

## A Big Empty

*Rhonda Browning White*

We hadn't talked since we left our West Virginia homeplace over two hours ago, both of us teary-eyed, too afraid to put words into the space already overfull of emotion. Every now and then, I'd hear Romie sniffle in the seat beside me, and she'd squeeze my knee, or I'd squeeze hers. It was the only way to say what we felt. It surprises me then that she speaks when we're partway through East River Mountain Tunnel.

"Look at them cracks," she says. "You think it's even safe to drive through here?"

I register her words and peer out the Jeep window at the long, zigzagged cracks between the bricks that hold the land away from us. "I feel safe," I say. And I almost do. Five years of underground mining taught me to seek a measure of calm in the disquiet of trespassing the belly of the earth. There's always danger, sure—men get crushed in roof-falls, die in fires and explosions, breathe the silica and coal dust that seizes up their lungs—but surely everybody knows tearing apart a mountain can kill you. Violence done to the land can never come to a good end.

That's why we're leaving.

I reach out a hand and lay it on the soft mound of Romie's belly, as if I can protect this life inside of her that is part mine. She lifts my hand, kisses my palm, and places it again over her womb as we leave the tunnel and drive into morning brightness.

Romie miscarried her first baby. We learned she was pregnant with that one on the day of Daddy's funeral, but we should have suspected it sooner, as Romie had been sick a while. She had it in her head that she had Crohn's disease, like my daddy. I have to admit, I worried about that, too, her not eating much, sick to her stomach, losing weight—just like Daddy started out. Even when

she fainted next to Daddy's casket, I never thought *baby*. People faint at funerals, don't they? Grief, stress, exhaustion. Lord knows, she'd worn herself down those last days Daddy was alive, cleaning him, changing him, feeding him ice chips or broth with a teaspoon. She hardly slept.

It was Momma's oldest friend, Bessie Harmon, who held Romie's head in her lap right there on the floor of the funeral home, looked up at me with a smile and said, "You don't know, do you? She's with child." Bessie was known all over Stump Branch to be some kind of seer, but if she knew then that Romie's baby wouldn't live but another four months, she didn't let on.

The doctor said there was no explanation they could find for the late miscarriage, but Romie blamed it on the land. Said the land was poison, poisoned by mountaintop removal mining and the mine owners. Said if we keep on killing the land, the land has no choice but to kill us right back.

Daddy felt that way about the land, too. Months after the funeral when Romie told me about him wanting to blow up the mine where I worked, it shocked me. Made me stop and think. My daddy loved mining. Or used to, before they started lopping off the mountains. Fifty years he worked underground. Went from shoveling coal into a rail-cart to watching it gouged out with a continuous miner and dumped onto conveyor belts. I seen his face the first time he saw the dragline megaexcavator shearing off the head of Kayford Mountain. Looked like he'd get sick.

Made me feel sickly, too, watching the monster that stands taller than Lady Liberty eat two-hundred-forty ton of mountain in every bite, two bites a minute. *Progress*, they call it. Progress that puts thousands of underground miners like me out of work. Progress that changes the land forever. Progress that pumps sickness into the water supply, kills fish and deer and daddies and babies.

It was Daddy's plan for me and Romie to pack up and head to North Carolina, get out of the West Virginia mountains before the coal companies flatten them all, before the mountains bury us in return. It felt like a message from beyond, then, when we learned

on the first anniversary of Daddy's death that Romie was pregnant again. I knew right then we had to leave.

By the time we drive through Mount Airy, we're breathing easier, talking easier. We plan how to decorate the nursery, and I tell Romie I want to do it in Flintstones. Put a big old Pebbles and a Bam-Bam holding a club on the wall over the crib. Romie looks horrified, and I goose her kneecap, feel a thrill in my chest when she giggles. I'm excited at the chance for a fresh start, but I still feel the cord of the mountains pulling at me every time I look in the rearview mirror. I stare ahead and make myself look towards what will be.

Three weeks into my new job, I still ain't used to working in the Greensboro heat. I take off my hardhat, wipe the sweat and yellow dirt from my forehead and look towards the treeline, thirsty for shade. My first gig with the crew at Billings Construction is to build a home improvement warehouse, one of them big-box stores that eats up acres of land. Two of the men I work with are from West Virginia, and the owner Mack Billings used to spend summers with his grandparents up in Fairmont. He took a liking to me right away, said he'd hire more West Virginia boys if they'd come down here. Said we're the best workers he's got, 'cause we know labor, and we know hard times, and we ain't afraid to earn our pay.

I'm earning it, all right. I'm on my second T-shirt today—first one was dripping wet by ten-thirty—and it's not even lunchtime. Leveling footers for concrete under the Carolina sun makes underground mining in the cool darkness seem like a pleasant memory, so I know the heat must be affecting my mind.

Mack landed a contract to build two of the big stores, one each on opposite sides of Greensboro, and he said that'll keep us tied up for nearly a year, though there's a short break in between he'll try to fill. That's security like I never had. We've got good insurance that even covers our families, so we don't have to worry about paying the hospital when Romie has the baby.

There's other good benefits, too. Mack graduated Chapel Hill, and he's all about his men getting an education. He told all of us that if we get our EMT license, he'll pay for the classes, plus he'll up our pay seventy-five cents on the hour. Only three months to graduate, so that's a deal I'm taking. Mack said it makes us safer workers, and it lowers company insurance, too.

Romie loves the idea. "I'll study your books alongside you, Jasper," she says, tossing aside another empty cardboard box. She's done most of the unpacking herself while I work, which is just as well, since she's particular about where everything goes. *Nesting*, Mack called it. "If we study together," Romie says, "when the baby's born and I go to nursing school, I'll have a jumpstart on the other students."

I think it's a fine plan, and before long, we're discussing aortas and hemophiliacs at the dinner table.

The whole thing seems funny to me, and I tell Bucky and Mack about it over lunch. Mack looks at me with that squint he gets when he ain't sure about something, and he tells me to be careful about letting Romie get smarter than me. I ask him what he means.

"You can't let your woman pass you by, Jasper. Got to stay one step ahead of her. Be smarter, be stronger, keep her under control."

I have to laugh. He don't know Romie like I know Romie. There ain't no keeping that woman under control.

Mack watches me a full minute, then he puts a hand on my shoulder. "Tell you what," he says, "why don't we go to B.G. McGee's on Saturday, grab a burger and a beer, and watch the Tarheels beat the Mountaineers."

"I'll be there," I say. "And we'll drink a cold one and watch the Mountaineers whup the Tarheels."

Saturday rolls around, and I'm surprised at the way Mack's tongue loosens after he downs a few. He starts talking about women, admits he's fresh out of his second marriage by only a few months.

“Married Satan’s spawn the first time.” Mack smirks. “The other one wasn’t bad, at first, but then she got above me.” He lifts an eyebrow, a warning.

“How do you mean?”

“It’s what I was talking about on the site the other day.” He draws the last from his bottle of beer, throws up a meaty hand for the bartender to bring him another. “She was—*is*—an attorney.”

I let out a whistle. “That had to hurt.” I chuckle.

Mack laughs, too. “It could have. She was fair, though. I put her through law school. You know that mirrored-glass building on Eugene Street? That’s her law firm. I built it for her. She took that, I kept the house.” He swabs at a puddle of ketchup with a french fry, downs it, then looks at me straight-faced. “Be careful is all I’m saying.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“Romie wants to go to nursing school. You work construction.” He lifts his beer, as if in a toast. “Reputable business, no doubt. It’s done me well.” He pulls a swig from his beer. “I got a degree in engineering, studied a little business along the way, decided I’d start my own company. Had my degree before she had hers. But while I was working, starting my business, building us a house, throwing up stores and condos and law firms, she was getting smarter. Too good for me. Next thing I know, she’s marrying a judge. Someone who understands her, she said, who can relate to her.” His voice goes up an octave at this last, and I press my lips together to keep from grinning.

I take a drink and think about Mack’s words, then I square my shoulders. Mack don’t know us. He don’t know what Romie’s done for me, for Daddy. He don’t know she’s the one who took Daddy’s OxyContin to Jimbo’s house that night and made the trade for the stack of cash that brought us here. She wouldn’t let me risk losing my job, said if she got caught, they wouldn’t be as hard on a pregnant woman.

Mack’s eyebrows raise, and I realize I’m looking at him harder than I mean to. “That won’t happen to us,” I say. “We’ve been through a lot together. We’re having a baby.”

He lifts his beer again, this time towards me, and our bottles ring together. “Congratulations, man. I wish you all the best in the world.”

Romie and I decide we’ll call our baby girl Jessica Marie when she’s born, name her after our deceased mothers. I pray each night she’ll be born healthy, with my blue eyes and Romie’s pout of a mouth. We’ve been here three months, and Romie spends her days now shopping for miniature dresses, applying to nursing programs and reading used textbooks so she can get ahead before school starts in the fall. “The baby’s going to eat up a lot of my time, Jasper,” she says, “so I want to learn all I can while I have some peace and quiet.”

I ain’t forgot what Mack said, and he’d remind me of it, if I did. I pay attention to what Romie reads and what she says, and I keep some of the books she’s read in my truck nowadays, so I can read history and Hemingway during lunch break, work on my own education, so we can stay on level ground.

It takes no time to finish the home improvement store, and Mack gets us a contract on a new spread of condominiums on the far end of Wendover. Our second day on the new site, Bucky calls in sick, and Mack points me toward his new Cat 568 Forest Machine. “Looks like you’re clearing today.”

My jaw drops. I’ve driven dozers before, but not a forest machine, and I’ve never cleared land. Mack had let me play on it one day shortly after he bought it, raising and lowering the boom, opening and closing the grapple claw with a joystick that moved as easily as the hand-me-down Atari I’d played with growing up.

Now he spreads the blueprints across the picnic table in front of the small trailer that serves as our portable office, and he jabs a thick finger at the overlapping circles that indicate trees. “All these trees have to go,” he says. He shields his eyes from the morning sun and points far left of the trailer, where packed yellow dirt gives way to scrub brush and several acres of loblolly pine. “Start at the far end there. Get as much as you can cleared by lunch, moving back this way.”

I smile when I fire up the 568. “Killdozer,” Bucky calls it, after some old movie he’d seen where machinery goes wild and kills people. Killdozer rumbles beneath me, and as I shift the gears, raise the boom and swing, my grin grows broader. I throw a thumbs-up Mack’s way, and I see him laugh, but can’t hear him. With an easy flick of my wrist, Killdozer moves forward, not in a lurch like the D9T dozer I sometimes drive, but smooth, like we’re rolling on glass, not rocky dirt. “This here’s power!” I yell.

In under a minute, I’ve crossed the expanse of yellow, reached the treeline, and there I bring Killdozer to a rest. I look back over my shoulder, but Mack’s moved on to other things, pointing and ordering the crew around the site. I take a deep breath, raise the boom and open the grapple. I’ve seen this done before, know how to fell a tree with a boom, start halfway up to keep from getting your head conked, but now it’s here in front of me, acres of sweet-smelling timber. It’s my hand on the joystick. It’s my job.

I think of Daddy and swallow against the knot that comes in my throat. He’d like this piece of equipment, like to crawl up in here with me, see how easily Killdozer maneuvers. I manage the controls, simple to do, open the grapple, and the metal claw grabs the first pine midway up the trunk. I startle at how easily the tree shatters, quicker and smoother than snapping my fingers. It’s about a seventy-footer, and just like that, it’s split in half.

My heart beats faster than I’ve known it to for a while, and I pick up the top of the tree, swing the boom to the side and start my stack. Back to what’s left of the tree, I maneuver the grapple to the base of the pine, snap it off like I’d break a toothpick, one quick and easy motion, lift it to lie alongside the treetop. I glance at my watch. Less than a minute.

I figure sixty trees an hour, give or take. Four hours later, I’ve cleared a few acres. When I climb down off Killdozer, my hands tingle from the vibration of the joysticks. I don’t want to look behind me, at where I’ve been, what I’ve done, but I know I have to count the stacks, survey the damage.

Standing beside the 568, I feel small, but I shrink to puny when I walk to the last stack of trees I made, see the oaks and maples and pines smashed into splintered haystacks twenty or so feet in the air. I turn away, and my eyes find the bare ground where I’ve been. Crater-size holes pockmark the dirt where root-bases once sunk deep, and scrub brush lies bent and flattened where Killdozer—and I—left tracks.

I think of the waste back home that once was Kayford Mountain, and my stomach knots up. I close my eyes, try to imagine the condominiums from the drawing on the wall in Mack’s office trailer, the playground area with the wooden jungle gym where kids will laugh someday soon. This here’s nothing like what’s been done to Kayford and hundreds of other mountains where I’m from. This is hardly any harm at all.

A week passes, and on Wednesday night Mack calls me at home to tell me Bucky has lost his job and gone to jail. Busted selling a bale of weed—I didn’t even know marijuana came in bales—so he’s making me full-time operator of Killdozer. I’ll get Bucky’s company truck, too.

Hours after I should be sleeping, I lay awake and think of Bucky’s arrest and how, without the grace of God, Romie could be in jail, too, serving a term a whole lot longer than Bucky will get. Felony offense, selling even a couple of Oxy capsules. Romie sold nearly six hundred.

“You worrying about your friend from work?” says Romie, turning to me beneath the covers.

“Yeah.”

She somehow reads my mind and lets out a breath of air that tickles my ear.

“What’s done is done, Jasper. Ain’t no danger in it, now. Nobody’s coming for us. We’re hundreds of miles and four or five months past that kind of trouble. I know that don’t make it right, but it’s nothing to worry over now.”

“I wasn’t worrying about that,” I say. “I was thinking about who’s gonna do my job, if I’m doing Bucky’s.”

She knows I’m lying, and her lips find mine before I can tell another untruth.

I hear the screech of the lunch whistle over Killdozer’s groan, and I drop the tree I’ve cleared and shut off the engine right where the forest machine sits. I step down off the dozer and pull on a clean T-shirt, and that’s when I hear it—a howling mewl unlike anything I’ve ever heard. It sends a chill skittering across the back of my neck. I shake off the shudder and stand still, trying to situate the source. It comes again, more of a squeal this time, from the tall stack of broken trees to my right.

My work boots are quiet as I step across the soft ground, lunge over Killdozer’s ruts in the rain-damp soil, maneuver around broken knee-high stumps I’ve yet to tear out. The sweet, pungent scent of fresh pine rosin and maple sap fills the air, and on the breeze I catch the bitter whang of diesel fuel.

The animalistic whimpering grows louder, but when a fallen branch snaps beneath my footfall, it silences. I wonder if I’ve trapped a cat in the pile of broken trees, except the sound doesn’t quite sound like a cat...or a squirrel, or a bird, or any small animal I’ve heard before. Two yards ahead of me, a low blur of movement in a pine bough catches my eye, and I hold my breath as I step alongside the shattered crown of a loblolly pine to find the source.

The scrambling movement grows more frantic as I draw near, and again the pained howl erupts, tensing me all over. Small branches crack beneath my boots, and the long fringe of pine needles on the ground in front of me stop moving. I cautiously push them aside, startled to see a smoke-colored rabbit nearly the size of a housecat. The panicked rabbit sees or senses me, lets out a pitiful squeal and furiously digs at the ground in an effort to escape. One of the heavy pine limbs has fallen across the rabbit’s hind-parts, pinning it to the ground.

“Shhhh,” I whisper. “Be still. I’m here to help you.” I squat near the rabbit, reach carefully around its head and grasp the

scruff, holding it with one hand while I lift the limb with the other, push it to the side.

The rabbit squeals again, a terrified sound that sends a shiver across my scalp. I hold the creature aloft, and he’s badly mangled. He twists in an effort to escape, and his hind legs dangle uselessly, his innards begin to slip loose. I look away, bury my face in my shoulder.

I know what I have to do.

I slide my hands together around the rabbit’s warm neck, close my eyes and give a quick twist, hear the soft crunch I feel between my fingers and thumbs. Daddy would call this a mountain-mercy killing. The breeze turns cold. It will soon rain.

I hammer the ground with heel of my boot, carve out a trough where I can bury the rabbit, and that’s when I see them. Seven kits. Only two have their eyes open. The limp rabbit I hold was a momma.

I lay her in the trough, and resentment tightens my jaw. I stand, stomp the ground like a temperamental child. Why me? I look at the kits again, each no bigger than my palm. I can’t bear wringing their little necks—they’re so tiny I’d have to do it with my fingertips. I stare at the momma in the furrow. It would be a slow, cruel death to bury the babies alive with their momma. They have to be killed, first.

As I kneel and scoop loose soil over the momma rabbit, I push away the memory of the fistful of dirt I crumbled over Daddy’s casket. Fury I can’t account for surges through me, and I stand and smack dirt from my hands, look again at the seven kits. Romie’s voice speaks in my head—*if we keep on killing the land, the land will have no choice but to kill us right back.*

That works both ways, don’t it? Daddy died of Crohn’s and cancer caused by the poisoned land. If the land kills us...

I let out a low scream as I stomp my boot-heel into the nest of kits, quickly snuffing their little lives. “You killed my daddy, and you killed Romie’s baby!” I curse the land, tromp at the earth, kick dirt over the rusty, fur-smearred ground, then drag the pine bough to cover my sin. I turn my face to the overcast sky and growl through my teeth like a madman.

I unpocket the key to Killdozer, skip lunch with the guys in the office trailer, stride instead directly back to the machine. No sane man could have an appetite after what I'd done.

I brutally attack the trees with Killdozer, grunting and shouting each time I snap one in half. The branches of a tall elm become arms reaching for the sky, and I grasp it in the middle with the grapple, right where I think its heart should be, and I split it in half. It feels good, like the land deserves what I'm doing to it, but then my rage burns off, and I start to feel sick again. I look behind me at the long row of tree-stacks waiting to be fed to the chipper—more trees than I've ever cleared in an hour—each stack standing higher than Killdozer and me. Tracks and ruts and splintered stumps mark where I've been, and I pause and look around at the woods I've destroyed. Soon, this will all be asphalt.

I drive the dozer between two of the tall stacks, out of sight of the office trailer and the half-dozen men roving the ground in the distance. I climb down and sit on the ground behind the leafy crown of a fallen maple. I hide my face in my knees and cry.

A big empty part of me aches to talk to Daddy one more time, to ask him if what I'm doing is right or wrong. After a few minutes, I climb back onto Killdozer, take a swig of water and spit it onto the ground. I'm proud of the paycheck I'm earning, of how well I take care of my family, but when I look around me, I'm ashamed. I can't do this much longer.

As I work the last three hours of my shift, my head churns with memories and stories and new ideas, and when I head back to the office trailer to punch out, I've decided it's the last day I'll drive Killdozer. Mack ain't around for me to tell him, so I head home, grateful for the start of rain, for the heavy traffic that allows me more time to think.

I'll talk to Mack in the morning and tell him I'll take the pay-cut that comes with the step-down. I'll go back to where I started, digging footers again, laying block, building something, instead of tearing things apart. I can't wait to tell Romie.

At the first red traffic light, I remember to turn on my cell phone, in case Romie's called for me to pick up milk or bread or cat food on the way home. Before the traffic even starts moving again, the phone chimes again and again and again with messages, and I know something's wrong. I pull into the first parking lot I come to, hit the speaker button on my cell.

"Jasper, call me as soon as you can." It's Romie.

The next message is also from her. "Something's wrong, Jasper. If I don't hear back from you in ten minutes, I'm going ahead to the hospital."

I let the phone fall into the seat beside me as the third message starts to play, and I punch the gas, cutting into traffic, ignoring the blaring horn from the car I've nearly sideswiped.

"Jasper, I'm in the E.R. at Women's Hospital. It's the baby." There's a sob in her throat, and I match it with one of my own. "Get here as soon as you can."

I drive too fast, too dangerous, Romie's words sounding again in my head. *If we keep on killing the land, the land will have no choice but to kill us right back.* I have done this to her, I think. Part of me knows I haven't caused anything to happen to her or the baby, but the other part of me thinks that maybe I have.

There's an empty parking spot in front of the emergency room entrance, and I jump out of the truck and sprint through the hospital's automatic doors. The nurse acts as if she's been expecting me, as if she knows who I am, who I'm here to see. I'm surprised when she leads me past the rooms made of green curtains and down a hallway, where she stops beside a private hospital room, holds open the door. She places her hand on my shoulder and looks at me, her eyes sorrowful, and my mouth goes dry.

Inside the dimly lit room, Romie looks small in the hospital bed, and when she looks up at me, her eyes are wet. She holds out a hand, and I take it, sit on the bed beside her, and hold her in my arms while we weep.

The next morning, I help Romie pull on her blouse, wishing I'd thought to go home while she slept to get her a fresh one. The

maternity top now hangs in soft folds across her middle. We sit side-by-side on the hospital bed, while we wait for the nurse to complete paperwork and come for us. I stroke Romie's hand.

"I want to go home, Jasper," she says.

"I know, baby. Not long now."

She grips my hand, stops its movement. "Home. Back home. I want to go back to West Virginia."

*Back home.* Her words strike a familiar ache in me, a throb, like a toothache I've probed with my tongue.

There is no home to return to, no empty house where we began married life together, no homeplace where I was raised. We sold them to people more rooted than us when we left Stump Branch.

Again, it is as if she pulls thoughts from my head. "I don't want to go back to Stump Branch."

I wonder if this is her way of running, of leaving behind all the bad that has happened. "Where would we go?"

"Morgantown. Maybe Huntington." Her shoulder lifts and drops. "A place where there's a good nursing school."

I stare at our hands nestled together, hers smaller than mine, softer, yet somehow much stronger.

Her voice drops to a whisper. "I don't want to do this again, Jasper. No more trying for babies."

She is fraught, upset, grieving. It will pass.

"We don't have to think about that right now. The doctor said to wait six months, get your strength back."

Romie shakes her head, and hair falls over one red-rimmed eye. "No more." Her voice comes stronger, louder. "No more."

I suck in the sadness, the hopelessness in her voice, swallow it down where it tightens like a fist, hard and cold in my stomach. "Okay. No more."

Daddy once told me the greatest joy of a man's life was a walk through the woods with his son. There will be no son for me. *No woods, either.* No coal mining. No slaying trees. No babies. No more. My scalp prickles.

I try to imagine what the future holds, where Romie and I will live—just the two of us, no child to bring us joy in old age. Where will I work, what will I do with the rest of my days? I close my eyes, but I can't picture anything at all, can't see what lies ahead, only blackness like I found in the belly of the earth. There's a void there, a nothingness, a big empty so powerful I still taste its icy bitterness in my mouth. ☹