**The Hole**

Sam Fouts

A hole had formed in the center of town. A pit of black, deep enough to meet the gaze of any soul who peeked in. Swirling, spiraling, whispering. Had a warm quality to it, hushed like a lullaby. You could fall in just by looking, listening to its cogent gurgles, bargains, and jokes that concealed its laughter whenever a gust of wind played off its circumference.

The spawning of the hole was a mute occurrence. In a blip, it swallowed the church, the police station, and the bowling alley. No word from anyone inside. Citizens gathered around and found themselves cut off by more than just that flaccid, yellow tape strung up by soldiers. Found themselves dazed. Murmured little things as if half-asleep -- which some were. The sun was just rising over the yellow, stump-ridden hill, but was quickly swallowed by textureless clouds. Now only pale light remained to give shape to those confused faces and color in the distant eyes watching their bodies from above.

Yet among that sapped crowd was a man with the biggest grin bouncing off his face. Ears perked up and tuned in to the hole, he stood closest to the tape, the point of his black goatee just cutting across as if it were caught on a hook. Those adjacent to him had since stepped away out of an uncanny hunch that he was the wizard or warlock that opened this rift, and even the soldiers steeled themselves in his presence. Yet when the goatee man scuttled his body under the tape, not a gun was drawn. He passed through those armored bodies like they were butter, sauntering unopposed all the way to the lip of the hole, where he set his body down and put an ear to the black mouth.

From his pocket, he pulled out his keys, dangled them over the hole with a jingle, then released them, listening with a hand cupped to his ear for a clang that never came. “Hey hey,” he said, smiling at the soldiers gathering around him. “How deep’s this thing?”

“Well…” one of the soldiers began.

“Well… why don’t we send someone to go take a look?”

Goosebumps. The soldiers looked at each other and blinked. And when their eyes opened, he was standing, swinging his arms back and forth, pacing in a circle, occasionally pretending to lose his balance around the hole.

“Woaahhhh,” he would go. That got a few chuckles. The citizens, initially frozen in their laconic moods, began to thaw and inch closer to the tape. A sizable crowd had condensed, and seeing he had an audience, the goatee man, with a preacher’s charm, beamed around at the others and nodded reassuringly, popped a few winks then rubbed his hands together and cracked his knuckles. “Watch this,” he said, raising his arms.

Then he did a backflip. Into the hole. Fired off finger guns on the way down. And every face went stone. Every eyeball watched the smiling man shrink shrink shrink and disappear, suddenly finding themselves back in their skulls. The citizens clamored forward, melting the yellow barrier to take a closer look for themselves.

But before any reckoning could be made, a woman who had been wiping her tears away only a moment ago decided to follow the goatee man. Chuckles quickly erupted. A pair of twins held hands before taking the next plunge. A choir boy’s curiosity boiled over. A couple of soldiers were afraid not to follow the smiling man, and a gambler asked what he had to lose before flinging himself in headfirst. Roars of applause bounced off storefronts. The townspeople flushed themselves down the hole as if it were as clear as the city pool, carried on their ways by some newfound magnetism lacing the laughter and spontaneous grins dotting the crowd.

In the end, only a lone shopkeeper was left with the company of the wind and a tumbling plastic bag. He too crossed the yellow tape and crept his head over the edge of the hole.

“Well…” His words trailed off, the ripples in their wake drowning as they too followed the smiling man down the hole. And as he dissected the liquid black for an absent explanation, all he felt was the hole winking back at him.