Sinkhole



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The realtor showed us the house on West Garland Avenue and insisted it had everything we wanted.

“Look,” he said, “there’s a fireplace, granite countertops, crown molding, and a large sinkhole in the yard.”

My husband Alex and I laughed because we thought he was kidding.

“No, really,” the realtor said.

We told him we didn’t want a sinkhole. That was not an item on our list. We agreed on this with absolute certainty. Back then, we always agreed with absolute certainty.

“I know,” the realtor said. “But the house is a steal. Way bigger than anything else you’ll find in your price range.”

He was right. Besides, size was what we wanted most: a home with more space for our ever-expanding brood of children and pets. So we bought the house and put up a fence around the hole to keep the kids from falling in and for a while after that, we didn’t pay much attention to it at all.

But then, one night a few weeks after the move, I asked Alex how deep he thought the sinkhole was. He said he had no idea. We went to look. We climbed our new fence and I held a flashlight while Alex leaned over the edge.

“I can’t see the bottom,” he said.

I stood beside him and peered in. It was almost as if the light was being swallowed up by the hole, eaten alive. We agreed it seemed sinister.

Then the beam of the flashlight began to fade and soon disappeared entirely.

“Piece of junk,” I said. Overcome by a childish impulse, I pitched it into the hole.

“That’s sort of wasteful, don’t you think?” Alex said. “It just needed new batteries.”

No, I said. I told him it felt good to throw the broken flashlight. The feeling alone was worth the waste. Alex chuckled at this. Back then, he thought I was funny.

Inside the house, the flashlight was waiting for us. It was perched at the edge of the coffee table.

“What the fuck?” I whispered, not wanting to wake the kids.

“Seriously, what the fuck?” Alex whispered back.

I picked up the flashlight. I didn’t know if I should be afraid or impressed. A minute earlier I had thrown it into a hole in our yard and now it was here, in the living room, on the coffee table. I turned it over in my hands to test its realness. I flicked the switch and the light came on.

“The sinkhole fixed it,” I whispered.

“Wait,” Alex said, and for a second I thought he was going to warn me to set the light down and back away—it could be dangerous. But he didn’t. What he said was: “Let’s try something else to be sure.”

He found a picture frame that had cracked during the move. I waited in the living room while he took the frame outside. In a moment, it was back on the coffee table just where the flashlight had been, the glass looking clean and solid. Alex returned and we inspected the repaired frame. We agreed it was incredible.

After that, we used the sinkhole quite often. We dropped in scuffed sneakers, forks with bent tines, books with torn covers. They all reappeared on the coffee table good as new. Soon the sinkhole became just another feature of the house we were grateful for, like the dishwasher and the walk-in closets.

We never considered the effect the hole might have on anything living. Not until the morning our oldest son, Jake, woke me to announce in a tear-ragged voice that something was wrong with his turtle. He was holding the turtle, named Bert, in both hands. I could see the creature was sick. I didn’t want to take both boy and turtle to the vet only to hear bad news. So, I led Jake to the yard and helped him over the fence to the hole.

“Put Bert in there and it will fix him,” I said.

I thought Jake would protest, but worry for his pet made him compliant. He set Bert into the hole and gasped when he disappeared. Back inside, he found Bert on the coffee table and ran to him. The turtle was much improved. But a pale of concern remained on Jake’s little face.

“Is my turtle a zombie now?” he asked.

“No, of course not,” I told him. “Zombies are dead things that come back to life. Bert was just sick. The sinkhole made him better.”

As soon as I said those words—The sinkhole made him better—I felt a kind shiver run through me. Like I’d just found the answer to a very important question I hadn’t even thought to ask.

I began to wonder what the sinkhole could do for me, if I put myself in it.

I wasn’t sick like Bert. I wasn’t broken like our clock radio. But I wasn’t the best version of me, either. I was thirty-eight, my body damaged from childbearing, and before that from alcohol and hair dye and music that was too loud. The usual things. Adulthood wore down my character, too. I was impulsive and at times forgetful. No great crimes. But wouldn’t my family be happier with an improved me? Wouldn’t I be happier?

I suggested this to Alex one night and he said no.

“I like you the way you are.”

I thought he was just being kind. Back then, we were always kind to one another.

“But wouldn’t you like me better if I was better?”

“No, because then you wouldn’t be you.”

I didn’t see this as the compliment he intended. I felt he was saying my essential nature was a flawed one.

Alex looked into my eyes and I could see the worry creep across his face.

“Please promise me you won’t get in that sinkhole,” he said.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because it’s weird. It’s a weird thing to do.”

I promised, but I couldn’t help but see this conversation as evidence for exactly why I needed so badly to go through the sinkhole: My logic was flawed, my thinking strange. What kind of woman wants to put herself in a hole? I felt strongly that if I used the hole to make myself better, I would banish such weirdness. I would no longer be the sort of person who wished to get into holes.

Alex kept looking at me. I didn’t say anything because I didn’t want to lie to him. Back then, we never lied.

I felt ready to get in the hole that night, but chose to wait. I wanted to be certain I was doing the right thing. So, for the next week, I went about my life as my normal, flawed self. I went to work, I visited with friends, I fed, cleaned, and entertained my children. I was kind and agreeable and honest and funny with Alex, like always.

But in my head, I kept a list of each mistake I made, every error a more perfect me would have been able to avoid—a burnt pan of lasagna, a forgotten birthday, a child scolded too harshly. And so on. Normally, I might have chastised myself for these missteps and later recounted them to Alex so he could reassure me they weren’t really so bad. But instead I hoarded them almost gleefully. They were the evidence against myself. I was building my case for the sinkhole.

I made a habit of visiting the hole before bed each night. I took my flashlight and, dressed in my slippers and robe, stood beside it, looking in. It was a meditative practice of sorts. I tried to think of nothing while I did this—not my flaws, or what a flawless me might be like. I just stood and stared, letting the darkness of the cavern fill my mind with calm and hope. Sometime I was aware of Alex watching me as I did this, waiting at the bedroom window for me to finish my ritual. But he never said anything about it. Why didn’t he say anything? What was wrong with me that my beloved husband could watch me do something that bizarre, night after night, and never feel capable of confronting me about it? Was

I so fragile? So frightening? So beguiling?

Then one evening Jake went off for a sleepover and left me with instructions to feed Bert—what kind of veggies and how much. Of course I forgot. In the morning, the turtle gazed out at me from his cage with what I imagined to be a hunger-stricken look. Never again, I thought.

I went straight for the hole. As I climbed the fence, I wondered about my entry. Should I dive? Cannonball? No. Such actions would suggest a kind of playfulness. But this was not play. It was work—the work of repairing myself. I walked into the hole as if stepping off a curb. I tumbled over once in the dark air then I was seated, legs crossed, back straight (no more slouching for me!) on the edge of the coffee table, feeling calm and perfect. Like I was someone else entirely. So, Alex had been right, of course. I was no longer myself. But the new and better me didn’t care. The better me was content to sit at the edge of the table, waiting patiently for Alex to come home so I could show him all the ways I’d changed.

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