

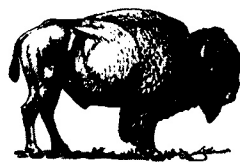
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The Hole

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AFTER THE TWENTY-FOUR minute walk home from work, Jace reaches his apartment and abruptly stops humming. A hole penetrates his apartment door. At his exact eye level, centered vertically, its diameter is an inch wide. A peephole. He fingers it and feels no jagged edge or splinter. Pressing his ear there, he hears staticky stillness like listening into a shell. When he looks through, his single-room apartment appears as orderly as he left it this morning.

He unlocks the door, shoves it open, and flips on all the lights. "Hello?" he asks the off-white room. "Allegra?" Hope grinds in him as he storms through the studio, ripping the cover from his bed, flinging open the bathroom door, jerking the plastic shower curtain with the shrill shriek of metal on metal, pulling at the plywood kitchen cupboards. When all that was closed is now open, he stands sweating in the center of the room. There's no one. Nothing.

He sticks a rectangle of white tape over the hole from inside, ensures the only window is locked, tugs the blackout shade down lower to a foot below the windowsill, and continues with his evening routine. He microwaves a frozen hamburger patty, as he has every night since the last meal he ate with his wife. On the night she didn't come home from work, he left hers on the table until cockroaches swarmed the meat.

When nothing's left on his plate but bun crumbs, he washes his hands. For minutes, he lets his fingers laze under the hot water, then towels away all drops of moisture. He rolls up his sleeves and unpacks two pieces of white paper from his wife's mahogany, cloth-lined stationery box.

With every grocery list and all seven anniversary cards, Allegra declared his handwriting utterly illegible. Now, each arch and line painstaking, he sees to it that his words are readable.

After an hour and six minutes, his page is crowded with precise letters and remarks like: *I hope you had a nutritious dinner tonight. Were there lots of anchovies?, and, It's been fall here for awhile now and winter's coming soon. The trees are still the colors you like best. Come back as soon as you can, and, At work I spilled coffee all over a rich guy heading for Honolulu and when he laughed good and long about it, I tried to join in, and, I saw a Great Dane today and thought of Gidget, and, I came home to find a small hole in the door. I hope it's some sign from you.*

He copies the letter word for word onto the second piece of paper, seals each in a separate envelope, and addresses one to Allegra Holland-Stewer via the post office in Sayre, Pennsylvania and one to Allegra Holland-Stewer via the post office in Huancayo, Peru. Every day for the past one hundred and fifty-five weeks, he's sent one letter to a nearby place and one to a distant location.

Last night, Detective Cree called with a gravelly voice full of regulation sympathy. "After three years," he'd said, "we inform relatives of the missing person that it's time to start in on the mourning process. You can pick up the death certificate at the precinct."

"Why three years?"

"We've talked about this before, Mr. Stewer. We don't pull this time out of a hat," Detective Cree told Jace. "It's figured on probability."

"Probability based on what?"

"Based on research and past experiences."

"Does that mean you're stopping your search?"

"Mr. Stewer, I'm sorry for your loss. But our offices are busy and priority goes to folks more likely to benefit from our—"

Jace released the phone and let it dangle from its cord until the dial tone came through, then put the speaker to his ear. It sounded like a steamboat plowing into his home, a void drilled through all meaning, the opposite of a human voice.

NOW, JACE RISES like a religious man at a religious ceremony and pushes two pins into Huancayo and Sayre on the wall-sized map that hangs opposite his bed: two new red dots among two thousand one hundred and seventy six others. From three steps back, the map looks infested with red ants.

With horse-like sighs, Jace hauls ten bricks from where fifty-five rest in a cardboard box at the bottom of his closet. With them, he had intended to build Allegra a mock fireplace against the left wall. She'd always wanted a fireplace, a house, a yard—but Jace could not afford this. Now, he sets ten bricks inside his brown blanket, covers them with two pillows, rolls the cotton blanket into a long cylinder, and pushes the bundle to Allegra's side of the bed. This bundle has vaguely imitated her weight and length next to him for the past one thousand eighty-eight nights. With no blanket above him, he lies in his work clothes beside

the cylinder. The apartment is cave-dark except for the hallway's grainy light through the taped hole. The point beams in Jace's open eyes like the first star, like the moment just before the universe exploded into existence and ruined everything.

AS HE REMOVES his arm from where it lays draped over the brick-stuffed blanket, Jace's eyelids swing open. Tape no longer covers the door's hole. He turns onto his stomach, urgent to hide his erection from whoever might be here, watching. Careful to keep his expression stoic, he rises, dismantles the bundle, stacks the bricks inside his closet, and makes the bed. He glances at the clock and snaps on the radio. Each morning he listens to 98.3—her preferred station—for a familiar voice requesting a song. With swift and shaking limbs, he peels off his clothes, showers without masturbating, then quickly steps back into his pants, stretches into his work shirt, buttons down, zips up, and, relief at escape beating like wings through his veins, turns to leave.

A view of the hallway greets Jace through a wrist-sized hole, spread out from the earlier point. Its inside matches the off-white of his door. He pokes the rim. The paint is not wet; not even sticky. When he pushes his hand through, it fits so perfectly he's wedged inside, and the edge is cold on his wrist: the door now a handcuff larger than his whole body. With only twenty-one minutes to reach work on time, he widens his stance and pulls his arm back with force that leaves a red ring around his hand. He measures the width of the gap, rips a flap from the cardboard box that holds his bricks, and tapes the misshapen rectangle over the hole from inside.

FROM THE WORN leather chair in his poorly-lit office, Jace performs. As a travel agent, his job is to create fantasies, then make sure they come true. At work, Jace arranges family vacations, business trips, ladies' getaways, man-and-mistress escapes, epiphany seekers' journeys, bachelor parties, and honeymoons to places he and Allegra once hoped to visit someday. He can't leave now—not the country, not the state, not the city, and, even here, he no longer goes to baseball games or wanders parks. Instead, Jace bustles home straight from work every evening in case she's arrived back, waiting; a baffled smile above her open arms lined with shopping bags; or face columned with tears and mouth brimming with apologies; or with pupils dilated and confused, wearing another woman's clothes; or pulling a half-risen cake from the oven to welcome him back from the work day. She is not a talented baker, but always an eager one.

To the hope-smearred faces of a soon-to-be-married couple, he declares Cinque Terre—a place, like most others, he has never been—utterly unmissable. Next, he convinces a recent divorcée that Huancayo's mountains are crammed so full of splendor and Lake Titicaca's

waters so purifying, she'll come back scrubbed clean of her former life's grime. He doesn't notice her hand on his knee until he rises to wish her a farewell. When he sees, his tone flattens from enthusiastic to formal, and he spins the wedding ring around his finger three times to call her attention there before shaking her hand once goodbye.

His third meeting is with Diane and Marty Klausen, orange-skinned and back from their fortieth anniversary trip to Southern France. "We got the message about showing you our photos and had to come by," Diane says, then hugs him with two tight squeezes. "Thank you for the most *delightful* trip. We adored our tour guide with his smart little accent." Marty shakes Jace's hand, then claps its backside with his free palm: between these men, the equivalent of a hug.

"There's nothing like reliving your trip," Jace says. "Let's see the photos."

Diane pulls the digital camera from her pocketbook—"made of Mediterranean leather," she holds the bag out, inviting Jace to feel it, "and on sale."

"Let's get a picture of you first, Jace. You're the man who made it all happen." Marty says. Jace understands this side-effect of travel; for awhile after, all life seems essential to record. This same side-effect occurs when searching for the lost.

In a botched French accent, Marty bellows, "Say cognac!" Jace chuckles twice for politeness and looks into the lens, through which he's seen but which he can't see into.

Jace is still seated when Diane thrusts the camera screen in front of him, her heavy arms around his neck from behind. A thick silver bracelet glints on her wrist. Jace massages his hand where the door left it sore.

"Here are the pebble beaches," Marty points out, his leg against the arm of Jace's chair, "In Nice."

"Hard on the feet, but lovely on the eyes," Diane adds, and together she and Marty laugh the childish laugh of recently-revived romance. "Oh! And this is that little restaurant on the water you told us about."

"You were right, Jace. The best shrimp we ever tasted," Marty says.

In the past three years, Jace has worked harder at his job than ever before. He feigns charm at meetings, sweats through his shirt arguing down prices through language barriers, quizzes tour guides on obscure facts excavated from the internet, and, while he sips black coffee, offers each customer a celebratory glass of champagne at the final meeting before embarkation, robustly imitating friendship. All this is meant to ensure every trip is stuffed with sweeping views, pulsing nights, fresh-scented hotel rooms, elegant drivers, and omniscient tour guides. And that his customers will be eager to visit him when they arrive home.

Here's why: As the Klausens spout on about escargot and firm-yet-fluffy pillows, Jace stares unblinking at their camera's small screen for a dark-haired, olive-skinned woman.

THE EVENING AIR is crisp as Jace walks home quick over uneven sidewalks. At the hardware store four blocks from his building, he orders a custom four inch by four inch square of Brazilian cherry wood and buys a package of long, thick nails to cover this morning's hole.

Though he lives on the fourth floor, he enters his building's second floor hallway. Directly in front of each door, he stands on tiptoes, then on flat feet, then crouches. While he's on hands and knees examining the lower half of 2C's door, a firm female voice showers him from above: "Can I help you?"

He twists toward the voice, then stands. Except for polite nods, he hasn't spoken to a neighbor in many months, maybe years. He assumes his office tone: professional, peppered with charm. "I live in the building—in 4D—and I'm looking for holes."

"Holes?" White haired, she wears a fist-sized gem on her neck.

"There's a hole in my door. I'm looking to see if it's a building-wide problem."

"Have you called maintenance?"

"Not yet."

"An exterminator?"

"I don't think it's an infestation."

"Sounds like one to me. Sounds like you should call an exterminator before it spreads to the rest of us." With that, she enters her apartment across the hall and bangs the door closed behind her.

All seven doors on this floor, and on the third and fourth, too, are solid.

Through his own door, his bed and map are on exhibit, framed in a hole grown to a neck's width. Standing in the hallway, he imagines his throat trapped inside, the circumference shrinking, his breath tightening: this apartment his last sight. Dust clings to the room's corners. Except for the map, the room is colorless. Looking in, his home appears barren and anonymous in a way he'd never noticed: a cell. Keys in pocket, he reaches into the hole, turns the deadbolt and knob locks, and lets himself in. He dreads the steps inside.

"Hello?" he asks the four familiar walls. His voice sounds clogged with sand. But no one is here, and as he sifts through the apartment to find what's been stolen, the hallway's fluorescent lights hiss through the opening.

Except for the radio, which still sits on the bedside table, there are no electronics to take. Allegra scorned—*scorns*—TV and computers. For all their years together, she'd argued, "there's a whole world to watch out that door and out that window," and, after two and a half years of debate, he dragged the things down four floors and left them on the sidewalk. When he'd arrived back upstairs, she laid naked on the bed, light from the open window licking her body up and down. Her grin was vast. "Isn't this better than those silly screens?" she asked.

Allegra's grandfather's pocket watch, Jace's two pairs of gold cufflinks, and all cash hidden in the underwear drawer remain in place. Only the cardboard Jace covered the wrist-sized hole with is missing. Only.

The Brazilian cherry wood is too small to fit over this expanded hole, so Jace removes the lid from Allegra's cloth-lined stationary box. With those newly-bought nails and a dirty old hammer, he drives the mahogany rectangle into the door. When eight nails hold the covering in place, when no hallway light shines through and the fluorescent's hissing's gone mute, when he tugs at the wood and it doesn't budge, he strips off his work clothes and puts on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. He pulls open the blackout shade for the first time in thirty-five months and microwaves a frozen hamburger patty.

Still chilled in parts, he eats the half-hot, half-cold meat and looks out his unveiled window into the window across from his. The room is a kitchen. On the table, two smoking steaks sit on plates and pasta fills a clear bowl. A man spoons food into a baby's mouth. When the child flails her hands up and pulls tiny fists back down to the highchair then bang-bang-bangs, the father imitates her motions: a baby show for baby. The child, a satisfied audience of her own gestures alive in another, leans back with an open mouth, maybe laughing. Jace laughs too. A very pretty woman enters, hay-colored hair in a ponytail. She kisses the child's forehead as if bestowing some blessing, sits next to the flailing man, and leans on an elbow outstretched across the dinner table, seeming as fascinated by the scene as Jace. She looks up: sees Jace watching.

Jace drags his seat to another side of the square table, where he continues his dinner while looking at the map, considering it. When nothing's left on his plate, he removes a piece of stationary from Allegra's box. He has known for a long time now that two million, four hundred sixty-nine thousand, five hundred and one cities exist in the world. For the first time, he calculates that at his rate, it would take three thousand three hundred and eighty-two years to send letters to them all. Until now, he had not cared to know.

Tonight, he doesn't wash before writing. Hamburger grease from his right hand globs the clean paper. With his naturally sprawling, lopsided handwriting, he storms the page until his words resemble a city of demolished buildings. He's written a single paragraph on each paper:

I hope you had a nutritious dinner tonight. I'm getting to be a handyman these days, covering all these holes. Today at work a woman grabbed my leg and I didn't even feel it. Maybe I'm losing my sense of touch.

One envelope is addressed to Chichester, New York and one to Kamptee, India. He sludges toward the map, pushes two pins in, and quickly reverses.

For the first time in many years, he pulls his window open two inches, inviting the prickling autumn air in, and plucks a book from the shelf. *Iceland*. An eight-year-old travel guide. With this book, he'd tried to convince Allegra to visit with him, but she'd said, "I refuse to spend my free days shivering," and meant it. On the cover, the letters of the country's name are raised and, lying in bed, he strokes them while he flips through pictures of fjords and peach bodies in steaming lagoons and small houses with colorful roofs. Finally, he's somewhere else. When the images blur, he puts the book down, and, too tired to rise

and lift the bricks from their box, wraps the blanket alone into a cylinder beside him. In jeans and a t-shirt, he faces the door. Street lights blare in through the unclothed window and glint on the eight shining nail heads that spike the lid in place.

HIS EYES STUTTER open. The room is cold. He removes his hand from where it rests on the would-be belly of the bundle beside him, and sits up. There's the sound of continuous wheezing, or an ocean that's lost its rhythm: traffic through the open window.

He glances at the digital clock radio. No numbers flash. Its batteries are dead. After replacing them, he looks at the time, and, with only eleven minutes to reach work, approaches the door. The hole, still neck-sized, has shed its covering. The mahogany lid and all eight nails are gone. No dents or splinters or paint chips mark where Jace pounded them in yesterday. He snatches the brown blanket from bed, folds it in four, and hammers its corners into the door, swinging furiously.

STILL IN HIS jeans and t-shirt, he leans further back in his chair than usual and returns no calls from the clients who offer to show him pictures from their trips. He puts his feet up on the desk and leaves them there through two meetings.

"Iceland," Jace tells his last customer, a recent college graduate with a hefty sum of gift checks. "*That's* the place to go if you're looking for the answers." Though Dylan hasn't agreed to work with him yet, Jace pours a glass of champagne for the kid and one for himself. When they clink glasses, the bubbles go berserk.

"I'm looking for the questions," Dylan responds, a real smart aleck in a turtleneck.

"Questions, huh? They're the only answer there is," Jace says. "And up there, you've got plenty. You've got the Northern Lights. You've got clean, cold air to wake you right up to what you want to do with your life. A new language. Questions all around. It'll feel like you're born new." Together, they finish the bottle of champagne.

After Dylan signs the check, Jace shakes his hand and says, "Bring me with you." This, part of his usual performance after a check is signed, spills out his mouth sounding less like a joke and more like a plea. Dylan half-smiles nervously.

ON THE WALK home, Jace notices circles bugs have bitten through the bright dying leaves that still cling to branches. In a store window, a male mannequin stands in front of a very realistic painting of an icy mountain. It wears a baby blue hooded jacket and pants with many pockets. Inside the store, the coat feels soft as a woman and the pants fit right. While he's at it, he buys a wool sweater, too, some socks, boxer briefs, and a pair of hiking boots with thick rubber soles.

At his apartment door, the hole remains neck-sized and the blanket is gone. Sunset's coral light blushes through the studio—and still, looking in from this frame, the off-white walls resemble the color of sickly skin and his bed without its blanket seems as inviting as a slab of wood. From here, the pins have the appearance of the wall bleeding through his map.

Inside, he removes his jeans and t-shirt and steps into pajama pants. His bare abdomen tingles from air through the open window. Looking out, he sees closed curtains in the kitchen window across. He begins a letter to Allegra but stops at *nutritious*, clicks on the radio, pulls his chair from the dining room table and, his usual slouching posture alert, sits in pajama pants watching the door.

As he watches, he listens to the radio; not for a familiar voice requesting a song, but for baseball scores, news about protestors down at the park, and reports from today's space shuttle launch. He closes his eyes, and for a full half-hour, he forgets the room, the chair, Allegra, the frigid air. He eats nothing and finds the hollow-feeling in his stomach pleasurable.

After three hours, the opening hasn't spread. He pushes the window open wide, removes Allegra's favorite dress from the closet and, draped like a weightless, sleeping child in his arms, carries it across the room. The cloth smells old and damp. Its orange is dimmer than he remembers, and when he hangs it from the coat hook inside his front door, it only partially covers the hole.

He strips off his pajama pants. Lying beside nothing in bed, curled in fetal position, the hallway bulbs' hissing and the traffic's rumbling enter the room. Together they sound like an ocean swelling around him. He doesn't imagine Allegra's shape inside the dress or in the bed. He remembers himself as a child, imagining his room a boat at sea on its way to somewhere new. The hallway's fluorescent glow seeps in around the dress's edges, and with this light, he looks at pictures in *Iceland* until his eyes flicker shut and the book falls like a roof over his bare chest.

BRISK AIR LAPS over his feet, his legs, his chest. It slides into his nostrils and yanks open a scene: in a canoe, they sway along. Jace's niece Leigh is two, snug beside Allegra as he paddles behind them, watching their backs. Leigh reaches her small arms into the water; Allegra holds her shoulder to keep her from falling. His niece twists backward to show him her wet hand, then points her face to the sky with an open mouth, maybe laughing. More than he longs for Allegra, he envies Leigh.

Consciousness chases the image away. Rising up in bed, he sees the door, where the dress and coat hook have vanished and an opening the width of his body waits. He calls his boss, and, with no effort to sound unwell, says, "Aaron, I have a terrible fever." He strips off his boxer briefs and wedding ring. In the shower, he scrubs and scrubs as if he's covered

in mud, then stands under the hot water until his skin blooms red. Walking naked into the room, he examines the map. There are many cities where the leaves aren't dying this time of year. There are five oceans and eighty-five seas. The red marks are thousands of open doors to places he's never been.

He dresses in his new clothes, fills one of the many pants pockets with cash from the underwear drawer, and snaps the baby blue coat closed. Slow and worshipful, as if reaching out to touch a lover unclothed, he feels around the hole's rim. Smoothed, rounded, it blends to the door's material like healed skin to a body. He pulls himself through this exit just his size. Outside, the hallway's fluorescent light blares in his eyes, so vivid he must close them. He stretches his healthy body tall. Then he's down the stairs and out the building's door, where air zips through his sterling lungs as he goes and goes and is gone.