

Champagne

The sinkhole in Lee's backyard started small, as a divot of sand that could've been written off as some anomaly of erosion or the handiwork of a disgruntled gopher, if only it hadn't expanded with such hunger, minute-by-minute, day by day, until it encroached upon the dwarf dogwoods and the wrought-wire credenza at the edge of the patio. The walls fell in hyperbolically, a study in mathematical derivatives, accelerating toward the vanishing point where the center became full dark—no bottom, no light. No nothing. Lee stood above the hole, his head reeling from the champagne he'd drunk for breakfast. He probed the precipice with the toe of his sneaker and imagined the stomach-flip he'd feel on tumbling headlong in. If he did, this would all be over, all of it. Instead, he sank back into a wire patio chair.

On the far side the sinkhole, rust nodes were forming on the lawnmower, blades of grass grown up around it, half-hiding the wheels. Lee didn't have the energy to drag the mower into the garage. He'd hardly had the energy to pop the cork on a bottle of champagne—which he had been drinking daily for breakfast—much less the energy to sweep up the scattered fragments of the dozen or so formerly-identical bottles of champagne he'd shattered against his garage wall. Rings of white sugary efflorescence were dried atop the concrete where the champagne evaporated.

The progression of the sinkhole went like this: day 3, salad plate; day 4, dinner plate; day 5, pizza pan; day 6, failure of cookware analogies; day 9, kiddie pool; day 11; swimming pool; day 14, all-

consuming void.

Lee poured out the dregs of his morning's second bottle of champagne. An eerie magnetism repelled the liquid from the walls of the chasm and drew it straight down the center in a perfect golden stream. The darkness in the bottom of the hole had substance. It was not a regular darkness, which is the absence of light, but a sort of inverse light, a black shroud. Lee opened a third bottle and poured it out, and again the weird gravity took hold. He followed it with a fourth, because fuck it, there were five and a half more cases of the stuff in the garage. Every single bottle had an identical custom label with his name on it, plus Greg's. A couple days ago, he'd sat for an hour trying to peel off the labels, but the adhesive was persistent.

Lee was passed out by noon, hung over by one, drinking off his hangover by three. He'd fallen asleep in the lawn chair again, and his peeling nose had worsened. He awoke to find the wrought-wire credenza teetering precipitously at the threshold of the drop. He nudged it with his toe. Watched it fall. He drained the sun-hot dregs from a bottle lying sideways in the lawn, then tossed the bottle down the sinkhole.

Inside, he thumbed through unheard voicemail notifications, and pressed *delete, delete, delete*. In the garage he tugged on Greg's old gardening gloves, a size too large for his own hands, and brought out a wheelbarrow and a shovel.

Lee dug up the flowerbed: the coneflowers, the tulips, those yellow daisy-looking things. When he had the barrow full, he wheeled it to the edge of the sinkhole—now the size of a modest pile of minivans—and tipped in his load of flowers and earth. The dirt disappeared. The hole did not lessen; nothing seemed to have filled in.

Lee worked until the dehydration gave him a headache, and then a bit longer. He decimated the raised-bed veggie plot. He uprooted the roses, ripped out the petunias, deracinated the chrysanthemums. When the perennials and edibles had all been destroyed he tossed in the shovel,

wheeled the barrow to its death, plucked off the gloves finger by finger and threw them, dusting his hands together as they fell. In great overhand heaves, he chucked in the patio furniture piece by piece.

Lee made trip after trip: comforters, afghans, trash cans, desk lamps, wireless phone headsets, instruction manuals for wireless phone headsets, needlessly-saved boxes and shrink-wrap for wireless phone headsets, coriander, cumin, cayenne, pink and white pepper, *War and Remembrance*, tubes of burnt umber, ultramarine and gamboge, an ottoman, a queen-sized mattress, queen-sized box spring, queen-sized mahogany bedframe. By dusk, the flagstone of the patio were being swallowed.

Lee climbed on the coffee table and hung from the ceiling fan until the fixture ripped free from the drywall. After the fan, he wheeled out the fridge. The photo albums that used to sit on the coffee table had long since been tossed, as had the anise-flavored toothpaste that only Greg brushed with and the decaf beans that only Greg brewed. Lee even tossed the crates of champagne, though he immediately regretted it, and then un-regretted it when he thought of how it was the last thing with Greg's name on it, but in the end regretted it even more when he awoke the next morning with his tongue as swollen as a broken toe and a murder of a headache, and there was no booze to be found except a half-bottle of anisette, also formerly Greg's, for baking, which Lee had missed in his drunken cleansing of the kitchen cabinets.

He drank the anisette standing at the kitchen sink and watched the sinkhole expand. The back bedroom and the sunroom both listed upon the margins of the hole, teetering on shaky foundations half gone. Lee busted out the kitchen window with the butt of the anisette bottle and tossed the bottle through the hole.

He searched the knife drawers but found no remaining knives, since they'd already followed the butcher's block and the silverware. There was no rope in the garage, no belt in his closet. The

prescriptions had all been emptied from the medicine cabinet. The stove was electric, and Greg had taken the car when he'd left.

Lee lay on the empty living room carpet, his body framed by a sun-faded inverse rectangle around where the sofa had sat for years. After a while, a car pulled into the driveway and killed its engine. The doorbell rang. Lee didn't move.

"Lee?" Greg's voice. The sound of the key working the lock, the swath of light from the opened door cutting across Lee's eyes, brightening the blood red of his closed lids.

"Close the door. I have a headache."

"You're hung over?"

"Close the door."

"I won't bother you. I just came for a few things."

"There aren't any things."

"Don't worry, none of your things. None of *our* things, even. Just a few of my things."

"There aren't any things."

"What do you mean there aren't any things?"

"There aren't any things at all." Lee pointed to the backyard. He rose and followed Greg, wrapped his arms around Greg, held Greg tight from behind as they stood together before the sliding glass doors.

"It's good to see you."

"You're drunk."

"It's so good to see you." Lee nuzzled his nose into Greg's neck, breathed him in. But Greg slipped the knot of Lee's arms.

"I'll just go get my things."

"I told you—"

But Greg was already disappearing down the hallway. Only there was no hallway to disappear down. The floorboards had splintered and the carpet hung like a loose tongue into the gaping maw of the pit.

“What’ve you done with my stuff?”

“I told you.”

“What’ve you done with the bedroom? Where did the sunroom go?”

“I told you.”

Greg fell back as the kitchen wall collapsed in a shriek of snapping timbers. A section of the roof followed, and a breeze entered from the back lawn, which was no longer a lawn but just a big expanse of nothing. He stood, dusting off his jeans.

“You’re pathetic.”

“Don’t go.”

“I’m going.”

The sound of Greg’s car faded into the distance. In an explosion of concrete and burst pipes, the bathroom crumbled and fell. The roof beams splintered and slipped and did not crush Lee to death as he hoped they might, but slid past, down into darkness. Somehow, everything had fallen around him. Lee was trapped atop a spire, a hunk of living room suspended above the black. He lay back on the carpet, waiting to feel the floor go out from under him.