookies. Several packages were quickly dispensed to those who would take them, though many miners refused. Zamora said later that he didn't think much about what he was doing: “I was just hungry. It was time to eat.” The raiders also opened several cartons of milk.

When the escape party arrived at the Refuge, they counted at least five empty packages of cookies. “With what you guys just ate, we all could have survived three days down here,” Florencio Ávalos, the foreman, said. “Well, whoever ate that food, let them get something out of it. May it serve them well.” Zamora, considered by many as the chief culprit, studied the faces of his friends and companions and, for the first time, understood the severity of their situation.

Sepúlveda and Bustos began to tell the others about their climb toward the top. Addressing them with a common term of endearment, chiquillos, Sepúlveda said, “In other words, kids, even if we’re super-optimistic about things, the best you can say is we’re in deep shit. The only thing we can do is to be strong, super-disciplined, and united.”

In the silence that followed, Urzúa stepped forward. Given the circumstances, he said, “we are all equal now. I take off my white helmet. There are no bosses and employees.” Some of the men later said that they felt this was an act of cowardice, an abdication.
“Give me the menus—you’ve kept the chef in suspense long enough.”

Sepúlveda helped to take an inventory of the remaining emergency provisions: one can of salmon, one can of peaches, one can of peas, eighteen cans of tuna, twenty-four litres of milk (eight of which turned out to be spoiled), ninety-three packages of cookies, minus the ones that had been eaten, and some expired medicines.

There were also two hundred and forty plastic spoons and forks, but only ten litres of bottled water. The miners figured that if each man ate one or two cookies and a spoonful of tuna every day the provisions might last a week. There were thousands of litres of water stored underground in tanks, but the water was used to cool the industrial machinery, and it was tainted with oil. The men put the food back into the locker and secured it. Urzúa gave the key to Sepúlveda.

Then Urzúa counted the men again, checking the list against his mental notes on how many men should be there. “There are thirty-three of us,” he announced.


Several other miners repeated the phrase: “The age of Christ!” Even for men who weren’t especially religious, the number carried significance. Normally, there would have been only sixteen or seventeen of them, but because many were working overtime, or makeup days, there were twice as many—so many that no one man had met all the others.

Finally, Sepúlveda spoke, raising his voice so that everybody could hear. “There are thirty-three of us,” he said. “This has to mean something. There’s something bigger for us waiting outside.”

After 10 P.M., the men scattered about the Refuge, looking for a spot to sit or lie down. Several made beds from cardboard boxes that once stored explosives, or from soft plastic ripped from the ducts that pumped fresh air from the surface. When there was nothing left to say, they lay with their eyes open.

Most of the men stayed in or near the Refuge. A few couldn’t stop thinking about how they had run for their lives in the exploding mountain, and didn’t venture out again for several days. Sleeping behind the steel door, or just next
to it, they could at least pretend that they were in a safe place. Chain-link fencing covered the stone walls inside—a net supposed to keep the rocks from crushing the men if the rest of the mountain disintegrated. In addition to their limited food supplies, there was a first-aid kit on the wall, a stack of plastic stretchers, and a picture of a naked woman ripped from a magazine. A small digital thermometer displayed the temperature: 29.5 degrees Celsius—85.1 degrees Fahrenheit.

Omar Reygadas had recently visited his wife’s grave, and the grave of their adult son, who had died in an accident. Then he had gone to a barbecue in honor of his seven-year-old grandson, Nicolás. “All my children were there, my grandchildren, my great-grandchildren,” he said. He also had visited his home town, an hour south of Copiapó, to see his brothers. Now all these events seemed foreordained: as if God had given him the chance to say goodbye to everyone before leaving this earth.

“I’m not embarrassed to say I cried, a lot, at that moment, thinking that I wouldn’t see my family again, and thinking of the suffering they would go through,” Reygadas said. He walked away from the others, in violation of a mining code that says you should never walk alone underground. The rules didn’t matter anymore. He followed the light of his lamp until he found a front loader like the one he operated. He sat inside the cab, but after a few minutes he remembered the moment of the collapse. Tons of rock fell on top of the miners, and yet “there wasn’t anyone who was hurt.” The improbable fact of their survival, he thought, carried a hint of the divine. He decided to go back to the Refuge, and to be a strong old man instead of a weak one. If it was all part of a plan by his Creator, maybe his prayers would reach the surface, and make the people who loved him strong, too, because they had to be suffering, out there in the night, wondering if he and thirty-two other men could still be alive.

Meanwhile, Sepúlveda, Urzúa, Aguilar, Bustos, Florencio Ávalos, and others climbed back up to Level 190, with its massive stone, to listen for the approach of rescuers and to make noises alerting people on the surface to the presence of survivors. They had no success and, after several hours, they went back down to Level 180. At the base of the chimney that Sepúlveda and Bustos had climbed to seek a way out, the men lit a fire, hoping that the
smoke would drift up and reach the surface, but it simply gathered around them. Sepúlveda used the scoop of a front loader, one of nineteen vehicles trapped with them, to clear rocks from a passageway, but more rocks fell from the top of the pile to take their place. The men considered building a ladder to climb the chimney, using rubber hoses and pieces of rebar, but they realized that a saw wouldn't be able to cut more than a few pieces of rebar before going dull; in any case, it was unlikely that the ladder would hold a man's weight.

Later, they drove an underground drill rig, known as a jumbo, to the fallen diorite block, honking the machine's horn and pounding its long, armlike boom against the stone wall. Then they stopped, turned off their lamps, and listened to the quiet, hoping for an echoing honk, a clank, a banging.

At noon on the second day, Sepúlveda lined up thirty-three plastic cups and scooped one teaspoon of canned fish into each, then poured in some water, making a broth. He passed out two cookies to each man. “Enjoy your meal,” he said. “This is delicious stuff. Make it last.” Each cup probably contained fewer than a hundred calories.

Several times during those first days, the mountain rumbled as though it were exploding again. Lobos said that, outside the Refuge, “I always slept with one eye open, and when the mountain made noises I'd go running back inside.” A few of the men took the stretchers and used them as beds; others put cardboard onto the tile floor. The men were covered in soot. The Refuge, without any ventilation, started to smell like their fetid, unbathed bodies. “We didn't have water we could spare to clean our private parts,” one miner said. Another said, “I've smelled corpses before, and after a while it smelled worse than that.”

The few litres of bottled water were finished in a day, so the men drank from the industrial water in the tanks. On the second day, some of the men used the water to wash themselves, but it was too precious to continue to use that way. Sepúlveda organized the men into teams of three, and every two days they drove a vehicle to a tank further up the Ramp, to fill a sixteen-gallon barrel. Before the collapse, the men would rinse their dirty gloves in the tanks. Sepúlveda had sometimes jumped in to take a bath. A few men pointed out that they were drinking his bathwater. When they shone their weakening lamps on the water, they could see a black-orange film and drops of motor oil. That water was keeping them alive.
The hunger hit them most painfully during the first few days. They could not defecate, and the emptiness in their stomachs felt like a fist pushing downward. Lobos, the former professional athlete, was particularly attuned to his body, and as he sat in the Refuge he began to assess the state of the men’s health. Mario Gómez, at sixty-three the oldest member of the group, was in bad shape. He had silicosis, and his incessant cough conveyed history, as if it were something transmitted by his grandfathers, who were miners. José Ojeda, a forty-seven-year-old widower, was diabetic. Would two cookies a day keep him from going into shock? Victor Segovia, a member of an old Copiapó family, broke out in a body rash. Was it the heat or nerves? Jimmy Sánchez, at nineteen the youngest of the miners, was acting like an old man. He wouldn’t get up, and his emotional and physical lethargy was beginning to spread to other men.

Victor Segovia began keeping a diary on the back of forms used to monitor the vehicle he operated. He wrote, “There is a great sense of powerlessness. We don’t know if we are being rescued or what is going on outside because down here we don’t hear any noises from machines or anything.” Segovia had been expelled from school in the fifth grade, but he wrote with stark clarity. At 3:30 A.M. on the third day, he began with a note to his five daughters: “Girls, unfortunately destiny only allowed me to be with you until the fourth of August. I am weak, and very hungry. I’m suffocating . . . it feels like I’m going to go crazy.”

The men began to listen obsessively for the sound of rescuers. When the mine stopped rumbling, some put their ears to the stone walls. “Do you hear it?” one would ask. “I think I can hear something! Do you hear it?” Zamora, the leader of the men who broke into the food supplies, said that yes, he could hear a drill. “I was lying,” he said later. “I couldn’t hear anything.” But he felt responsible for keeping up the men’s spirits. “It’s really faint, but, yes, I think I hear it,” he said. “They’re coming for us.”

Barrios said that, with your ear to the stone, “it was like listening to the inside of a seashell.” You heard nothing and you heard everything. You could imagine an ocean roiling inside that shell, and then you realized that it was all an illusion.
The more active group of men—the mechanics and Urzúa and Ávalos—camped at Level 105. Bustos referred to the irritable and lethargic men sleeping lower down in the Refuge as the Clan. Sepúlveda was one of the few to move back and forth. His foulmouthed soliloquies entertained many in the Refuge. But he had vertiginous mood swings, becoming suddenly angry or sullen and lost in thought. Sitting outside the Refuge, Barrios saw Sepúlveda slip into a kind of manic hopelessness. “I was watching him walk up and down the Ramp, when all of a sudden he stopped. He yelled, very loudly, ‘I want to pray.’ ” A few of the men looked at him as one might a possessed street preacher.

“I’m angry!” Sepúlveda shouted. “I feel powerless!” The men were drenched with sweat and had shed their shirts, but somehow Sepúlveda looked grimier and more desperate than the others. One miner described him as looking like “a commando.” Sepúlveda fell to his knees. “Those who want to pray, come and join me,” he said. Barrios looked at him and thought, We aren’t going to get out. Perri knows this. And he wants to get good with God.

Sepúlveda turned to José Henríquez. “Don José, we know you are a Christian man, and we need you to lead us in prayer,” he said. “Will you?”

From that moment, Henríquez, a jumbo operator, became known as the Pastor. Tall and balding, Henríquez was fifty-four, and he’d survived five mining accidents since the seventies, including two that killed most of the men on his shift. He dropped to his knees and told the men that when you pray you have to humble yourself before your Creator.

“We aren’t the best men,” Henríquez said. “But, Lord, have pity on us. . . . Jesus Christ, our Lord, let us enter the sacred throne of your grace.” The men knelt. Around him, Sepúlveda saw his filthy, sweating, unshaved companions, men of different faiths, in poses of penitence and desperation, some with their
eyes closed, praying, whispering, crossing themselves. Some were crying; others looked perplexed, as if they couldn’t quite believe they were on their knees, begging God to rescue them.

Prayer became a daily ritual. The men gathered before they ate. They listened to a brief sermon from Henríquez, and, later, from other men, too. The prayers and the meals were the one time each day that all thirty-three were united. Eventually, each prayer meeting included a self-criticism session, at which the men apologized for their transgressions. “I’m sorry I raised my voice.” “I’m sorry I didn’t help get the water.” With each day, fewer headlamps illuminated the sessions, and those still working were dimmer. At one point, Juan Illanes, a fifty-two-year-old mechanic, removed a battery and a bulb from the headlight of a vehicle and connected them with telephone wire. The bulb cast a weak gray light over the praying miners. Barrios thought that it made them seem to grow taller.

One of the men said that if you heat up food it has more calories and more nourishment, so on the third day they decided to cook some soup and have a picnic at Level 135, where the mechanics used to work and the air still circulated a bit. They managed to get all the men out of the Refuge for the walk, some five hundred metres along the Ramp and other passageways.

In the middle of a pile of stones, they made a fire the size of two cupped hands. They removed the cover from an air filter on one of the machines, turned it upside down, and used it as a pot. Henríquez had a cell phone but didn’t know how to work its camera, so he gave it to Claudio Acuña, a thirty-four-year-old driller. Sepúlveda narrated the video, speaking to the camera in a voice that suggested he believed outsiders might one day find the recording. “Tuna with peas!” he announced. “Eight litres of water, one can of tuna, some peas. A little tiny fire here. So that we can survive this situation!” Around Sepúlveda, men, most of them shirtless, moved about wearing yellow-and-red helmets, a dancing ball of orange light near the center of the dark frame of the video. Sometimes Acuña turned the camera and captured the light from one of the vehicles, but mostly the image was of a black space filled with Sepúlveda’s voice: “We’re going to show that we are Chileans of the heart.
And we’re going to have a delicious soup today.” Sepúlveda served each man with a metal cup that clanked against the bottom of the air-filter cover, pouring the hot, murky liquid into plastic cups.

“Has everybody got some?” Sepúlveda asked. “There’s a bit more, if anyone wants it.” He scraped his cup against the air filter, and addressed his son: “Francisco, when God tells you to be a warrior, this is what it means to be a warrior.”

Once again, a few of the men said that they heard distant drilling, and they quarrelled about whether it was really there. “Down here, there is no day, only darkness and explosions,” Victor Segovia wrote in his diary. “All our spirits are on the ground. We are bordering on insanity.” It was their fourth day in the mine. He listed the names of his five daughters, and the names of his mother and father, added his own, and drew a heart around them.

At 7:30 P.M. on August 8th, about seventy-eight hours after the collapse, Segovia noted in his diary the sound of something spinning, grinding, and hammering against rock. For three hours, the roar grew steadily louder. At 10 P.M., Barrios was ready to believe it, too. It was unmistakably a drill, the sound travelling through two thousand feet of rock.

“Do you hear that, you bastards?” Sepúlveda shouted. “What a beautiful noise!”

Someone said that a drill could advance a hundred metres a day. At that rate, the drill might break through in five or six days.

That night, Segovia dreamed that he was at home, asleep in his own bed. His daughters were calling to him. For a moment, he was in a bright and open space, but then he opened his eyes and found himself on the floor of the Ramp near the Refuge, lying on cardboard, and he was swallowed up again by fear and longing.

Now the men could hear two drills headed toward them. A few hours later, Segovia noted the mood around him: “We are more relaxed. Down here, we’re all going to be family. We’re brothers and friends, because this isn’t the kind of thing that can happen to you twice.”

The next day, after the prayer session, they were given their meal: a single cookie, a spoonful of tuna, and an ounce or two of milk mixed with water. Someone proposed suing the mine owners. Juan Illanes suggested that if they
were rescued they should keep a “pact of silence” about the accident, telling only their lawyers what happened, so that they would have a better chance of punishing the mine owners in court. Esteban Rojas, a forty-four-year-old explosives expert, reacted angrily: “What’s the use of talking about money and lawyers while we’re still trapped down here?” It seemed wrong to think about going to court and settling scores when they were still buried in the mine.

“The drilling is going really slowly,” Segovia wrote in his diary a few hours later. “God, when are you going to end this torment? I want to be strong, but I have nothing left to give.”

The drilling continued unabated into the next day. The midday prayer ended with a recognition that it was August 10th, the Day of the Miner, a national holiday. The Day of the Miner falls on the day honoring St. Lawrence, the patron saint of miners. Mine owners pay tribute to their workers with a feast for them and their families. The men took a moment to say a few words in honor of themselves and their profession. Mining is intrinsic to Chile’s national identity. Pablo Neruda wrote a poem to the miners of the north, and Chilean students grow up reading books such as Baldomero Lillo’s “Sub Terra,” a collection of early-twentieth-century stories about mining work. The men in the San José Mine concluded their ceremony by singing the national anthem.

When the drilling faded, and the men stopped talking, Segovia and the others could hear an intermittent rumbling. It didn’t come from the walls, or from a distant rockfall, but from inside the Refuge, and Segovia took note of it in his diary. He didn’t know it, but this noise has a scientific name—borborygmus, the sounds caused by the layers of muscle in the men’s intestines squeezing food that wasn’t there. It was a gurgling set off by the remnants of the food they had swallowed a few hours earlier, made louder by the echo chamber of an empty stomach. Each contraction was amplified and transmitted for other hungry men to hear, causing them to think about food even more.

Despite his lack of standing in the mining hierarchy, Mario Sepúlveda decided that he would take control of the men’s fate: “We’re going to show that we are Chileans of the heart.”
ver since Omar Reygadas’s epiphany about God and the need to be strong for his miner brothers, he had said, again and again, “God is with us.” But the days of hunger, along with the fluctuating emotions as he listened for the drills, began to sap his strength. As he lay near the Refuge, he felt a pain in his chest, and then a burning sensation in his arm. Soon he lost the ability to move the arm. He believed that he was having a heart attack, and imagined his death, visualizing the thirty-two remaining men being left with his body, and how quickly his corpse would rot in the heat. While lost in these thoughts, he began to feel a fresh breeze blowing over him. He sat up, took out a cigarette lighter, and watched the flame bend, pointing upward on the Ramp. Air was rising from somewhere farther down in the mine. Reygadas announced his discovery to the other men, and he and a few others began walking into the deeper parts. The possibility that they might find a shaft drilled from the surface, and make contact with the outside world, drove them past several curves and switchbacks. They reached Level 80 and then Level 70, and the flame was still blowing upward. Finally, near Level 60, the flame blew straight up and then flickered and died. At Level 40, the flame moved back and forth and bent back on itself before going out. They inspected several abandoned corridors but never found the opening where fresh air was entering the mine. Still, Reygadas felt the tightness in his chest lift. “I started to breathe well again,” he said. “And when I had to walk back up to the Refuge the breeze stayed with me all the way.”

The cooler air returned every evening at six o’clock. “That little breeze would come and it would leave us calmer,” Reygadas said. He believed that in the bending flame he had seen something divine, God feeding oxygen to his ailing lungs.

ometimes José Henríquez told Bible parables from memory. One day, he spoke of Jonah. God sent Jonah on a mission to speak in a certain village. But instead Jonah got on a ship and went in the opposite direction. “Jonah was a guy with a bad temper, so God put the squeeze on him,” Henríquez said. The Lord sent a powerful storm to toss that ship about, and when Jonah’s shipmates realized that he was the source of God’s wrath they threw him overboard, where he was swallowed by a great whale. “Disobedience is never good,” Henríquez told his fellow-miners. Jonah was in the belly of Hell, in the depths, Henríquez said, using a word that he remembered from a Bible passage: profundidad.
Victor Segovia didn’t go to church much, but with each prayer session he felt that the union of the thirty-three men was a holy event. In his diary, Segovia wrote that before the accident he’d thought of church as a place where sinners went to seek forgiveness. But Henríquez spoke to him now of a message of hope and love. The Pastor had shed his shirt, cut down his pants to shorts, and walked around in work boots that he’d cut up until they looked like sandals. With his chest covered in sweat, with the matted fringe of hair on his head, Henríquez was beginning to look like a crazed mystic who lived in a desert cave. When he spoke of God, he seemed utterly convinced of what he was saying. For Segovia, the Pastor’s words were a revelation. “I see now that people who are thankful go to church, too, and that the people who go there have been touched by the grace of God,” he wrote.

The miners had survived for more than a week without a true meal, with no certain prospects that they would ever eat again, and so every word and small event seemed to have some deeper meaning. Henríquez told the story of the miracle of the loaves and fishes, when Jesus multiplied the bread and the fish to feed five thousand people. Then he led a prayer asking the Lord to find a way to make their small supply of food last longer.

Sepúlveda said, “Afterward, I’d see one of the boys walk over to the locker and try to see if there really might be more food there.”

Instead, the men were forced to scavenge. Yonni Barrios, who had failed to protect the food from Victor Zamora and the others, watched another miner pick up a discarded can of tuna and wipe the inside with his finger and lick it again and again. Others began to rummage through trash cans, and when they found orange peels they wiped them off and ate them. One devoured the brown remains of a pear.

As the men grew weaker, it was harder to walk up and down the Ramp. The surface drills used water to fight friction in the borehole, and the water seeped through and began to turn the ground to mud; it engulfed the men’s boots when they walked on it. Sepúlveda, bearded, shirtless, and soot-covered, stopped talking to the men in the Refuge, and they stared at the lonely spectacle he made as he trudged up to the camp on Level 105. He told the men that it was disgraceful that they were going to die down there, and they tried to cheer him up. When he returned to the Refuge, he fell into a fitful sleep. Victor Segovia heard him talking in his sleep, saying his son’s name: “Francisco.” Then Sepúlveda woke up, looking sullen and crushed, the man of so many words now unable to speak.
Juan Illanes, the mechanic who had urged the men to agree on a pact of silence about their story, installed lights near Level 105 and Level 90, but the sense of forbidding darkness grew as the days passed and more lamps dimmed and went out. The prospect of being surrounded by complete darkness caused Alex Vega to remember a miners’ legend: men left in the dark for too long eventually go blind. Jorge Galleguillos remembered another time when his lamp had stopped working. You get disoriented quickly, and it’s frightening, reaching out with your hands to try and find the cavern wall nearby. Eventually, Illanes discovered that he could charge some of the lamp batteries by using the vehicles’ generators.

On August 15th, their eleventh day underground, Segovia noted in his diary, “It’s 10:25 and the drilling has stopped once again. Again they sound really far. I really don’t know what’s going on up there. Why so many delays?” The next day, Segovia wrote, “Hardly anyone here talks anymore.” Then, on August 17th, “They are starting to give up. . . . I don’t think God would have saved us from the collapse just to let us die of starvation. . . . The skin now hugs the bones on our faces and our ribs all show and when we walk our legs tremble.”

The drilling continued, but intermittently. After a day, it seemed to be getting closer, and the men prepared for a possible breakthrough. They found a can of red spray paint, used in routine mine operations. If the drill bit broke through, they’d leave a mark on it with the paint, and when the bit was lifted up it would prove that there were survivors below. José Ojeda, who had remained alert despite his diabetes, explained that he had been taught to include three pieces of basic information in any message for potential rescuers: the number of trapped men, their location, and their condition. With a red marker and a piece of graph paper, he wrote such a message, boiling it down to seven words: “Estamos bien en el refugio los 33.” Richard Villarroel, the expectant father, found a wrench: if and when the drill bit broke through, he would pound on its steel casing, making a sound loud enough to travel up the two thousand feet or so of metal to the top.

After another day, it became clear that the drill had passed beneath them, and they tried to follow its sound, going lower and lower until it faded away. On August 19th, Segovia wrote, “We are getting desperate. One of the drills went
right by the walls of the Refuge but it didn’t break through.” The next day, he noted, “Perri’s spirits are very low.” They were now eating a cookie every two days. That day, they had only water. “The drill does NOT break through,” Segovia wrote on the twenty-first. “I’m beginning to wonder if there’s a black hand up above that doesn’t want us to get out.”

Without roughly a hundred and twenty grams of glucose a day, the human brain starts to malfunction. The trapped men were ingesting, on average, a sixteenth that amount. During the first twenty-four hours without steady food, the body produces glucose from the glycogen stored in the liver. After two or three days, the body begins to burn the fat stored in the chest, abdomen, and around the kidneys, but the central nervous system cannot survive on such fats. Instead, the brain is fed the ketone bodies produced by the liver as it processes the body fat. When the body’s fat reserves are exhausted, the protein in the body—primarily muscle—becomes the brain’s chief source of energy. The protein is gradually broken down into amino acids that the liver can convert to glucose. In effect, a man’s brain begins to eat his muscles to survive. This is the moment when starvation begins.

After two weeks, the smaller and thinner of the men had lost considerable muscle mass. Alex Vega’s clavicle was starting to push out against his skin. He looked like charqui, a Chilean idiom equivalent to “jerky.” Charqui de mariposa, Omar Reygadas called him—butterfly jerky. “You can imagine what butterfly charqui would be like. That’s basically just dust.”

Vega took this with the humor with which it was intended. All the men felt their metabolisms slowing. Even the most energetic were sleeping longer than normal, and a haze was starting to drift over their thoughts. Several were beginning to experience a side effect of prolonged hunger that has been noted by people who fast for a week or more: when they slept, their dreams were unusually long and vivid.

“I would sleep not to feel the hunger,” Carlos Mamani, the Bolivian, said. “Then I’d dream, and in my dreams I’d go to see my siblings. I’d wake up a bit, fall asleep for a long time, and I’d see another of my brothers.” He had ten brothers and sisters, who were dispersed across Bolivia. “I went to their houses. One right after the other. I
went to see my aunts. And my cousins, too.” In his dreams, he was walking on
the Altiplano, down unpaved roads, past corrals for llamas and goats. “I grew
up in the provinces,” he said. “In the countryside, they say that when someone
is about to die they walk at night. In my dreams I was walking.”

One night, Edison Peña moaned as he tried to sleep. “I’m dying, I’m
dying,” he said. Sepúlveda was lying next to him. Enough, Edison,
he thought. Finally, he moved his head back and forth in imitation
of Peña, mouth open to make a choking, gurgling sound, as if he
were suffering a final seizure. He launched into a movie-like death speech.
“This is the end, Edison,” he moaned weakly. “I’m dying. I’m going.
Tell . . . my . . . wife . . . that . . . ”

When Sepúlveda closed his eyes and went silent, Peña sat up, leaned over
Sepúlveda’s chest, and started to shake him.

“No, Perri, no!” Peña cried out. “No! Don’t die!”

Sepúlveda opened his eyes and broke into laughter.

For two weeks, Florencio Ávalos, the foreman, had driven up and down
the mine, gathering water, looking for passageways out, trying to send
messages to the top. He’d been going to the Refuge, too, to bolster the
spirits of his younger brother, Renán, who had spent nearly all his
time lying on a makeshift bed there. “Get up, Renán,” he said. He was afraid
that Renán might take the miner’s traditional way out of a desperate situation:
leaping to his death in the Pit. In the Pit, you could fall a hundred feet. A few
of the men confessed to thinking about this kind of death as an escape from
the mountain’s sporadic thunderclaps of falling rock.

One night, Ávalos fell asleep on a bed of rubber tubes, and woke to find water
rushing by his legs. It had seeped from the distant drills. Ávalos rose to his feet,
flailing in mud. He got into a pickup truck, but the wheels simply spun in the
mud. Later, as he walked uphill to retrieve drinking water, the futility of the
situation became too much to bear. He wandered away from the men ahead of
him and entered the cab of a truck. The battery of his headlamp was dead.
Hasta aquí llego, he thought. He’d reached the end of his journey. He leaned
back in the cab’s seat, exhausted. Let starvation take me away from here, he
thought, on the cushioned seat with the windows closed, away from the mud
and the thunder. He thought about his children and imagined them growing
up in his absence: Cesar Alexis—Ale—who was seventeen, the boy he and
Mónica had when they were teen-agers; and Bayron, who was seven. What would they look like as men? His death in this mountain would help make certain one thing about his sons’ future: neither would ever work in a mine.

When the men who had been walking with Ávalos noticed his absence, they went in search of him.

Ávalos fell into a deep sleep. When he woke up, he didn’t feel quite as desperate. Eventually, he saw beams of light headed toward him. He sat up in the pickup, and soon the search party’s headlamps were shining on his face.

“Here you are, Florencio.”

“We were worried about you.”

“We thought you threw yourself in the Pit.”

Breakfast, lunch, and dinner became a single event every two days: one cookie. At the end of the meal, there was dessert: a slice of peach, to be divided thirty-three ways. An act of surgery was required. “Excuse me, Perri,” one of the men said to Sepúlveda. “But isn’t that one piece there bigger than the others?” Finally, each miner took a sliver about the thickness of a fingernail.

The cookie, with forty calories and less than two grams of fat, wasn’t enough to keep them alive, and Victor Zamora could see that. “It’s the most terrible thing,” he said. “That’s what I’ll never forget: to see your compañeros dying before your eyes.”

By now, fifteen days after the collapse, the apology sessions had grown longer. Zamora, his curly mop of hair flattened by sweat and grime, stepped forward.

“I want to say some words to the group,” he began. “I made a mistake. I was one of the people who took the food out of the locker. I’m sorry.” It was the first time that some of the men heard about Zamora’s role in the raid. “I didn’t realize the harm I was causing by taking that food. Now I truly regret what I did.”

“You know, it’s O.K. to skip a news cycle.” Vega stepped forward. “Can I speak?” he asked. He looked smaller and frailer and more in need of a meal
Sepúlveda turned to Reygadas and whispered, “This guy is going to ask for more food. What do we do?”

“I’ll share a bit of my cookie with him, you another little bit,” Reygadas replied. “We’ll ask if there’s anyone else who wants to help out.”

But Vega wasn’t asking for more food. “This thing is going to go on for a while,” he began. One drill had just missed them, and it was possible that the next one they could hear coming would, too. “There’s only a little food left, and I think that today we shouldn’t eat. Let’s not eat. Let’s leave it for tomorrow, and that way we’ll last a day longer.”

Some of the men groaned and shook their heads. Let’s eat! I want to eat! But Vega’s act of nobility left the group deeply moved—the skinniest among them had put the collective health of his brothers beyond his own obvious need. They went three days with nothing but water.

Like Victor Segovia, several men wrote farewell letters. The next time they fell asleep, they might not wake up, or they might soon lack the strength to write. Some of them needed help to rise to their feet, supporting each other up and down the Ramp, to the pile of rocks that served as a latrine. Someone suggested that they connect hoses to the water tanks, because in a few days they would be too weak to travel higher in the mine and fill the containers they’d been bringing down to the Refuge. Some of the men wept as they wrote. Carlos Mamani felt badly for them, because only a broken man would cry in front of his co-workers. Like many of the younger miners in and near the Refuge, Mamani believed that the older ones had become more accepting of their fate.

Sepúlveda could see how emaciated the men in the Refuge were. Claudio Yáñez, a small man with angular features, had hollowed-out cheeks, sharpening a haunted, faraway look. Sepúlveda could get the rest of the men to sit up, but Yáñez just lay there.

“Hey, motherfucker, stand up!” Sepúlveda would say to Yáñez. “You have to stand up, because if you stay tossed there on the floor you’re going to die, and we’re going to eat you. For being lazy we’re going to eat you.” From a starving
man, the words carried a meaning they might not have otherwise. Yáñez began to climb to his feet, his knees buckling. “It was like watching when a little horse is trying to walk right after it’s born,” Reygadas said.

Each of the younger men had lost more than twenty pounds. When Vega stood up, his vision clouded and for a few seconds he went blind—a side effect of hunger, caused by Vitamin A deficiency. Many of the older, bigger men still had layers of fat around their waists, but their upper bodies had caved in, giving them a boyish appearance when they walked around shirtless. Yonni Barrios’s eyes had retreated into his skull, his once seductive brown irises fixed in a sad stare. When Jorge Galleguillos spoke, he seemed to be chewing his words. His legs and feet were swollen, and, to keep him off the muddy floor, other miners built a bed from a wooden pallet, and he lay there for hours, staring at the ceiling.

The faces and the arms of the trapped miners had grown as pale as mushrooms. The men averted their eyes from one another. Not from vanity: it was the way they felt inside—small, broken. Victor Segovia wouldn’t allow himself to believe that the latest drill would break through. Instead, he asked Sepúlveda, “What do you think dying is like?”

Sepúlveda said that it was like falling asleep. Peaceful. You closed your eyes, you rested. All your worries were over.

Up on Level 105, Vega dreamed that he was climbing through the mine. He squeezed past the stone wall blocking the Ramp and into the cavern of the Pit. He crawled over boulders, rising ever higher until he reached the opening. He walked out onto the surface and saw an entire city of rescuers and drillers trying to reach the men below. “We’re alive, we’re down there,” he told them. “I can show you the way.”

“Very good, Larry!
Just one more step
and you’ll have the
entire aisle
blocked!”

AUGUST 23, 1999
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Sometimes after 5 A.M. on August 22nd, Sepúlveda woke up from a dream at the command of his dead grandfather. The almost euphoric feeling of having seen his grandfather stayed with him as he took in the grinding and pounding sound of a drill that had become impossibly loud.

“It’s going to burst through,” José Ojeda said, in a matter-of-fact voice.
On the surface, several hundred family members had gathered near the entrance to the mining site. Farther up the mountain, Nelson Flores, who operated the controls of a Schramm truck-mounted drilling rig, manufactured in Pennsylvania, had been at work all night. Teams had been drilling around the clock for two weeks, and Flores had begun his shift at 10 P.M. the night before. He kept his foot on a platform attached to the rig, because the vibrations could tell him what the bit below was doing. At 5:50 A.M., he noted that the steel shaft turning a hundred and fourteen interconnected tubes below was starting to stutter in its rotation. Suddenly, the cloud of dust coming from the Schramm’s exhaust pipe stopped, and the pressure gauge dropped sharply. He put the engine into neutral. The rig turned quiet, and the silence was filled, almost immediately, by the sound of the men of his crew yelling and running toward him.

Six hundred and eighty-eight metres below, there was a small explosion just up the tunnel from the Refuge—poom!—followed by the sound of rocks tumbling to the ground. The grinding of metal against rock stopped, and was replaced by a whistle of escaping air. Richard Villarroel grabbed his wrench and, with Ojeda, ran toward the noise. A length of pipe was protruding from the rock, at a place where the wall and the ceiling met, and Villarroel watched as a drill bit inside the pipe lowered and rose, and lowered again. Up on the surface, Flores, realizing that the bit had entered an empty space, was “cleaning” the shaft. Then the drill bit extended to the mine floor and stayed there. Villarroel took his wrench and began pounding on the pipe protruding from the tunnel ceiling.

Villarroel had been waiting for days to put the wrench to use. It was three feet long, the biggest tool he had, and he struck it against the pipe with joy and desperation: We’re here! We’re here! Finally, his boss, Juan Carlos Aguilar, told him to stop. They had to think like miners, making sure that the roof of the tunnel where the drill had broken through didn’t crack and break, crushing a miner below it with a loosened slab of rock.

Soon, all thirty-three men had gathered around the pipe and the drill bit. The men stared at the drill bit in awe and joy, embracing and weeping. To Carlos Mamani, “It felt like a hand had punched through the rock and reached out to us.”

José Henríquez looked at the drill bit and said, “God exists.”
For the first few minutes, the men took turns pounding at the drill's shaft, hitting it with Villarroel's wrench and with loose stones and a hammer, not paying much heed to those who warned that the rock loosened by the drill could fall on their heads. “We were like little kids hitting a piñata,” Reygadas recalled. The men kept hitting until one of the miners drove up with a forklift. Two men got into a basket to reinforce the ceiling with steel bars. Several of the men yelled instructions: they had to erase any doubt that the people on the surface might have about men being alive down here. Make a sound, leave a mark, attach a note. Someone said to stop hitting the shaft, to see if the people at the top were answering, and Yonni Barrios put his ear to the shaft and said that he heard them tapping back. A miner tossed him a can of red spray paint, and he tried to leave a mark on the shaft, but the steel was covered in muddy water that erased the paint again and again.

Eventually, some of the paint seemed to stick. The men tied notes they'd prepared, more than a dozen, to the bit, wrapping them in pieces of plastic and strips of electrical tape and rubber tubing to protect them against the muddy mixture that was pouring down. They kept pounding on the pipe.

“Our plans? Of course you’re in our plans.”

APRIL 17, 2006
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Four hours after the drill bit broke through, it began to rise into the shaft. The men watched as it disappeared with their messages: personal letters, details about where the drill had broken through, and the seven-word note written by Ojeda. He’d wrapped it in rubber tubing and stashed it behind the hammer and the bit, because one of the miners said that that would be the safest place. The men then gathered to celebrate. Henríquez turned on his cell-phone camera.

In the video, more than half of the men are stripped down to their underwear. They start to chant, “Chi-chi-chi, le-le-le, mineros de Chile!” They laugh and cheer, and pass around a plastic bottle filled with dirty water as if it were champagne. Sepúlveda throws up his hands and waves them in the aggressive, pleading gesture that Chilean men make at soccer matches. Vega wraps his arm around Sepúlveda, and the entire group launches into the national anthem. As they begin to sing, they shout the words, but by the time they get to the third repetition of the final line their voices sound faint, and the song peters out.
ews of the breakthrough quickly spread among the family members in what had become known as Camp Esperanza, but they were separated by several layers of security from the drill site. A crew slowly raised the bit, removing the hundred and fourteen steel tubes that linked the bit to the machine on the surface, one after another, a process that stretched into the afternoon. Finally, the last tube emerged from the shaft, covered in mud. The drillers cleaned off the muck, revealing a clear red mark on the metal. A single, palm-size smudge had survived the journey to the top. “Was that there before?” Laurence Golborne, Chile’s Minister of Mining, asked. “No!” the drillers responded excitedly. Golborne could see that there was something wrapped around the drill bit, and he began to remove it. It was a piece of rubber tubing, and underneath it he could see scraps of paper. Of the dozen or more notes that the men had attached to the drill assembly, two had survived.

Golborne began to read the first one out loud: “The drill broke through at Level 94, at three metres from the front. On one side of the roof, close to the right wall. Some water is falling. We are in the Refuge. Drills have passed behind us.” Part of the note was torn off. It ended with “May God illuminate you. A saludo to Clara and my family. Mario Gómez.”

Someone began to read the second note: “Dear Lila. I am well, thank God. I hope to see you soon.”

“It’s a personal letter,” another person said. “We should save it.”

Meanwhile, one of the roustabout members of the drilling crew had nudged the piece of rubber tubing, which had fallen to the ground. The driller figured he’d pick it up as a souvenir, but when he took a closer look he noticed that there was something inside. “It’s another note!” someone yelled. Golborne opened the third message, written on a folded piece of graph paper: “We are well in the Refuge. The 33.”

Even before Golborne could announce what it said, those nearby had caught glimpses of the note and screamed out in joy: “They’re alive! All those bastards!” The workers cheered and embraced. One of the drillers fell to his knees. Some sobbed, in the way men do when their mothers die, or when their sons are born.
Several drillers ran down toward the tents of Camp Esperanza, which was dotted with media trucks and Catholic shrines. There were fires made by families keeping round-the-clock vigils. The drillers shouted that the miners were alive.

The three-inch-wide tube linking the interior of the mine to the rescuers on the surface allowed a probe to descend with a video camera. It captured the first images of the trapped men seen by the outside world—the haunting eyes of Luis Urzúa. Next came a telephone receiver. Edison Peña took the earpiece and listened as it filled with the robust, hopeful voices of people on the surface. There was a man saying that he was the Minister of Mining, and other voices, too. “I could hear this collection of people,” Peña recalled. “And I heard this very firm voice. . . . I broke down. I just wasn’t capable of speaking.”

After several hours, vials of glucose gel were lowered to the men through the plastic tube. In the days that followed, small amounts of protein drinks and fresh water were lowered to them, and then cereal and fruit in gradually increasing portions, as the Chilean medical staff heeded the advice of NASA scientists to “go low and slow” in feeding the miners.

“I need you to turn off the burger and step out of the bun.”

OCTOBER 17, 2011
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As the men gained strength, they began to suffer urine retention and a skin condition caused by fungi spreading inside the humid petri dish that the mine had become. To get the men out, the rescuers began drilling a twenty-eight-inch-wide shaft directed at a passageway near the mechanics’ workshop, but told them that they might have to wait until Christmas, some four months longer, to be rescued.

“Now I know how an animal in captivity feels, always depending on a human hand to feed it,” Victor Segovia wrote in his diary.

The mountain’s intermittent roars and wails reminded the men that the mine was still destroying itself, and that another collapse could kill them before the rescue shaft was ready. They also learned from newspapers and a palm-size television projector that had been lowered down to them that they had become worldwide celebrities.
“Buenos Días a Todos,” a morning show broadcast from Santiago, said that the government of the Dominican Republic had offered to fly all of them and their families to resorts there. “It was surreal,” Urzúa said later. “But after a while surreal things like that started to seem normal.”

A Chilean mining executive gave the equivalent of about ten thousand dollars to each man’s family, and urged the country to raise an additional million dollars for each of them. Offers of money for interviews and endorsements reached their family members. The men’s sudden wealth, and their growing fame, led many to bicker. Sepúlveda wrote to his son, describing himself as the group’s “absolute leader.” When the letter was leaked to the press, the miners split into pro- and anti-Sepúlveda camps. For the first time, the men began to fight about religion, and attendance at the daily prayers dropped off.

Sepúlveda said he could see the “insect” of greed and vanity destroying the brotherhood. Sin had filtered down from the surface, so on his thirty-seventh day underground he descended into the mountain to pray in a cavern at Level 44. “Have pity on us, and make us as we were before,” he said. At that moment, Sepúlveda said, he felt the presence of something evil. When he returned to the Refuge, he was covered in mud, as if he’d been in a wrestling match.

What happened to you? his fellow-miners asked.

“I was fighting the Devil,” Sepúlveda said.

A miners’ legend has it that Satan lives in gold mines. On the morning of their sixty-seventh day, the mountain began to rumble with explosions nearly as loud as those on the day of the collapse. The drilling of the rescue shaft had just been completed, after four weeks, and the rescue was scheduled to begin in three days; several of the men believed that the Devil was making one last effort to keep them inside.

In frantic phone calls to the surface, they begged the rescuers to begin bringing them out immediately. Word came back that they had to wait, while a winching device was prepared. Finally, on October 12, 2010, sixty-nine days after the collapse, the rescuers lowered a steel cylinder capsule, dubbed the Phoenix, into the shaft. Just before midnight, Florencio Ávalos, the foreman, got in it. The leaders of the rescue had decided that a younger and stronger man should go first, in case problems arose. A billion people watched his ascent, live, on TV. Alone in the capsule, Ávalos remembered the events of the past ten weeks, and his wedding day, and the births of his sons. The heat and
humidity inside the shaft began to diminish as Ávalos rose. When the capsule neared the surface, after a quarter of an hour, he felt the cool breeze of a spring night flowing over him.

Three months after the rescue, the men of the San José Mine were celebrated at Disney World. They wore yellow mining helmets with black mouse ears, and rode in old-fashioned cars down Main Street. “To be treated like a rock star—that was stressful,” Pedro Cortez, who was twenty-six when he was rescued, said. “People wanted to touch us. As if we were God, almost.” Strangers took pictures of them. “It’s a miracle we’re alive,” Cortez said. “We’re grateful to God and all the people who helped us. But it was like being in a movie about Holy Week, where Jesus is walking and everyone is following him.” Most of the miners went on other trips: to London, Madrid, Israel, the Parthenon. They received prizes and gifts, including bronze medals from Chile’s congress and Kawasaki motorcycles, and met with Chile’s President in La Moneda Palace.

“Those who can’t do, comment.”
FEBRUARY 13, 2012
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Most of the men spent a year or longer at home, and they felt obliged to attend all the official and unofficial events in their honor. “We became puppets,” Edison Peña said. “We’re going here, we’re going there. ‘Stand like this. Over here, over there, under the lights.’ We wanted to go out and bite the world. We had been born again.”

Yonni Barrios sometimes woke in the middle of the night and put on his mining helmet, turned on its headlamp, and sat in his dark living room, as if he were back inside the caverns of the San José. After returning from his trips abroad, Richard Villarroel, who underground had feared that his unborn son would be fated to a fatherless life, faced a surface reality in which he wasn’t the father he’d hoped to be. “I’m a harder person now,” he said. “I don’t have any feelings. . . . My wife has noticed it, too. Whatever happens around me, it’s like I don’t care. I have this disorder in my head.”

Carlos Mamani turned down an offer of a government job in Bolivia and eventually got work with a construction company in Copiapó. He operated a front loader like the one he used for half a day in the San José Mine. One day, as he was dumping dirt into a sifter, the cloud of dust transported him back to
the morning of August 5th. “I saw the entire collapse again, just like I lived it those first few moments,” he said. He opened the door of his loader and screamed.

The emotional crisis didn’t hit Victor Segovia until more than a year later. He became reclusive, rarely leaving his house. His turmoil began to manifest itself in physical maladies, including swollen limbs and difficulty in breathing. His doctors gave him medication, but at first it made him sick. Then he started to write again, keeping a diary, as he had underground. He called it “My Rescue.” He wrote about how no one asked him how he was feeling. They asked only to borrow money.

Most of the older miners accepted government retirement pensions; a few of the younger men took jobs with Codelco, the national mining company, where prized aboveground jobs awaited them. Some who stayed in Copiapó took jobs underground.

In the years after the rescue, Mario Sepúlveda relished his role as a media star. He started a foundation to build houses for people made homeless by the 2010 earthquake and the tsunami in Talcahuano, and starred in a 2014 World Cup commercial for the Bank of Chile. In private, he wept when he remembered how the miners had pulled together after the collapse, and he cursed and shouted when talking about the divisions among the men during the weeks after the first drill broke through. Freed of hunger, they had fought over the potentially lucrative deals that awaited them on the surface. Sepúlveda regarded a few of his former colleagues as enemies. But, on the occasions when all the men were summoned to a gathering, the miners embraced and told stories as if none of them had ever said an untoward word about another.

After the rescue, Alex Vega, the five-foot-three mechanic who had become “butterfly jerky” underground, suffered severe mood swings, and had nightmares about being buried alive. If you asked him about his experience of being trapped, his hands would start to tremble, and the shaking would spread through his body.

Eventually, Vega came to think that a job was the best therapy, and nearly a year after the rescue he went back to work, as an aboveground mechanic at a mining company. He had avoided talking to his relatives about his time underground, and he decided to host a family gathering at which he spoke of
his hunger and momentary blindness, of his smallness before the immense, crumbling mountain, and how they all had prepared for a slow death in the dark.

When the nightmares didn’t stop, Vega decided to confront them directly. A brother-in-law worked in a mine that reached three hundred metres below the surface, half as deep as the San José. Let me go to work with you, Vega asked him. I need to go back in. Just for a few days.

A year after teams of rescuers pulled him out of the collapsed mountain, Vega put on a mining helmet again. He climbed into the back of a pickup truck and descended through a tunnel that followed a vein of ore into the deep, hot earth. ♦