

RONALD SPARLING

Holes

A BLACK HOLE HAS GRAVITY so great that nothing can escape it, not even light. If you look at a black hole through a telescope for too long it will sap the life right out of you.

My brother told me these things. He had a telescope. If he caught me using it he'd push me roughly from his room. A telescope is a boy's toy, he said.

My husband has a telescope.

The moonlight bleeds through the trees and through the window, oozes onto the bed, and splashes his face which is looking up, always up. I rise and open the window. He closes it every night, winter and summer, before he climbs in beside me.

I've always loved to sleep in the cold, have always loved to bury myself deep in a hole in my goose down comforter.

He's allergic to feathers. Now we have an allergy-free comforter, but it's not the same. You can't dig a good hole in synthetics. I tested his allergy once, replaced the new comforter with my old, real one. He wasn't lying.

With the cool night air arrives the trickle of the stream that runs behind the farm house and the deep, foreign love song of the bull frogs. They remind me of the deep, low murmurs the Italian men would push towards my girlfriends and me in Europe after graduation. We ignored them as we'd been told to do. I can't ignore the bull frogs or their reminder that I'd once travelled, had once been the object of lustful thoughts in a language I didn't understand, still don't understand even though I've been in love many times.

He lies beside me and begins to snore in unison with the frogs. This new sound ends the memory. I am what I am. A forty-year-old mother of three with sagging breasts, scars from two Caesareans, and a husband who is growing as tired of me as I am of him. We've been married eighteen years.

She's in her early twenties, barely older than our eldest. A receptionist at his law firm. Not even a legal assistant. I could understand if he was at least able to talk with her. But then, he never wants to talk with me.

When we were first married he would talk. He'd tell me what his job would do for him, for us, but he never discussed his work. Perhaps I wasn't smart enough for him.

My degree was in political science, but I was more interested in political action than theory. That's what first drew him to me. It was also the first thing he criticized after we got married. Asked when I was going to grow out of it.

The pillow his head lies on is new. Qualofill. A play on quality. I look at his face and wonder if it breathes. His mouth. The pillow. Do they breathe—could they breathe—together, one through the other?

I saw them downtown together. It was on Saturday morning. He said he had some shopping to do. The usual, Canadian Tire kind of shopping. Saturday morning chores kind of shopping. Then he was to stop at the office for a few hours.

They were drinking coffee and eating croissants on the patio of a small restaurant. She was wearing spandex shorts and a T-shirt, Reebok trainers on her feet. There was a sports bag hanging from the back of her chair.

I haven't had a croissant in years. He says they're not good for us. Too much something. He's always watching our diets. He wants us to look like her.

I resisted the urge to confront them, to catch him in an undeniable situation. There was a time when I wouldn't have hesitated to do so.

His snoring is now out of sync with the bull frogs. They have a rhythm, a beat. He snores like he dances, slightly off. The only thing missing is the sly smile. He thinks he looks good on the dance floor.

The truth is—he does. I lied before. I was always happy to be seen dancing with him.

An Italian tried to kiss me when we were by ourselves for a moment. We were lagging behind the others who'd rounded the corner in front of us. He grabbed me and pushed me against the wall, tried to press his lips against mine. I turned my head away. He only wanted something to tell his friends.

Later, as we walked down the lane that led to our hotel, he looked across the water to an island we couldn't see. He told me this island had been his home, although he hadn't returned in many years. He looked so sad. I reached up and pulled his head towards mine, pressed my lips against his. I led him to the beach and made love to him. I knew there was no danger. Afterwards, he lay in my arms and continued to search for his island.

I told my friends what had happened.

Details, they said. We want details.

I got a Christmas card from one of them each year. It has a picture of her husband and herself surrounded by four well-dressed, smiling children. One child is holding a small dog in her lap. Inside is a photocopy of a letter that brings the reader up to date on the events of their lives over the past year.

This year the dog died. He was older than any of the children and would be sorely missed. They bought a new one two days later because the hole he left was too great to bear.

I am a hole, lying in bed beside him. I used to swallow him whole. He told me he would be lost without me, no longer whole. Now he's just lost. Doesn't know who he is anymore. He thought he did, but nothing is clear the way it used to be.

You can lay branches over a hole and trap a wild animal.

If you place sharpened sticks in the bottom of the hole, you can kill the animal.

hole (hol) 1. a hollow or hollowed-out place; a cavity

2. a small, dingy, squalid place 3. a prison cell 4. a flaw; fault; blemish; defect.

No longer whole.

In the moonlight I can see his pants neatly folded over the back of the chair. There are no crumpled clothes on the floor, no half-empty glasses of wine on the nightstand, only a television on its own table at the foot of the bed and a remote control by the clock radio with the exact time flashing in dull, red neon.

The alarm is set. He wants to be at the office early. Miss the traffic. Get a head start on the day's work load. No time to make love. Besides, the kids might come in.

He's forgotten we made those kids. He thinks they came with the *Globe and Mail*, like the *Report on Business* magazine. An extra-special treat. They can stay around for longer than the paper. These items have what they call longevity.

They expire in hospital waiting rooms.

The love song of the bull frog is gradually being replaced by the singing of birds. The open window has lowered the temperature in the bedroom by several degrees and I attempt to burrow into the allergy-free comforter. In doing so, I pull the comforter too far and expose his back to the cool air.

I begin to reach across his body carefully, trying not to waken him, reaching to replace the cover, but I stop myself. I retract my hand and use it to scrunch the comforter in front of my face, nestle my nose in to keep it warm, and pull on the comforter just a tiny bit more.