

HOLLOW IN THE LAND

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VALLEY. N. (PL. VALLEYS)

- 1 a low area between hills or mountains
- 2 an extensive, more or less flat, and relatively low region drained by a great river system
- 3 any depression or hollow resembling a valley
- 4 a low point or interval in any process, representation, or situation
- 5 any place, period, or situation that is filled with fear, gloom, foreboding, or the like

noun HOLLOW IN THE LAND

synonyms

basin, canyon, combe, corrie, dale, dell, dene, depression, dingle, dip, gap, glen, gully, hole, pass, gorge, HOLLOW, ravine, rift, slade, strath

Below the Wind Farm

ON THE MOOR OVERLOOKING THE VALLEY was a wind farm. You could get there easily via the root system of track built for the maintenance guys, and each turbine made a wild sound if you got close to it. According to Ada Robinson the swoop and turn of those forty-metre blades fucked with your spatial awareness. You'd be standing at the foot of one, looking up, and the razors would come at you at such a pace and angle that it could do all sorts to your head, especially if the clouds were being sent in the opposite direction. She'd said all this to Harry Maiden a few days ago, but now, wandering between the turbines for the first time in search of Ada's putrid-smelling Border Terrier, Harry had no idea whether or not she was right.

It was so misty that he couldn't see more than five feet ahead. He kept stumbling upon the turbines, the structures looming so suddenly from the murk that you could be forgiven for thinking they'd sprouted from the ground and were ready to rocket free, maintaining their course into the sky. Harry had spent the last fifteen minutes maundering through this place, and picking his way around each turbine's broad metal base was beginning to make him feel as if he was sneaking between the legs of an enormous wintery monster.

Ada had never really displayed much affection for the terrier anyway. The creature had belonged to her husband, Martin, who had left her to go travelling somewhere in Asia, so it was a trophy of sorts, albeit a sentient one. Harry pictured the look on Ada's face when he brought the dog home. Her hand might slide up his shoulders, her fingertips graze the nape of his neck. She was the sister of a lumpy colleague of his who he had yet to figure out. At the quarry they called Ada's brother Jolan Rob; Jolan drove the dumper trucks and gave Harry a lift to and from the site every day. A couple of years ago Jolan had taken a tumble from his truck's hopper without a helmet. Landing badly, he'd suffered a depression fracture of the skull, somehow managing to come through the ordeal with relatively little fallout for the quarry's management. Surviving and saying what the bosses told him to say to the health-and-safety investigators meant Jolan now had a job for life. It meant easier shifts, extra holidays and pretending you hadn't noticed when he said something odd, when the corner of his mouth drooped or one eye did whatever the hell it wanted.

Before they left that morning, Ada had specifically told Jolan not to let the dog off its lead until they arrived at the moor where they could keep an eye on it, but midway up the bluff Jolan had untethered the creature's collar with a shrug. The dog duly disappeared and now Harry was striving after it, coughing up a smoker's gobbet here and there. His bearings were lost and his patience had thinned. Jolan was following somewhere. He better had be.

Sick of the mist, Harry scrambled through the spiny bunches of gorse populating this subsection of hill, and stopped to whistle. Ada's dog had a stupid name that he couldn't bring himself to say out loud, so it was a matter of this, of calling unintelligibly to it in a higher register. He'd always found it odd that people talked to their pets in such silly voices, yet here he was partaking in the same theatre. Harry supposed it was what he'd signed up for when he agreed to this endeavour behind Jolan's horrid little terrace. He'd only agreed to come along

because he thought Ada would be joining them, but she'd been struck with a headache almost as soon as she stepped into her walking boots. Harry, she'd said, falling lavishly against him. Could you help me to my chair, please? *Thank you.*

Harry hadn't known Ada that long, let alone that she suffered from headaches. He'd started at the quarry that autumn after returning to the valley where he and his wife Jenny had grown up. Like Jolan, it was Harry's job to shift the compacted knots of sandstone around after they'd been removed from a hill that had been so over-mined it now resembled a giant piece of cake with a bite taken from it. Harry had been placed on Jolan's team, and for some reason Jolan had taken a shine to him. This was strange because Harry was far from outgoing and resisted meeting new people, especially those who tried as hard as Jolan did to be liked. The pair had been muddling through this terse dynamic when it came up that they lived near to one another, and seeing as Harry hadn't a car, would he like a lift?

It made sense to take advantage of a free ride, even though Harry knew Jolan shouldn't be driving after a head injury, so he'd agreed to the offer, heroically putting up with Jolan's insane speeding and the daily attempts to coax him indoors for a drink. For weeks Harry had refused Jolan's invitations. He'd said no so many times that there had to come a yes at some point, if only for the lifts' sake. With that in mind he eventually found himself scraping the residue from his work boots on the steel mat on Jolan's front step, and entered the house hoping for a glass of something strong to take the edge off another day. Ada had been waiting by the kettle. She explained to Harry that since her husband disappeared, she'd been unable to afford the rent. She was staying with her brother until she got her head together, while her children were being looked after by their grandmother for the time being. Ada had a baggy purity that Harry liked, an obtainable quality. The cuppa at the Robinsons' had become a pot now, a regular thing.

Harry found the dog in a clearing way below a farmer's field. The terrier had wandered down the escarpment in pursuit of

a sheep that must have slipped through a fence hemming the elevated meadow, then fallen off the crag to where it now lay, at the bottom of about eight foot of stone and boulder reaching up a messy face of rock and fern.

If you could see past the hazing flies and stillness, you could be forgiven for thinking the creature was asleep. But when Harry knelt close he could see that its eyelids were shut, locked forever, and the eyeballs had been reduced to a gloop that eked from beneath the lids in thick, ketchup-red tears. The sheep had died alone. Perhaps it had bleated awhile before submitting to the pull of what cannot be avoided.

Ada's dog had lost interest in the sheep. It nuzzled at a scent along the boulders, then, sensing Harry, it gave a cursory turn of the head before scampering up the rock. It was a sharp and wiry ratter, an agile thing.

Robbo! Harry called. Fucking dog's here.

He drew the line at picking the animal up himself. He'd seen how dogs behaved – there was just no way. He sat on a rock to wait. The fog had cleared enough to reveal a hill marbled with russet and green, and above it turbines that spun sedately, looking so out of place up there that they could have been built by aliens. A bird flew above the wind farm in the sifting cloud; it resembled a punctuation mark against a page. Even *that* had slowed, hovering as if suspended from an invisible length of wire. Harry watched the bird. He saw it dive. He missed its return thanks to Jolan, who chose that moment to burst into the clearing.

David!

Jolan hitched his saggy jeans up around his waist and paused, apparently perplexed by the sight of Ada's busy dog, the expired sheep and Harry smoking. Between his damp breasts and broad belly line, Jolan had a smiley face of sweat illustrating his T-shirt. Harry studied the pink crack of scar riven up Jolan's head. Tearing through his crew cut, it looked melted on, a puckered centipede that reached behind one ear, forming an unsightly keloid. On sunnier days you could make out the

raised brushstrokes of tissue along the perimeter of the scar: the trail where many stitches had woven Jolan's scalp.

Here he is, said Jolan to the dog. Where you off to, pal? Where you going?

The terrier cocked its head, its front paw raised. Its beard and whiskers shone, its coat ranging in colour from brown-black to light brown then back again.

How is he? said Jolan. How's my boy?

The dead sheep stank. It had been a juvenile, its tail not long removed. Harry's father had often spoken of docking the lambs on the farm he'd grown up on, not far from here. The pensioner as a boy, strapping delicate shins into snapping braces and tying the cords around the tails so men could sever them with the metal snips. Some stories you never forgot. Blood saturating cotton and forearm while local events were discussed, football scores, whatever daft thing a family member had last come out with. You'd not feel as sorry for 'em if you'd seen a sheep with its back end eaten to the bone by fly strike cause its fucking tail's been left to infect, Harry's father had once said.

Davey, come on now ... come wi' your Jo-Jo, Jolan cooed as he eased the dog's leash from his pocket. He jangled the leash, but this prompted the terrier to clamber further up the rocky mound. A breeze stirred David's coat: a bristle caused by wind when seemingly there was none. Harry headed around the boulders so that between Jolan on one side, him on the other and the sheep carcass in the middle, the dog's options were limited. Or so you'd think. Harry had to laugh as the animal slipped into a hole at the top of the rocks and vanished from view.

It took Harry and Jolan a long time to clear enough space in the boulders to see where the dog had gone, but once they'd crawled through the gap they realised that the animal had led them into what was undoubtedly a very large cave. Harry used the torch application on his phone, and noticed that Jenny hadn't bothered to message today. His wife had been faffing

around on the kitchen worktop with a watermelon when he'd left for work that morning. For after lunch, she'd said, maybe tea. Knowing full well that Harry didn't like watermelon, thinking he didn't know that the moment he left the house, she upended a secret litre of vodka into a hole bored in the top of the fruit. After finding the boozy remnants of the previous melon, Harry had considered saying something to Jenny like he used to do when he found the empty bottles hidden all over the old house, but this time he'd decided to let her continue eating her way to inebriated peace. Turning a blind eye to how she dealt with her sadness had started out as an act of weary compassion, but had since become a means of salvaging a quieter life. Because there was no other way of putting it: these days Harry's wife was easier to be with when she was drunk.

The mediocre phone torch didn't reveal the whole chamber. What it did show, if you got about a yard away from the walls, was clefted and hoary limestone, time-rippled, set; a very different quality of rock from the sandstone that Jolan and Harry worked with every day at the quarry.

Harry shone the torch on the spot where the boulders must originally have come down. There were what looked like carvings in an alcove there: three skulls. For some reason he wasn't afraid. He put a finger in one of the eye sockets and wondered who the last person to do this very thing had been.

Can you see him? asked Jolan.

No, replied Harry. You'd think it'd be warmer in here. He hugged himself. Fucking animal.

They advanced until they arrived at the edge of a second chamber, managing to pick their way through a chorus of dripping water, delving into what Harry supposed was the essence of the earth itself. He traced his fingers up the cave's walls yet could find no more carvings. By now they were as deep into the cave as they dared go, and Ada's dog was nowhere to be seen. There was no light in this place – there wasn't supposed to be. There was just a phone torch piercing the blackness, its glare swiftly lost.

*

Harry arrived home to find Jenny asleep on the couch with a thoughtful expression on her face and 'Cheree' by Suicide playing on the stereo. She'd eaten – for there was an open jar of greengage jam by the cooker and a paring knife jammed into the melting butter pat – then likely made a start on unpacking the washing machine, forgotten what she was doing and opted for music. A solitary wedge of melon lay on the rug while additional rinds were discarded in the bin as if various smiles had been cut from the faces of green jack-o'-lanterns. The TV flashed merrily. People with fine teeth conversed mutely on the flat-screen.

Upstairs, Harry fetched the big torch. The spare room where it was kept was criss-crossed with washing lines on which many shirts were strung on hangers. Varying from colour to colour, sweet-smelling, soft, the shirts looked surreal suspended there without the men to fill them. Not one of them belonged to Harry, who washed and ironed his own clothes because Jenny never felt like it after laundering for other people all day. She and Harry had bought the laundry business when they returned to the valley after the ordeal with Jenny's ectopic pregnancy finally drew to a close. Having the foetus removed had rendered Jenny infertile, depressed, so they'd opted for a new start in an old place, somewhere they could get on with their lives without being bothered, knowing it would be just the two of them now.

Harry knew Jenny blamed him for how things had turned out. The single cycle of IVF valley women her age were granted courtesy of the NHS had failed, they couldn't afford to go private and, as for adopting, who wanted to deal with another man's mistake? Harry recalled the door slamming when he told his wife this.

The finality of the sound.

Although for his part Harry blamed Jenny too. Because he was certain that if she could have, his wife would have opted to proceed with her ectopic pregnancy and miscarry, or die along with the child, leaving him alone. Jenny would have

preferred that tragedy to the complicity of termination. After all, there is romance to tragedy and Jenny had always been susceptible to romance.

Harry put his nose to a shirt. He loved doing this. The wholesome aroma of the fabric softener reminded him of riding his bicycle as a kid, behind the gritstone terraces, the neighbours' pegged bedsheets flapping from the washing lines strung across the track. He used to cycle into the drifting cloth, burying his face in something clean, the fresh rectangles.

Downstairs, he saw that Jenny had the robin book out again. She was obsessed with the damn birds, convinced their lost baby was trying to communicate with her in the form of one. This delusion had originated during a walk through the roving dunes of Formby last year. Overcome by yet another wash of grief, Jenny had turned towards the churning boundary of the ocean where she happened to witness an extraordinary flitting ball landing on a jumble of bricks buried in the sand. The delicate bird stared at Jenny and broke into song. You never saw robins by the sea, she said. The bird was a messenger. It was their son.

Rosy blotches of watermelon juice had made the pages sticky. Today's robin had a rotund chest of vivid watercolour, true crimson, its twig legs melded to a scabby tree stump. Harry wasn't sure if robins had empathy in their black eyes, or if the artist had just managed to imbue this particular depiction of one with some soul. *Jesus*, he was getting as bad as Jenny – she had a whole scrapbook of this shit upstairs. He stood and watched her sleep for a long time. He lit a cigarette with a match. He left the room.

Ada took the news of the dog's disappearance from the couch, covered by a woollen blanket, a damp flannel draped across her forehead. Unreliable light broke through the gap in the drawn curtains and caught the eddying dust spores that settled on the coffee table, upon everything. The room smelt strongly medicinal, a combination of the calamine lotion Jolan

used for his eczema, and the Olbas Oil Ada said helped curb her sinusitis. Grown tall outside the window was a lush bower of blackberry. Looking out, Harry noticed some lip-stained urchins picking at the vines, stuffing the nobbled clots of fruit into their mouths. Three long-haired elders watched from across the road, necking cans of lager bought from the Booze Buster around the corner.

Harry listened to Jolan's benign, supplicating apology with his arms folded. He was trying hard to ignore Ada's resemblance to Jenny, the way she lay, half-stirred, her gentle face reaching the lip of the couch's seat. She was a shapely woman in her early forties. He was a neglected husband whose drunk wife joked about his pattern hair loss. Harry touched the nascent pebble of cruelly revealed scalp, the fronds of crown hair he had gelled upright in an attempt to disguise his bald patch. *An egg in a nest*, Jenny often called it, delighting in mentioning it in front of other people. Stop being so sensitive, she used to say.

Least we know where he is, declared Ada, sitting up. I just don't like thinking of him on his own down there.

She glanced at Harry, who had to stop himself from taking her hand. There was just something *to* this woman. The fact that he was sure he could have her was eight tenths of it, the fact of his boredom and Ada's apparent understanding of him made up the remainder. Of course Harry couldn't imagine himself without Jenny, and the thoughts of his wife finding out about his trips to the Robinson house were terrifying, but he couldn't escape the niggling desire to have his own way. After all, if something as tiny as an atom could be split, there seemed like no good reason why you couldn't do the same thing with something as big as your own need to possess what you shouldn't. Harry could divide his affections in two. A fire engine hurtled up the Bury Road.

Using the wind farm as their compass Harry and Jolan navigated their way towards the cave. Jolan wheezed all the way up the brow, carrying a greasy box of fried chicken and a holdall

packed with nine-inch candles. The sound of him massacring the bones and licking his fingers, his greedy, scything breaths, Harry tried to ignore. Jenny still hadn't been in touch. She was probably lounging in bed, floating through the cottony inter-zone between sleep and consciousness. Harry pictured their room. Even their private quarters were draped with the billowing laundry of local strangers.

They left the path to pick their way through the furze. Harry swatted away a horsefly while a group of goldfinches fussed in a sour-smelling hawthorn nearby, the tree contorted as if suffering the most agonising arthritis. He would ease onto the bed that evening and ask Jenny how she was. She would call him darling, and he'd feel awful, he knew he would, each hand resting in his lap, unable to hold his wife because she didn't like to be touched when she was hungover and had got drunk all day and didn't want him to know about it.

As soon as they arrived in the clearing Jolan tossed the cardboard box of chicken bones into the undergrowth, then he crawled through the boulder gap. Harry found his attention commanded by the grassy altar. The way the sheep was splayed was hypnotic. A shimmering square of sunlight drifted over its corpse.

With the aid of the torch and following the dim parade of Jolan's candles, the two men explored the cave. Its ceiling was low at first, fraught with curtains of bumpy stone, but it quickly rose to over twelve feet in height, ribbing the hill's interior like the insides of a fossilised whale skeleton.

Clumps of rock shaped like busted popcorn kernels intercepted the tunnel leading to the next cavern, the overhangs forcing Harry and Jolan to duck, the narrow walls glistening, chilly to the touch. The sound of water was back. Their boots upon the rock. There was a cooling draught; where did it come from? They were of the hill now, no longer on it, and the further Harry went into the cavity the more urgently he wanted to go as deep into this place as it would allow him.

In the next chamber they set down the last of the candles, lit

them and cast the torch. Harry would plait piss if he had ever seen anything this spectacular. They were in a limestone grotto, an ancient place. The light they brought proved it, searing vectored shadows up tall undulating walls that could have been made of cream slime, on stalactites, stalagmites, dense columns linking ground to ceiling.

Moisture glittered everywhere. Thousands of years of seepage had left amazing deposits up every surface, forming claws of hardened calcite, free-standing knuckle sculptures, bubbled flowstone lumps. The cave's walls fed into the darkness, ridged, almost blossoming, the shapes trapped in sequence, rough yet smooth, sometimes seeming as if they'd been coated in wet batter, the liquid dribbled over the rock and suspended there for many centuries.

Harry could run tours in a place like this; he'd be on TV. His giddy torchlight guided him along sheets of mineral that reminded him of tripe hanging from the cave's roof, upon hundreds of tiny stalactites emerging from the ceiling as slender worms. It picked out calcite deposits so wide and delicate that his light beamed pinkly through them. Robbo, what've we gone and found? he said, but by then Jolan was in the next chamber facing an underground lake. When Harry followed the torch's beam, he too saw, at the water's edge, a glowing pair of discs: animal's eyes. The timid sound of whining filled the cave.

Ada insisted on celebrating with a drink. Jolan had left her and Harry alone because he'd the petrol-station boy bribed into letting him use the red diesel reserved for agricultural and construction vehicles; he had to fill the car's tank up before the boy's shift finished. David lay in his basket performing the occasional wild spasm. Since the terrier's dank rescue and its journey home in the holdall, it had done nothing but shiver. Covered in blankets, the dog could have been mistaken for a furry baby.

Harry and Ada took about two drinks to lurch together. Ada kissed differently to Jenny: she was fiercer, more mechanical. Midway through the embrace, Harry opened his eyes and

saw that Ada had hers open too. She was watching him. He pulled away and wiped his lips on the back of his hand.

The sound of the front door slamming and Jolan's ludicrous moan interrupted the syncopated dry-hump Harry had going on a short while later. He and Ada parted then staggered their arrivals downstairs, Harry visiting the bathroom on the way, splashing scoops of water over his face before entering the living room where he found Jolan knelt in prayer and Ada with her cheeks flushed, her furrowed brow misted with sweat.

The dog lay dead in its basket, its tongue flopped from its mouth like a pink shammy leather. Harry tried not to look at Jolan, whose eye had done that weird thing again.

Well, he said.

He must have caught a chill, said Ada.

Jolan rocked back and forth. My fault, he kept saying, *Oh, Jesus.*

No, Jo-Jo, said Ada. Harry, tell him ...

Harry stuffed his hands in his pockets. It *was* Jolan's fault. He approached his colleague. Weren't to be helped, he said gruffly. You weren't to know.

Jolan bear-hugged Harry's legs.

Never mind, said Ada. He died surrounded by the people who loved him.

Yes, said Jolan. Yes.

We'll sort him a proper grave, mate, Harry added, extricating himself from Jolan's clutches and looking at Ada, who he now felt strangely intimidated by. She was the only woman since Jenny who he had ever acted on an impulse around, and he worried now about his capacity for venturing into tempting places, of substance dark.

Later that day he pushed into the cave for a third time, the most exercise he'd had in weeks. He set down Jolan's tool bag in the second chamber. Jolan had been in tears when Harry left, prising out a patio flag with his bare hands in order to transform the panel of soil beneath it into a grave. Harry said

he'd be back with a surprise. Ada had watched him coolly as he left.

It would take a while to knock out the stalagmite: needing the conical edifice in one piece meant taking his time. Harry had selected a marker fit for a dog's grave: a formation from the cave's rear that people wouldn't be able to see when he opened the place up to the public. *Maiden Voyages*, he'd call it: a tenner a pop for a tour of the awesome caves below the wind farm.

Harry knocked a dent free of the stalagmite with the hammer and chisel, then he knocked away another, working around the circumference, deeper, carefully, until the whole thing came loose in his arms. He heaved the stalagmite by its trunk into his backpack, then headed back towards the cave's entrance. He'd just arrived at the crawlspace when he heard a ruffling, feathery sound, and what he could *swear* was birdsong.

He whirled around to face the call, but saw only those carved skulls: three pitted and amused faces leering at him from the rock. In that moment the stalagmite Harry had planned to present Ada with weighed many tons, and at the same time it weighed nothing at all. He got to his feet. There was the most wondrous definition to this cave. Its scope and depth brought him back to Jenny and the days when they were making a foray into a life together. The Bridestones were a throne of rock overlooking Todmorden and the Calder Valley, and he and Jenny used to hike there, each of them tiny against the cliffscape. Jenny always packed a lunch: triangulated sandwiches and 10-pence packets of crisps, a plastic bag with a stash of ice in it to keep their drinks cool. She always knew what to do. Once, when Harry stumbled upon a lapwing nest in the grass, Jenny led him away before the dive-bombing parents returned to protect their young. Later, they wrapped themselves in their coats and a tartan picnic blanket, and lay on the roof of Harry's car listening to CDs.

Harry dumped the stalagmite on the ground and hurried, drawn, he didn't quite know why, to the cavern with the lake

where they'd found Ada's dog earlier that day. That clever draught created wavelets here. Harry could see a letterbox-shaped crevice above the murmuring water. He edged around the lake until he could shine his torch into the fissure, discovering a greater treasure within the tear: a magnificent stalactite of dazzling alabaster white. Perhaps Jenny could display it on the hearth.

Harry dragged himself into the crevice and began to climb. There were enough handholds to think of this gap as another obstacle course at a jungle-gym, the kind he would have taken his son to when the boy was older, had he had the chance.

The stalactite emerged from the rock like a canine tooth from a gum. Harry began chipping at it. He had just the room to work, pinioned at a right angle in the crevice, back against one wall, feet upon the other. His devoted breath swirled from him in the radiance of the torch trapped between both tense legs.

He worked for a long time, striking chisel with hammer, clinking until the stalactite was ready to come away, realising as it teetered and dropped how heavy it was going to be, and not just how tired his legs were, but how rash he'd been.

The stalactite landed immensely in Harry's lap, the impact knocking his feet loose and sending him down the vertical passage, three, four feet, where he caught his back on a ledge and came to a halt, stuck at the waist, his legs dangling, he wasn't sure where. The hammer, chisel and torch splashed into the lake. Harry had at least kept hold of the stalactite. He breathed in the cold, his blindness total. The blood clammed his shirt as he cradled his wife's gift. Thousands of years it had taken for this strange monument to grow, and he had broken it away with remarkable ease. Harry rested his head against the pitiless stone. Outside the day would be escaping, its sun setting, the golden sleepers of light navigating the first winding flush of the sweet peas staked in his garden miles away. The creepers had exploded recently into glorious flower. Jenny had planted the seedlings earlier that spring.