

# Dead-End Drift

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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The trickle of sand ceased, and there was silence. Then a small rock dropped from overhead into the rubble beneath, and the flat finality of the sound put a period to the moment.

There was a heavy odor of dust, and one of the men coughed, the dry, hacking cough of miner's consumption. Silence hung heavily in the thick, dead air.

„Better sit still.“ Bert's voice was quiet and unexcited. „I'll make a light.“ They waited, listening to the miner fumbling with his hand lamp. „We might dislodge something,“ he added, „and start it again.“

They heard his palm strike the lamp, and he struck several times before the flint gave off the spark to light the flame. An arrow of flame leaped from the burner. The sudden change from the impenetrable darkness at the end of the tunnel to the bright glare of the miner's lamp left them blinking. They sat very still, looking

slowly around, careful to disturb nothing. The suddenness of the disaster had stunned them into quiet acceptance.

Frank's breathing made a hoarse, ugly sound, and when their eyes found him, they could see the dark, spreading stain on his shirt front and the misshapen look of his broken body. He was a powerful man, with blond, curly hair above a square, hard face. There was blood on the rocks near him and blood on the jagged rock he had rolled from his body after the cave-in.

There was a trickle of blood across Bert's face from a scalp wound but no other injuries to anyone. Their eyes evaded the wall of fallen rock across the drift, their minds filled with awareness.

„Hurt bad?“ Bert said to Frank. „Looks like the big one hit you.“

„Yeah,“ Frank's voice was low. „Feels like I'm stove up inside.“

„Better leave him alone,“ Joe said. „The bleeding seems to be letting up, and there's nothing we can do.“

Frank stared down at his body curiously. „I guess I'm hurt bad.“

He turned his head deliberately and stared at the muck pile. The cave-in had left a slanting pile of broken rock that reached toward them along the drift, cutting them off completely from the outside world, from light and air. Behind them was the face of the drift where Rody had been drilling. From the face of the drift to the muck pile was a matter of a few feet. Frank touched his dry lips with his tongue, remembering what lay beyond the cave-in.

It could scarcely have been the tunnel alone. Beyond it was the Big Stope. He reached over and turned out the light. The flame winked, and darkness was upon them.

„What's the idea?“ Joe demanded.

„Air,“ Frank said. „There's four of us, and there isn't going to be enough air. We may be some time in getting out.“

„If we get out,“ Joe said.

Rody shifted his weight on the rock slab where he was sitting, and they heard the rasp of the coarse denim. „How far do you reckon she caved, Frank?“

„I don't know.“ Then he said what they all feared. „Maybe the Big Stope went.“

„If it did,“ Rody commented, „we might as well fold our cards and toss in our hands. Nobody can open that stope before the air gives out. There's not much air in here for four men.“

„I warned Tom about that stope,“ Joe said. „He had no right to have men working in here. That stope was too big in the first place. Must be a hundred feet across and no pillars, and down below there was too much weight on the stulls. The posts were countersunk into the laggin' all of two inches, like a knife in butter.“

„The point is,“ Frank said, „that we're here. No use talking about what should have been. If any part of the stope went, it all went. There's a hundred feet of tunnel to drive and timber, and workin' in loose muck isn't going to help.“

No one spoke. In the utter blackness and stillness of the drift they waited. There was no light, no sound. All had been cut off from them. Joe wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand.

The blackness of a mine, the complete darkness, had always bothered him. At night in the outer world, no matter how clouded the sky, there is always some

light, and in time the eyes will adjust, and a man can see—a little, at any rate. Here there was no light, and a man was completely blind.

And there was no sound. Only two hundred feet to the surface, yet it might as well have been two thousand. Two hundred feet of rock between them and the light, and that was the shortest route. By the drift or tunnel it was a quarter of a mile to the shaft where the cage could take them to the surface.

Above them was the whole weight of the mountain, before them the solid wall where they had been drilling, behind them the mass of the cave-in, thousands of tons of broken rock and broken timbers.

On the surface there would be tense, frightened men, frightened not for themselves but for those entombed below—and they could not know that anyone was alive.

The skip would be coming down now, bringing men to attack that enormous slide. On top men would be girding for the struggle with the mountain. Around the collar of the shaft men and equipment would be gathered to be sent below. Near the warehouse men would be standing, and some women, tense and white, wondering about those below. And the men who were buried alive could only wait and hope.

„Got a chew, Bert?“ Joe asked.

„Sure.“ Bert pushed his hand into the darkness, feeling for Joe’s. Their hands were steady. Joe bit off a chew, then passed the plug back, their hands fumbling in the dark again.

„We ain’t got a chance!“ Rody exclaimed suddenly. „She might have caved clear to the station. Anyway, there’s no way they can get through in time. We ain’t got the air to last five hours even if they could make it that quick.“

„Forget it,“ Joe said. „You wouldn’t do nothing but blow your money on that frowzy blonde in Kingman if you got free.“

„I was a sap for ever coming to work in this lousy hole,“ Rody grumbled. „I was a sap.“

„Quit crabbing,“ Bert said mildly. „We’re here now, and we’ve got to like it.“

There was a long silence. Somewhere the mountain creaked, and there was a distant sound of more earth sliding.

„Say“—Frank’s voice broke into the silence—„any of you guys work in Thirty-seven?“

„You mean that raise on the Three Hundred?“ Bert asked. „Sure, I put in a couple of shifts there.“

„Aren’t we right over it now?“

„Huh?“ Joe moved quickly. „How high up were they?“

„Better than ninety feet.“ Frank’s tone was tight, strained. He held himself, afraid to breathe deep, afraid of the pain that would come. He was not sure what had happened to him. Part of his body was numb, but there was a growing pain in his belly as the shock wore off. He knew he was in deep trouble, and the chances of his getting out alive were small. He dreaded the thought of being moved, doubted if he would survive it.

„If that raise was up ninety feet“—Joe spoke slowly, every word standing alone—„then it ain’t more than ten feet below us. If we could dig down—“

„Ten feet? In that kind of rock?“ Rody sneered. „You couldn't dig that with a pick. Not in a week. Anyway, Thirty-seven ain't this far along. We're thirty yards beyond at least.“

„No,“ Frank said, „I think we're right over it. Anyway, it's a chance. It's more than we've got now.“

There was a long silence while they turned the idea over in their minds. Then Joe said, „Why a raise here? There's no ore body here. That's supposed to be farther along.“

„Air,“ Bert said. „They wanted some circulation.“

He got up, and they heard him fumbling for a pick. They heard the metallic sound as it was dragged toward him over the rock. „Better move back against the muck pile,“ he said. „I'm digging.“

„You're a sap,“ Rody said. „You've got no chance.“

„Shut up!“ Joe's tone was ugly. „If you ain't willing to try, you can go to hell. I want out of here.“

„Who're you tellin' to shut up?“ They heard Rody rise suddenly. „I ain't never had no use for you, you—“

„Rody!“ Frank's tone was harsh. „I've got a pick handle, and I know where you are. You go back where you were and keep your mouth shut. This is a hell of a time to start something.“

A light flared in Frank's hand, and he hitched himself a little higher to see better. „That's right, Bert. Start right there. Some of that top stuff will just flake off.“

Sweat beaded his strained white face. One big hand clutched a pick handle. Slowly, as if he had difficulty in moving them, his eyes shifted from face to face. He stared at Rody the longest. Rody's stiff black hair curled back from a low forehead. He was almost as broad as Frank but thicker.

The sodden blows of the pick became the ticking clock of the passing time. It was a slow, measured beat, for the air was already thickening, and the blows pounded with the pulse of their blood. The flame of the carbide light ate into their small supply of air, burning steadily.

Bert stopped, mopping his face. „She's damn hard, Frank. It's going to take the point off this pick in a hurry.“

„We've got four of them,“ Frank said. The whole front of him was one dark stain now. „I always carry a pick in a mine.“

Bert swung again, and they watched as the point of the pick found a place and broke back a piece of the rock. The surface had been partly shattered by the explosions as the drift was pushed farther into the mountain. It would be harder as they got down farther.

Frank's big hands were relaxed and loose. He watched the swing of the pick, and when Joe got up to spell Bert, he asked him, „Anybody on top waitin' for you?“

„Uh-huh.“ Joe paused, pick in hand. „A girl.“

Rody started to speak but caught Frank's eye and settled back, trying to move out of reach of the pick handle.

„My wife's up there,“ Bert said. „And I've got three kids.“ He took off his shirt and mopped his body with it.

„There's nobody waitin' for me,“ Frank said. „Nobody anywhere.“

„What d'you suppose they're doing out there?“ Bert said. „I'd give a lot to know.“

„Depends on how far it caved.“ Joe leaned on the pick handle, gasping for breath. „Probably they are shoring her up with timbers around the station or at the opening into the Big Stope.“

He returned to work. He swung the pick, and a fragment broke loose; a second time and another fragment. Bert sat with his elbows on his knees, head hanging, breathing heavily. Frank's head was tipped back against the rock, his white face glistening like wet marble in the faint light that reached him.

It was going to be a long job, a hard job, and the air was growing worse. Being active, they were using it more rapidly, but it was their only chance. Nobody could get through to them in time. As Joe worked, the sweat streamed from his body, running into his eyes and dripping from his chin. Slowly and methodically he swung the pick, deadened to everything but the shock of the blows. He no longer noticed what progress he made; he had become an automaton. Bert started up to relieve him, but Joe shook his head. He was started now, and it was like an infection in his blood. He needed the pick. He clung to it as to a lifeline.

At last he did give way to Bert. He dropped on the rocks, his chest heaving, fighting for air. He tried to keep from remembering Mary, but she was always with him, always just beyond the blows of his pick. Probably she did not yet know what had happened to them, what this sudden thing was that had come into their lives.

She would be at work now, and as the mine was forty miles from town, it might be hours before she knew of the cave-in and even longer before she knew who was trapped below. It would be her tragedy as well as his. Joe cursed. Tomorrow they would have gone to the doctor. He was reliable, Frank had told him, a good man and not a quack.

Big Frank knew about Mary. He knew that with every drive of the pick it would be a closer thing for her. There were but four of them here, underground, but outside were Mary and Bert's wife and kids. It would be a close thing, any way it was looked at. He, Joe, could take it. He had never done anything else, but Mary was in a strange town with no friends, and unless they got to the doctor—

They were fools to have gone ahead when they knew they were taking a chance, but nobody expected anything like this. He had worked in mines most of his life and no trouble until now, and then the roof fell in. The whole damned mountain came down—or so it seemed. When he heard the crash, his first thought was for Mary. He was trapped here, but she was trapped out there, and she was alone.

„Better take a rest,“ Frank said. „We've got some time.“

Joe sat down, and Bert looked across at him. „We could work in the dark,“ he suggested. „That flame eats up air.“

Frank shook his head. „If you can't see, there's too much waste effort. You've got to see where the pick goes. Try it with the light a little longer.“

Joe's eyes went to Frank. The big man lay tense and still, gripping the rock under his hand. He was in agony, Joe knew it and hated it. Frank was his friend.

„Will we make it, Frank?“ He was thinking of Mary. What would she do? What could she do? How could she handle it alone? It wasn't as if they were married. „Think we'll make it?“

„We'll make it,“ Frank said. „We'll make it, all right.“

„Listen!“ Bert sat up eagerly. „I think I hear them! Wasn't that the sound of a pick?“

They listened, every muscle tense. There was no sound. Then, far away, some muck shifted. Frank doused the light, and darkness closed in, silent and heavy like the dead, dead air. There was no vibrancy here, no sense of living.

They heard Joe get up, heard the heavy blows of the pick. He worked on and on, his muscles aching with weariness. Each blow and each recovery was an effort. Then Bert spoke, and they heard them change places. Standing once more, Bert could feel the difference. It was much harder to breathe; his lungs labored, and his heart struggled against the walls of his chest, as if to break through. Once he stopped and held a hand over it, frightened.

Long since they had thrown the first two picks aside, their points worn away. They might have to return to them, but now they were using another, sharper pick. They were standing in a hole now. Once a flake of rock fell, and Bert held himself, expecting a crash. It did not come.

Rody moved suddenly. Frank lit the light with a brush of his palm. Rody looked at him, then reached for the pick. „Let me have it,“ Rody said. „Hell, it's better than sittin' there suckin' my thumb. Give me the pick.“

Bert passed it to him; then he staggered to the muck pile and fell, full length, gasping with great throat-rasping gasps.

Rody swung the pick, attacking the bottom of the hole savagely. Sweat ran into his eyes, and he swung, attacking the rock as if it were a flesh-and-blood enemy, feeling an exultant fury in his blows.

Once he stopped to take five, and looking over at Frank, he said, „How goes it, big boy?“

„Tolerable,“ Frank said. „You're a good man, Rody.“

Rody swelled his chest, and the pick swung easily in his big hands. All of them were lying down now because the air was better close to the muck.

„Hear anything?“ Bert asked. „How long will it take them to reach us, Frank?“

„Depends on how much it caved.“ They had been over this before, but it was hope they needed, any thread of it. Even talking of rescue seemed to bring it nearer. The numbness was all gone now, and his big body throbbed with pain. He fought it, refusing to surrender to it, trying to deny it. He held the pain as though it were some great beast he must overcome.

Suddenly Joe sat up. „Say! What became of the air line for the machine?“

They stared at each other, shocked at their forgetting. „Maybe it ain't busted,“ Bert said.

Stumbling in his eagerness, Joe fell across the muck, bumping Frank as he did so, jerking an involuntary grunt from him. Then Joe fell on his knees and began clawing rocks away from where the end of the pipe should be, the pipe that supplied compressed air for drilling. He found the pipe and cleared the vent, unscrewing the broken hose to the machine. Trembling, he turned the valve. Cool air shot into the room, and as they breathed deeply, it slowly died away to nothing.

„It will help,“ Joe said. „Even if it was a little, it will help.“

„Damned little,“ Rody said, „but you're right, Joe. It'll help.“

„How deep are you?“ Frank asked. He started to shift his body and caught himself with a sharp gasp.

„Four feet—maybe five. She’s tough going.“

Joe lay with his face close to the ground. The air was close and hot, every breath a struggle. When he breathed, he seemed to get nothing. It left him gasping, struggling for air. The others were the same. Light and air were only a memory now, a memory of some lost paradise.

How long had they been here? Only Frank had a watch, but it was broken, so there was no way of calculating the time. It seemed hours since that crash. Somehow it had been so different from what he had expected. He had believed it would come with a thundering roar, but there was just a splintering sound, a slide of muck, a puff of wind that put their lights out, then a long slide, a trickling of sand, a falling stone. They had lacked even the consolation of drama.

Whatever was to come of it would not be far off now. Whatever happened must be soon. There came no sound, no breath of moving air, only the thick, sticky air and the heat. They were all panting now, gasping for each breath.

Rody sat down suddenly, the pick slipping from his fingers.

„Let me,“ Joe said.

He swung the pick, then swung it again.

When he stopped, Bert said, „Did you hear something?“

They listened, but there was no sound.

„Maybe they ain’t tryin’;“ Rody said. „Maybe they think we’re dead. Can you imagine Tom Chambers spendin’ his good money to get us out of here?“ Rody said. „He don’t care. He can get a lot of miners.“

Joe thought of those huge, weighted timbers in the Big Stope. Nothing could have held that mass when it started to move. Probably the roof of the Big Stope had collapsed. Up on top there would be a small crowd of waiting people now. Men, women, and children. Still, there wouldn’t be so many as in Nevada that time. After all, Bert was the only one down here with children.

But suppose others had been trapped? Why were they thinking they were the only ones?

The dull thud of the pick sounded again. That was Rody back at work. He could tell by the power. He listened, his mind lulled into a sort of hypnotic twilight where there was only darkness and the sound of the pick. He heard the blows, but he knew he was dying. It was no use. He couldn’t fight it any longer.

Suddenly the dull blows ceased. Rody said, „Hey! Listen!“ He struck again, and it was a dull sound, a hollow sound.

„Hell!“ Rody said. „That ain’t no ten feet!“

„Let’s have some light over here,“ Rody said, „Frank—?“

He took the light from Frank’s hand. The light was down to a feeble flicker now, no longer the proud blade of light that had initially stabbed at the darkness.

Rody peered, then passed the lamp back to Frank.

„There should be a staging down there.“ Frank’s voice was clear. „They were running a stopper off it to put in the overhead rounds.“

Rody swung, then swung again, and the pick went through. It caught him off balance, and he fell forward, then caught himself. Cool air was rushing into the drift end, and he took the pick and enlarged the hole.

Joe sat up. „God!“ he said. „Thank God!“

„Take it easy, you guys, when you go down,“ Frank said. „That ladder may have been shaken loose by blasting or the cave-in. The top of the ladder is on the left-hand side of the raise. You’ll have to drop down to the staging, though, and take the ladder from there. It’ll be about an eight- or nine-foot drop.“

He tossed a small stone into the hole, and they heard it strike against the boards down below. The flame of the light was bright now as more air came up through the opening. Frank stared at them, sucking air into his lungs.

„Come on, Rody,“ Joe said. „Lend a hand. We’ve got to get Frank to a doctor.“

„No.“ Frank’s voice was impersonal. „You can’t get me down to that platform and then down the ladder. I’d bleed to death before you got me down the raise. You guys go ahead. When they get the drift opened up will be time enough for me. Or maybe when they can come back with a stretcher. I’ll just sit here.“

„But—“ Joe protested.

„Beat it,“ Frank said.

Bert lowered himself through the opening and dropped. „Come on!“ he called. „It’s okay!“

Rody followed. Joe hesitated, mopping his face, then looked at Frank, but the big man was staring sullenly at the dark wall.

„Frank—“ Joe stopped. „Well, gee—“

He hesitated, then dropped through the hole. From the platform he said, „Frank? I wish—“

His boots made small sounds descending the ladder.

The carbide light burned lower, and the flame flickered as the fuel ran low. Big Frank’s face twisted as he tried to move; then his mouth opened very wide, and he sobbed just once. It was all right now. There was no one to hear. Then he leaned back, staring toward the pile of muck, his big hands relaxed and empty.

„Nobody,“ he muttered. „There isn’t anybody, and there never was.“

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