Hollow

By Breece D’J Pancake

Hunched on his knees in front of the three-foot coal seam, Buddy was lost in the back-and-forth rhythm of the truck mine’s relay: the glitter of coal and sandstone in his cap light, the setting and lifting and pouring into the cart that carried the stuff to the mouth of the mine. This was nothing like shaft mining, no deep tunnels or up-and-down man-trips, only the setting, lifting, pouring, only the rumbling of the relay cart and the light-flash from caps in the relay. In the pace of work, he daydreamed his father lowering him into the cistern: many summers ago he touched the cool tile walls, felt the moist air from the water below, heard the pulley squeak in the circle of blue above. The tin of the well-pail buckled under his tiny feet, and he began to cry. His father hauled him up. “That’s the way we do it,” he said, laughing, and carried Buddy to the house.

But that came before everything; before they moved from the ridge, before the big mine closed, before welfare. Now, at the far end of the relay, the men were quiet, and Buddy wondered if they thought of stupid things. From where he squatted he could see the gray grin of light at the mouth of the truck mine, the March wind spraying dust into little clouds. The half-ton relay cart was full now, and the last man in the relay shoved it toward the chute at the mine-mouth on two-by-four tracks.

“Take a break” came from the opening, and as he set his shovel aside to rise from where he knelt at the coal face, Buddy saw his cousin Curtis start through the mine-mouth. Curtis was dragging a poplar post behind him as he crawled past the relay cart toward the face. Buddy watched while Curtis worked the post upright from the floor to catch the weight of the ceiling. It was too short, and Curtis hammered wedges in to tighten the fit.

“Got it?” Buddy asked.

“Hell no, but she looks real pretty.”

Estep, Buddy’s sidekick, grunted a laugh. “Damn seam’s gettin’ too deep. Ain’t nothin’ but coal in this here hole. When we gonna hit gold?”

Buddy felt Estep’s cap light on his face and turned toward it. Estep was grinning, a purple fight cut oozing through the dust and sweat on his cheek.

“Chew?” Estep held out his pouch, and Buddy took three fingers before they leaned against each other, back to back, stretching their legs, working their chews.

“Face is a-gettin’ pretty tall,” Estep said. Buddy could feel the voice in his back.

“Same thing’s happenin’ up Storm Creek,” he said, pulling up his sagging kneepads.

“Curt,” Buddy shouted, “when’d they make a core sample on this ridge?”

“Hell’s bells, I don’t know,” Curtis said, trying to work in another wedge.

“Musta been sixty years ago,” Estep said. “Recollect yer grandaddy shootin’ at ‘em. Thought they’s Philadelfy law’ers.”

“Yeah,” Buddy said, laughing as he remembered the tales.

From near the opening, where the rest of the relay gathered for air, came a high-pitched laugh, and Buddy’s muscles went tight.

“One a-these days I’m gonna wring that Fuller’s neck,” Buddy said, spitting out the sweet tobacco juice.

“What he said still eatin’ at ya?”

“He ain’t been worth a shit since he got that car.”

“It’s Sally, ain’t it?”

“Sally?” Buddy said. “Naw, let’er go. Worthless …”

The group laughed again, and a voice said, “Ask Buddy.”

“Ask ‘im what?” Buddy shined his light along the row of dirty faces; only Fuller’s was wide with a grin.

“Is Sal goin’ back to whorin’?” Fuller said, smiling.

“God damn you,” Buddy said, but before he could get up, Estep hooked both his elbows in Buddy’s, and Fuller laughed at his struggle. Curtis scrambled back and grabbed Buddy’s collar.

“I reckon you all rested ‘nough,” Curtis shouted, and when they heard coal rattling down from the bin to the truck at the mine-mouth, they picked up their shovels, got into line.

Buddy loosened, giving in to Curtis and Estep. “Tonight at Tiny’s,” he shouted at Fuller.

Fuller laughed.

“Shut up,” Curtis said. “You and Estep work the face.”

Estep let go, and they crawled to the coal face and picked up the short-handled spades. The face had already heightened to four feet, and both men could now work on their knees, stretching up to knock sparkling chunks into the pile, pushing it back for the relay.

“Bet this whole damn ridge is a high seam.”

“Make it worth more than ten swats a day.”

“By God,” Buddy said, and as he dug, wondered if the extra money would make Sally stay. Remembering Fuller, he hit the face harder, spraying coal splinters into the air.

Estep stopped digging, and ran a dirty sleeve across one eye. Buddy was coughing in a raspy wheeze, flogging coal to his feet. “Stop killin’ snakes—throwin’ stuff in my eyes,” Estep called out.

Buddy stopped digging. Estep’s voice washed over his anger, leaving him small and cold in the glint of the coal face, yet bold and better than Estep or Fuller.

“Sorry, it’s just I’m mad,” he said between coughs.

“Get yer chance tonight. C’mon, pace off—one two …”

Together they added speed and threw the relay back into rhythm. The chink of spades and scrape of shovels slipped into their muscles until only the rumble of the return truck could slow them. The seam continued to rise where it should have faulted, and they could rise to their feet while they dug toward the thin gray line of ceiling.

“Get some picks,” Buddy said, grinning.

“Naw, needs shorin’ yet.”

Curtis slipped through the relay to the face, his light showing through the dust in up-down streams. When he got down to Buddy and Estep, they leaned against the sidewalls to give him room, and he stuck a pocket level to the ceiling, watching as the bubble rose toward the face.

“Knock off till Monday,” he said. “We ain’t got the timbers fer this here.”

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As the other men crawled out toward the coal-waste pile, a whisper of laughter seeped back through the mine to the face, and Buddy dropped to his belly to slink outside, unhurried. Even a clam crawl had winded him, and he waited by the chute for Estep and Curtis as the cold air dried his sweat, sealing the dirt to his skin. Beneath the whining low gears of the coal truck, he could hear a dog barking up from the hollow. He sat down hard, and leaned against the chute.

From the entrance to the hilltop was a wold of twenty yards where the dead stalks of broom sedge rippled in the wind. Buddy figured the overburden of dirt could be moved in a month, the coal harvested in less than a year. He knew Sally would not wait, was not sure he wanted her.

He remembered a time when the price of her makeup and fancy habits would have fed his mother and sisters something besides the mauve bags of commodities the state handed out.

Estep emerged, and Buddy offered him a smoke as they watched the truck shimmy under the bin, leveling its load.

“Goddamned cherry picker,” Estep grunted.

“Gonna be lots more cherry—all that goddamned coal.” Buddy looked to the western ridges, where the sun set a cold strip of fire.

Curtis came up behind them, smiling. “I’m gon’ home an’ get all drunked up.”

“Last time I done that,” Estep said, “got me a new baby. Gonna watch ol’ Mad Man here so’s he don’t tear up Tiny’s.”

“That’s where I’ll be, by God,” Buddy said.

“Just leave ‘nough of Fuller to crawl in that doghole on Monday,” Curtis said, taking off his cap. Buddy stared at the lines of gray in his hair where the coal dust had not settled.

“I ain’t makin’ no promises,” Buddy said as he started down the path toward the road.

“Pick ya up about eight tonight,” Estep yelled, watching Buddy wave his lunch bucket from the trail.

Night rose up from the hollow, and as he came to the dusty access road, Buddy could feel the cold air washing up around him, bringing back the cough. Patches of clouds gathered over the hollow and glowed pink. He turned onto the blacktop road, banging his lunch box against his leg as he walked, and remembered hating Fuller as a boy because Fuller had called him a ridge-runner.

He laughed again at the thought of the coal. He would have a car by fall, and a new trailer—maybe even a double-wide. He tried to think of ways to get Curtis to give up dogholing, and for a moment thought of asking Sally to go into Chelyan with him to look at trailers, but remembered all her talk of leaving.

Through the half-light, he could make out the rotting tipple where his father was crushed only ten days before they shut it down, leaving the miners to scab-work and welfare. The tipple crackled in the cold as the sun’s heat left it, and on a pole beside it an unused transformer still hummed. No more coal, the engineers had said, but Buddy had always laughed at engineers—even when he was in an engineer company in the Army. At the foot of the smoldering bone pile where the shale waste had been dumped, Estep’s little boy wandered, searching.

“What ya doin’ there, Andy?”

“Rocks,” the boy said. “They’s pitchers on ‘em.” He handed Buddy a piece of shale.

“Fossils. Ol’ dead stuff.”

“I’m collectin’ ‘em.”

“What ya wanna save ol’ dead stuff for?” he said, handing the shale back.

The boy looked down and shrugged.

“You get on home, hear?” Buddy said, watching as Andy disappeared down the secondary road, leaving him to the hum of the transformer. He wondered why the boy looked so old.

As he started up the road, he could hear the dogs packing up, their howls echoing from the slopes, funneling through the empty tipple. The clouds had thickened, and Buddy felt the first fine drops of a misty rain soak through the dirt on his face. When the trees thinned, he saw his trailer, rust from the bolts already streaking the white paint of last summer. The dogs were just up the road, and he wondered if they could smell Lindy, his bluetick bitch, in the trailer. Sally sat by the window, looking, waiting, but he knew it was not for him.

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Lindy smiled at Sally, wagged at the sound of Buddy’s footsteps from the bedroom and down the hall. Sally walked away from the door window, and set the plates by the stove.

“Estep’s stoppin’ ‘round eight,” Buddy said, frowning at the turnips and beans beneath the pot-lids of supper. “No meat?”

Sally said nothing, but took up her plate and dolloped out her food, leaving the sidemeat for Buddy. She watched him serve himself, and found herself staring at the freckles of black dust embedded in his face. A dog bark broke her stare, and she went to the table. She could hear them sniffing under the floor.

“They bother hell outa me,” she said when Buddy sat.

“Well, she stays in. I don’t need no litter of mutts.” Buddy mashed fat between his fork prongs, fishing the lean from the mess, and watched Sally eat. “They’s gonna be money, Sal.”

“Don’t start up. They’s al’s *gonna*, but they ain’t never any.”

“This time’s for sure. Estep an’ me, we worked that stuff today. A D-9 dozer an’ steamshovel’d a-fixed us real quick. Curt’s got the deed an’ all.”

“Thought yer folks settled these here ridges.”

He remembered standing in the sun at a funeral—he could not say whose, but the scent of Vitalis from his father’s hands had turned his stomach, and his new shoes pinched his feet.

“Never had a pot to piss in, neither. Stick ‘round, Sal.”

With her fork, Sally drew lazy curves in her bean-soup, and shook her head. “Na I’m tired of livin’ on talk.”

“This ain’t talk. What made ya stay with me this long?”

“Talk.”

“Love? Love ain’t talk.”

“Whore’s talk,” she said.

His hand flashed across the table, knocking her head askance, and she flushed. She got up slowly, put her plate in the sink, and walked down the hail to the bedroom. Buddy heard her turn on the TV, but the sound died down, leaving only the whimper of the dogs. He watched his plate turn cold, grease crusting the edges.

Getting bourbon for his coffee, he set his plate on the floor for the bitch, and went to the window. With lamplight shining green in their eyes, the pack circled the trailer, talking, waiting. He turned off the lamp, and looked for the thing Sally stared after, but only the light-gray sky and near-black ghost of the road touched the hollow.

In the darkness he found his 30-30 rifle and his flashlight, opened the slatted window, and shoved them out. Passing over two strong-boned hounds, his light landed on a ragged spitz and he fired, the shot singing through the washes and gullies.

The dogs scattered into the brush beyond the road, leaving the thrashing spitz to die in the yard. Lindy paced the trailer’s length to the sound of the whines, but, when they stopped, she leaped up and lay on the couch, her tail flapping each time Buddy moved.

The shot jerked Sally from her half-sleep, but she settled back again, watching the blue TV light play against the rusty flowers of ceiling leaks as the last grains of cocaine soaked into her head. She stretched, felt afloat in an ocean of blue light rippling around her body, and relaxed. She knew she was prettier than the girls in the Thunderball Club, or the girl on the TV, and lots more fun.

“Lotsss,” she whispered, over and over.

Buddy’s silhouette appeared in the doorway. “They won’t be back,” he said.

“Who?” Sally sat up, letting the sheets slide away from her breasts.

“The dogs.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Ya can’t make any money at it, Sal. Too much free stuff floatin’ ‘round.”

“Yeah? An’ all this money yer makin’s gonna keep me here?”

He turned back down the hall.

“Buddy,” she said, and heard him stop. “C’mon.”

As he shed his shoes, she noticed the slope in his back more than usual, but when he turned to her, his chest swelled as he unbuttoned his shirt. From where he stood, the hail light mixed with the TV, flashing her eyes white and pink as she moved in the blanket-wave to make room for him.

He climbed in, and his cold hands stroked her waist, and she felt the little tremors in his muscles. She dragged a single finger down his spine to make him shiver.

“When ya leavin?”

“Pretty soon,” she said, pulling him closer.

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Estep honked his horn again, and Lindy danced by the door, howling.

“I’m comin’, dammit,” Buddy muttered, buttoning his shirt. The clock on the nightstand glowed ten after eight.

Sally propped her pillow against the headboard and lit another cigarette. As she watched Buddy dress, her jaw tightened, and she rolled ashes from the tip of her cigarette until the fire came to a point. “See ya,” she said as he started down the hail.

“Yeah. See ya,” he answered, as he closed the door quickly to keep the dog inside.

Outside, the mist mingled with snow, and water beaded on the fur of the spitz. Buddy left it to warn the pack, and walked toward the clicking of Estep’s engine and the soft clupping of wipers. Before he could open the door, a pain jabbed his lungs, but he held his breath against it, then tried to forget it in the blare of the car’s radio.

“Whadya know, Mad Man?” Estep said as Buddy climbed in, coughing.

“Answer me this—Why’d ya reckon Curt wants props for?”

“To shore the damn face, dumbshit.”

“An’ doghole that goddamn seam, too. He’s a ol’-time miner. He loves doin’ all that ol’-time shit,” Buddy said.

“Whadya drivin’ at?”

“How many ya reckon’d walk out if I’s to dump the water Monday?”

“Buddy, don’t go callin’ strike. I got family.”

“C’mon—how many ya reckon?”

“Most,” Estep said. “Maybe not Fuller.”

Buddy nodded; “I’d say so, too.”

“Yer talkin’ weird. Curt’s kin—ya can’t go callin’ strike on yer kin.”

“I like Curt fine,” Buddy said, coughing. “But I’m tellin’ ya they’s a easy way to run that coal.”

“Won’t work, Buddy. Operation like that’d put ever’body outa work. ‘Sides, land ain’t good fer nothin’ after ya strip it.”

“That land,” Buddy said, “that land ain’t no good noway, and we could so use work. We’d use ever’body in our hole. An’ Storm Creek. An’ that piddlin’ of Johnson’s. Fair an’ equal. Know how much that’d be?”

“Can’t be much with all the fellers in the line.”

“Try on fifty thou. Does it fit?” Buddy slapped Estep’s arm. “Well, does it?”

“Where’d we get the machines?”

“Borrow on the coal. Curt’s got the deed—just needs some new thinkin’ put in his head’s all. You with me?”

“I reckon.”

They rode, watching the snow curve in toward the lights, melting on the windshield before the wiper struck it. Through the trees, Buddy could see the string of yellow light bulbs above the door and windows of Tiny’s.

“Johnson found out who’s stealin’ his coal,” Estep said, letting the car slow up. “Old Man Cox.”

“How’s he know for sure?”

“Drilled a chunk an’ put in a .410 shell. Sealed ‘er over with dust an’ glue.”

“Jesus H. Christ.”

“Aw, didn’t hurt ‘im none. Just scared ‘im,” Estep said, guiding the car between chugholes in the parking lot.

Buddy opened his door. “Man alive, that’s bad,” he mumbled.

Inside Tiny’s, Buddy nodded and waved to friends through the smoke and laughter, but he did not see Fuller. He asked Tiny, but the one-eared man only shrugged, setting up two beers as Buddy paid. He walked to the pool table, placed his quarter beside four others, and returned to lean against the bar with Estep.

“Slop,” Buddy yelled to one of Johnson’s shots.

“Slop you too,” Johnson said, smiling. “Them quarters go fast.”

Fuller came in, walked to the bar, and shook his head when Tiny came up.

“’Bout time ya got here,” Buddy said.

“Sal’s out yonder. Wants to talk to ya.”

“Whadya got? Carload of goons?”

“See fer yerself,” Fuller said, waving toward the window. Sally sat with Lindy in the front seat of Fuller’s car. Buddy went out and motioned for Sally to roll down the window, but she opened the door, letting Lindy out.

“You babyset for a while,” she said.

Fuller laughed as he started the car.

Buddy bent to collar Lindy, but the bitch stayed by him. Straightening himself, Buddy saw, through the rear window as the car turned, his TV bobbing in the back seat.

“C’mon,” Estep said from behind him. “Let’s get drunked up an’ shoot pool.”

“Yer on,” Buddy said, leading the dog into the bar.

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Buddy lay on the trailer’s carpet, a little boll of rayon batting against his nostril as he breathed, and tried to remember how he got there, but Sally’s smile in his mind jumbled him. He remembered Estep driving him back, and he remembered falling down in the parking lot, and hitting Fred Johnson, but he did not know why.

He stood up, shook himself, and supported himself down the hall to the bathroom. The blood flow from his head and the shock of the light turned the room purple for a moment, and he ran water from the shower on his head to clear the veil. Looking into the mirror, he saw the imprints of the carpet pattern on his cheek, the poison hanging beneath his eyes. He wanted to throw up, but could not.

“Ol’ dead stuff,” he muttered, and heaved dryly.

Atop the commode sat a half-finished bourbon and coke. He tossed it down and waited for it to settle or come up again. Leaning against the wall, he remembered the dog and called to her, but she did not come. He looked at his watch: it was five-thirty.

He went into the living room and opened the door—the wet snow was collecting in patches. He called Lindy, and she came to him from behind the trailer with a hound close behind her. He shut the door between the dogs and sat on the couch. Lindy hopped up beside him. “Poor ol’ girl,” he said, patting her wet side. “Yer in fer the works now.” His knuckles were split, and blood flaked from his fingers, but he could not feel them.

“Sal’s gone, yes, she is. Yes, she is. Couple of months, an’ we’ll show her, yes we will.” He saw himself in Charleston, in the Club, then taking Sally home in his new car.

“Hungry, ol’ girl? C’mon, I’ll fix ya up.”

In the kitchen, he looked for fresh meat to treat her, and, finding none, opened a can of sardines. Watching her lap them up, he poured himself a bourbon and leaned back against the counter. Sally’s plate lay skinned with bean-soup in the sink, and for a moment he missed her. He laughed to himself: he would show her.

Lindy walked under the table and coughed up her sardines.

“Don’t blame ya a damn bit,” he said, but in the roil of sardines and saliva, he saw himself cleaning it up, knew the smell would always be there. There was no reason he should have to clean up, no reason he could not have meat, or anything he wanted. He took up his rifle, which was leaning where he had left it, and Lindy barked around his heels. “No,” he shouted, hanging her by the collar with his forefinger until he could shut the door.

Outside the snow fell harder and in thick, wet lumps, making patterns in the darkness. The climb up the hill to the ridge behind the trailer stirred his lungs to bleeding, and he stopped to spit and breathe. Rested, he walked again in a quiet rhythm with the rustle of snow on the dead leaves.

In the brush by the trail, a bobcat crouched and waited for the man to clump by, its muscles tight in the snow and mist. Claws unsheathed, it moved only slightly with the sounds of his steps until he was far up the trail, out of sight and hearing. The cat moved down the trail and stopped to sniff the blood-spit the man had left behind.

By the time he crested the ridge, Buddy could feel the pain of trailer heat leave his head, and he stopped short of the salt blocks he had laid out last fall. He held in a breath to slow the wheezing, and when it stopped, sat on his old stump while the first mild light of the sky glowed brown. He loaded his gun, and watched a low trail in the brush, a trail he saw through outlines of snow in the ghost-light. From the hollow, dog yelps carried to the ridge. The trail was empty.

Behind him, something rattled in the leaves, and he turned his head slowly, hearing the bones in his neck click. In the brown light he made out the rotted ribs of an old log barn he had played in before they sold the land and moved to the hollow. Something scurried past the barn and ran away from him and up the ridge. From the baying of the dogs below, he was sure it was a fox.

Between the clouds and the hills hung the sun, moving fast enough to track, making the snow glisten on the branches. When he looked away from the sun, his eyes were drawn to the cool shadow of a deer standing against the yellow ribbon of sunlight.

He moved slowly, lifting the gun to his face, aiming into the shadow, and before the noise splintered into the hollow, he saw a flash of movement. He ran to the place where the deer had stood, but there was no blood. He tracked the animal only ten yards to the spot where it had fallen. It was a doe with a pink bloodless lip of wound near her shoulder.

Working quickly, he split her hind tendons, threaded them with a stringer, and hoisted her from a low limb. He cut across the throat, and blood dripped into the snow, but as he ran the knife up the belly, something inside the carcass jolted, moved against the knife point. He kept cutting, and when the guts sagged out, a squirming lump fell at his feet.

He kicked the unborn fawn aside, disconnected the doe’s guts, sliced off the hindquarters, and let the rest of the carcass fall for the scavengers to find. He laid three small slices of liver aside in the snow to cool.

Warm doe blood burned his split knuckles, and he washed them with snow, remembering now that the feeling had returned, why he had hit Fred Johnson—for spiking Old Man Cox’s coal. He began to laugh. He could see Old Man Cox screaming his head off. “Shit,” he said, laughing and shaking his head.

He bit off a piece of the cool, raw liver and, as it juiced between his teeth, watched the final throes of the fawn in the steamy snow. He could not wait to dump the water at the mine tomorrow, and laughed as he imagined the look on Curtis’s face. “Strike,” he muttered over and over.

On a knoll in the ridge, run there by the dogs, the bobcat watched, waiting for the man to leave.