

The Hole

John arrived at the work site in the early morning, dreading his task. His secretary had already given him the basics: There's a broken water line, you can't get to it with the backhoe, it has to be dug out by hand. Ordinarily, he'd have sent one of his younger guys to deal with it, but he liked his employees and didn't want another one to quit. The problem wasn't so much with the "what" the job entailed as it was with the "whom" it was for. While part-time residents from the city were where the money was, they often made for terrible clients, and the Blanchards were bad even by those standards. The last time they'd hired his company to work on something, their behavior had cost him one of his best employees. John would have loved to turn down the job, but the Blanchards were notorious for spreading rumors and complaints when they were dissatisfied, so it was best to keep them happy if he wanted to get any more lucrative jobs in the developing neighborhood.

John lingered in the truck for a short while, but he finally got out and walked to the door. Taking a deep breath, he knocked, loudly, then waited. The curtain behind a nearby window pulled back, and a middle-aged woman in a purple robe appeared. Her eyes narrowed as she looked at him, and she disappeared from the window, reappearing when she opened the door a few seconds later.

"Good morning, Mrs. Blanchard. How are you this morning?" John tried his best to sound enthusiastic and friendly.

"It's about time you got here. I called yesterday." *So much for the friendly approach*, he thought.

"Yeah, Cheryl told me. Your message came in after she went home for the day. She called me as soon as she got in and heard it this morning."

"Why didn't somebody answer yesterday? You should have somebody there to answer

the phone at any time!”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Blanchard, but we’re not a big enough business to have somebody watching the phone all day.”

“Well, you should leave your personal number in the message, then, so that people can get ahold of you anytime.”

“Sorry, but I don’t usually give out my personal number for business.”

“What if there’s an emergency?”

John shrugged. “Call the fire department?” He winced as soon as he said it.

Her eyes narrowed even further. “Very funny. The problem is in the back. How much is this going to cost me?”

“I won’t know until I take a look, ma’am. Excuse me.” With that, John turned and headed for freedom around the nearest side of the house. He hated dealing with confrontational customers. One of the biggest challenges of his new business was navigating the dichotomy between the expected servility of customer service and how he’d been taught a “real man” should act, so when situations devolved, he did his best to keep exchanges brief. Usually, a firm “excuse me” was enough to end an uncomfortable interaction. A moment later, however, he heard huffing and footsteps as Mrs. Blanchard caught up to and then overtook him, leading the way along the wraparound dirt driveway. The house was situated on a large area of flattened hilltop, and she led him to where the downward slope began. It didn’t take John long to spot the problem. From the edge, he could easily see the telltale signs of the leak. The water had been shut off, but not before the leak had created a large, muddy mess on the scrubby hillside.

“My husband put the pipe in himself when we built the house. I called him, and he says that this should be an easy fix. He’d do it himself, but even if he weren’t at our house in Seattle right now, he’s under doctor’s orders to take it easy these days.” *I think she’s actually glaring at*

me, John thought. *How is this my fault?* “How much is this going to cost?”

“Well, it’ll depend on how long it takes me to dig up the waterline and on what the actual problem is, but I’m guessing it’s a small crack in the pipe, which should be a pretty easy fix once I get to it. Probably around two hundred bucks,” he told her.

“That’s ridiculous. My husband said it should only cost around fifty dollars.”

John sighed. “This is going to be at least half a day’s work, probably more. Feel free to call someone else, but you won’t get it done cheaper unless you do it yourself. Your call.”

Her eyebrows widened, and she looked like she was about to argue more, but then she looked again at the mess on the hillside. “Fine,” she finally replied, “but I want it done as quickly as possible. I wasn’t able to shower last night or this morning, and I feel disgusting. And don’t even think about working slowly to pad the bill: I’ll be watching you.” With that, she strode back toward the house. John, after overcoming his momentary shock at the accusation, shrugged and followed. Before she went back inside, she cast a final look over her shoulder at him as he climbed into his truck.

He pulled the truck around the back of the house, parking as close to the edge of the hill as he judged safe. From his vantage point, he could make out a number of lavish new homes in various stages of completion. *No wonder property values are skyrocketing*, he thought. *At this rate, soon no one born here will be able to afford to live here.* His thoughts inevitably turned to the recent increase in his own property taxes, and a familiar frustration set in. A change in the pitch of the engine brought him out of his economic musings, and John realized that he was procrastinating because he wasn’t looking forward to his project. He turned off the ignition. Getting out with a groan, John grabbed his favorite shovel out of the back. The plastic-handled one was newer and wasn’t splintery, but he hated the cool smoothness of the plastic under his hand, preferring the rough, warm texture of the old wooden handle. The calluses on his hand

usually caught any splinters, anyway. Stretching his shoulder muscles, already feeling a phantom ache in anticipation of the soreness he would feel tomorrow, he turned with shovel in hand to start making his way down the steep hill.

As he neared the edge, he felt a vibration in his pocket and heard the familiar baritone of Randy Travis, singing, “Digging up bones, I'm digging up bones...” John had selected that ringtone shortly after starting his excavation business; he'd thought it was pretty clever. He was glad it had rung, as he might otherwise have forgotten to take it out of his pocket before starting to dig in what was sure to be a mud pit. Looking at the screen, he saw his brother's name. *What could Chris possibly want at eight in the morning?* Curious, but glad for any delay to the digging, he ducked behind a nearby tree and answered the phone, peeking sheepishly back around the tree at the house.

“Hey, Chris. What's up?”

“Hi, John. Are you somewhere you can talk? I've got some bad news.” Chris's voice was trembling.

Thoughts rushed through John's mind: *Is one of the kids hurt? Has something happened to Dad? Aunt Sarah? Oh crap, is my house on fire?* “Yeah, I'm all by myself at a job site. What is it? What's wrong?”

“I just got off the phone with Aunt Sarah. She called to tell us that Mom died last night. They told her that Mom's liver finally gave out because of the drinking and the hepatitis and that she died in her sleep and they found her this morning and...” The words came fast through the phone, Chris rushing through the details as if afraid to linger on them, afraid that they might be contagious. The news caught John completely by surprise; he had anticipated many possible scenarios as to what was wrong, but this had not been one of them. He felt himself lean back against the tree. *Mom is... dead?*

Chris stopped, and John could hear him taking a few deep breaths. He continued in a slower, steadier voice. "Aunt Sarah said that the funeral is Thursday. I'll be driving down Wednesday night with Jenny and the girls." He stopped, and John could sense the discomfort on the other end. After a long pause, Chris asked, "Are you gonna go?" There was another long pause. "We have room in the truck if you want to go. I can pick you up Wednesday after work..." His brother's voice trailed off.

Dead? The word repeated itself in John's head. *Dead. Dead.* It echoed in Chris's voice, over and over, each time becoming more and more indistinct until it had completely lost its meaning, like a game of telephone. *Dead. Dead.* John, unsure of how he felt, of how he *should* feel, slowly muttered a response to Chris, telling him that he'd get back to him later, that he needed time to think. Besides, he really needed to get back to work. After he ended the call, he stared at the cell phone in his hand, unable to connect one thought to another. *Dead?*

John's head snapped up. He'd dropped his shovel, which had landed loudly on a rock with a clang that reverberated on the otherwise silent hillside. John set his phone down under the tree, did the same with his wallet and keys, then scooped up the shovel and purposefully strode toward the edge of the hill, clambering down toward the mud. Instead of dread, he now felt like the workout would do him some good, help get his mind off things. With new resolve, John began digging.

The ground beneath his spade was soft and gritty. The digging went quickly at first, as the water had compacted the dirt and sand into an easy to manage, solid consistency. As he dug, John's thoughts returned to the conversation with his brother. Their mother, dead.

He thought about the last time he and his mother had spoken. John had not been on good terms with his mother for over a decade. The last time they had spoken was nearly four years ago, when he'd been over at Aunt Sarah's for dinner. Chris had been there as well, although he'd

practically lived there at the time, so that was normal. Aunt Sarah had been busy in the kitchen, and Chris was in the bathroom getting ready for work, so John had been the only one not busy when the phone rang. He'd picked up the phone and given the Caller ID a quick look. *Not an 800 number; probably not a telemarketer*, he'd concluded, so he answered it with his characteristic jovial, booming, "Hello?"

"Johnny? Oh, my God, is that you? It's Mom! How are you? I've really wanted to talk to you for so long!"

John nearly threw the phone across the room, as if it were a rabid squirrel at his ear. His stomach clenched with anger and humiliation as he chided himself for not asking Aunt Sarah about the unfamiliar area code before answering. Had he realized that it was a California number, he'd have known that the call was likely from his mother, and he certainly would not have picked it up. Then again, it wouldn't have surprised him if Aunt Sarah had planned the whole thing. It was very like her to meddle.

His mother's voice, almost completely unfamiliar due to her deteriorated health, nonetheless still carried that familiar slur and false chipperness that John associated with his childhood. *Drunk*, he thought to himself, *and she wants something. That's the only reason she ever calls. I'm not dealing with this; if I have to talk to her, it's going to get very ugly, very fast.*

Without another word, John handed the phone to Chris, who had just stepped out of the bathroom in his work uniform. "It's your mother." That was the last time John and his mother had spoken.

And now she was dead.

John continued shoveling. After an initial few minutes of easy labor, he found himself digging through what was rapidly becoming a muddy slurry. Each sloppy shovelful became more and more watery, until it seemed like he was slinging melted chocolate ice cream out of the hole

instead of earth. Soon, he had several inches of cold standing water in the bottom of a two-foot-deep hole. The water had been off for over sixteen hours, since the discovery of the leak, but clearly that had not been enough time for the saturated soil to absorb it all. Standing in the hole, flinging mud and water out with a practiced precision, John quickly found himself wet, muddy, and cold. However, he was only dimly aware of his discomfort, and, as his experienced muscles continued working with minimal concentration, John found himself remembering his childhood, piecing together for the thousandth time why things were the way they were.

In the middle of John's sophomore year of high school, his mother had left the family. That was not the reason for John's anger, however; his parents' marriage had been rocky for as long as he could remember, complicated in the way that only two drunks with half a generation of age difference could make it. John had been expecting a divorce for years, often *hoping* for it, so it had not been surprising to him when his mother sat her sons down to tell them that she was leaving their father. What had surprised him, though, and indeed surprised the entire family, was that she was leaving him for another man, a man she had been seeing for quite some time.

John's father had been devastated. He'd known that there were problems, but he'd been sure that they could work them out. And, although John later found out that it wasn't even the first time, his father had been completely blindsided by the idea that his wife was having an affair. He lost himself for months in depression; it was the only time in John's life that he saw his father cry, and the tears seemed as endless and foreign to John as the waters of the Amazon.

John had never felt particularly close to his mother, but Chris, as the baby of the family, had. Six years John's junior, Chris had been too young to really understand what was happening. All he knew was that Mom was gone, Dad was sad, and life was now a mess. Chris, who had always been prone to misbehavior, quickly went feral in the chaos of the following months, making mischief, ditching school, and violently overreacting to the smallest things.

Things might still have been salvageable, John always thought, had their mother not repeatedly undermined any stability they briefly managed to achieve. Anytime she fought with her new boyfriend, she came running back to their father for comfort. She would assure Chris that yes, she was back to stay, that they were working things out, that they would be a family again. Instead, she bled the bank account dry, maxed out the credit cards, and began stealing stuff from around the house to pawn or sell. The most impressive theft had been the refrigerator, which she'd managed one afternoon with help from her suddenly on-again lover.

Due to the debts she racked up, their father lost the house, and they were forced to move away to live with Aunt Sarah, whose life motto was "family first." Eventually, with nothing left to pillage, their mother stopped coming back. Instead, she turned to scamming the extended family. Occasionally, she stopped in for a short visit, as Aunt Sarah's door was always open, but, while their mother said that it was to see the children, it was really always about assuaging her guilty conscience while also trying to extort more money.

That was what John could not forgive. Not the pain that she had caused him, for it had not been that much. Not because she had left, for that had probably been inevitable. No, it was the repeated abuse of his father and his brother that enraged him. It was the violation of family bonds, values she had vehemently preached to her children, then freely cast aside when they no longer suited her. It was those repeated bad choices that everyone else had to suffer the consequences of that John could not forgive. Ultimately, he decided to break off all ties with his mother, to the horror of most of the family. Chris, ever the "mamma's boy," still kept in touch with her, but John refused to have anything to do with her. He told everyone that if he never spoke to her again, he'd be just fine with it. The family told him that he was just angry, that when he cooled down, he'd find it in his heart to forgive her; she was his mother, after all. Eventually, the rage subsided, but his resolve to refuse her the forgiveness that she told everyone she

deserved held firm, no matter how often Aunt Sarah badgered him about it.

And now she was dead.

John hit something with the shovel, disrupting his musings. Bending down and feeling with his hands, he quickly determined that it was the PVC pipe he'd been looking for. He carefully removed mud from around the pipe until the hole was deep enough that the water filling the bottom no longer obscured the pipe. Using handfuls of cold, muddy water, he rinsed off the pipe as best he could to assess the damage. The water line was old, and it looked like it had been pretty well-worn even before it was installed; he was surprised it had held up this long. Examining the pipe, he soon found where it had burst. To fix the line, he would need to return to the truck and get a length of three-inch pipe, a saw, and some PVC glue. He looked up and saw with surprise that the sun had moved directly overhead. How long had he been digging?

Feeling that a break was due, John climbed out of the pit and walked leisurely back to the truck. Before retrieving the items, he wiped his hands on a clean towel, which quickly went from a bright blue to a deep brown, then popped open the cooler his lunch was in. He took out a bottle of water and drank half of it in a single draft. He leaned back against the truck, which had warmed under the morning sun and was a nice contrast to the chill he'd picked up in the muddy hole.

"I'm not paying you to sit around!" an angry voice called from the house.

Dismayed, John looked up to see the client standing on a second-floor balcony. Biting back his initial response, he waved and called to her. "I had to come back to the truck for supplies to fix the pipe, and digging is thirsty work!"

She yelled something else that he didn't catch, then appeared to storm off in a purple blur. John was pretty certain that he was glad he hadn't caught that last part.

As rude as the wife could be, the husband was supposed to be even worse. From what

he'd heard, other contractors in town wouldn't come out to this house anymore. According to the rumor mill, the couple had been a nightmare during the building process two years ago, always micromanaging, always haggling, always looking to cut costs and corners. The husband was supposedly only a minor executive at some company, but the house and property were surprisingly ostentatious. John suspected that the couple's behavior stemmed in part from the financial pressures of living outside their means. In order to save a few bucks, the husband must have used some old pipe he'd found somewhere when he put in the water line. No wonder he'd put it in himself: No contractor in town would have laid that pipe because they'd have been accountable when it inevitably burst.

Still, a customer was a customer, and his business was new enough that he couldn't really afford to alienate clients, especially not such gossipy ones. He was well aware that a number of his recent jobs had only come his way because of unfavorable stories about his peers going around the neighborhood. Gathering his supplies, he returned to his excavation. He was surprised when he looked in the hole: He hadn't realized how deeply he had dug. *Who buries a pipe that deep? That's gotta be at least six feet deep! Usually they're only three or four feet down.* With annoyed resignation, John sighed as he set down his materials, and he climbed back down into the pit to saw off the broken length of pipe. Looking at it afresh, John whistled. "Well, pipe, you've got quite a hole in you, that's for sure."

You've got a hole in you. The words of four summers past. John had gone camping with his uncle and his cousins, which meant two things: fishing and drinking. After several drinks, a few laughs, and a couple of lost fish, his uncle abruptly and uncomfortably shifted the topic of conversation to John's mother.

"She's in pretty bad shape. Her and that boyfriend of hers got into the drugs pretty hard down in California. If what she told your aunt is true, they've both got hepatitis, probably from

sharing those damn needles.”

John, surprised by his uncle's comments and unsure of what to say, raised his beer to his lips. His uncle continued. “You really should go visit her, see how she's doing. Every time she calls, she tells your aunt that all she wants is to see you boys. She'd like to come visit, she says, but she can't afford it, what with the medical bills, and with them both being out of work and all.”

“Yeah, that's not gonna happen,” John replied coldly. He took a long pull off his beer and added, “They can both rot down there for all I care.”

“I know you're angry with her, but you really should forgive her. She's your mother: You can't hate her.”

John, reflecting on his childhood, on the absenteeism before she'd left and the complete abandonment of her family after, quickly replied. “She's my mother only in the biological sense of the word. And I don't hate her; I feel absolutely nothing for her. But after what she put Dad and Chris through, I refuse to give her the satisfaction of 'forgiveness.' Actions have consequences, and I'm going to make damned sure that she has to live with them.”

His uncle looked at him sadly and shook his head. “You've got a hole in you. You've killed your heart, and it's left a cold hole inside of you. You're dead inside.”

The memory rekindled the anger John had felt that night after his uncle's remark. Saw in hand, he furiously cut into the browned PVC pipe in front of him, muttering to himself. “I don't have a hole inside me, God damn it. Just because I don't feel obligated to love my mother simply because she gave birth to me, regardless of all she's done, doesn't make me heartless. I feel for other people perfectly well. You people need to mind your own God. Damned. Business!” Driven by his anger, he sawed through both ends of the pipe quickly, startling himself when it popped off in his hand. He gawked at it for a minute, panting hard. Then, pipe fragment and saw in hand,

he clambered back out of the hole.

As he measured the length of broken pipe in his hand against the new pipe he'd brought along, John considered the funeral dilemma. *If I don't go, I'll never hear the end of it*, he thought, sawing off the ends of the fresh pipe. "John, she was your mother. How could you not show up?" he mimicked in a high falsetto. *Aunt Sarah, Chris, everyone in the family will think I'm a heartless bastard, a man with a hole instead of a heart*. He finished sawing with a violent thrust, roughly casting aside the portion he didn't intend to use.

Scooping up the glue and a couple of fittings, he began his final descent into the hole. *If I go, I'll be a hypocrite. No two ways about it*. He glued the ends of the pipe, and added the two attachment pieces, which he also glued. *On the positive side, it'll keep people happy*. Sweat ran down his forehead, and he wiped it away with his forearm before it got into his eyes. *Just like I'm doing here. Story of my life*, he thought bitterly. *Everyone else makes a mess of things, but it always turns into my problem*. He jammed one end of the replacement segment over the main line, fighting to make it fit. *I'd be uncomfortable the entire time; it would be a fake reconciliation. Just a nice, happy funeral for Aunt Sarah's benefit. A quick fix for a problem that doesn't have a quick solution*. One side secured, he turned his attention to the other end. After a struggle, he managed to connect the pipe. As he stood up to inspect his work, he noted how the bright white of the replacement segment contrasted against the aged main pipe, and he shook his head.

A shadow blocked the sun above the hole. John looked up to see a purple silhouette. "Are you finished yet?"

"Well, the repair looks good, but this entire pipe is rotten. Seems pretty senseless to just fix this spot instead of scrapping the whole thing. It's just gonna break again soon somewhere else. You should probably have somebody dig up the entire line and replace it with a new pipe."

Not that I want that job, he thought, but he added, “We could probably do it next week, if you and your husband decide you want it done.” *Gotta keep people happy. It makes life a lot easier.*

“Trying to scam us out of even more money, are you?”

“What?” John gaped up at her.

“I saw you, chatting on the phone, then taking breaks when you thought I wasn’t watching. Well, I was.”

“Excuse me?” John scrambled out of the pit with the broken fragment in hand, then turned to face her. “Mrs. Blanchard, that was an emergency phone call, and I ended it as quickly as possible.” He could feel his adrenaline surging as he spoke, and he fought to keep his sudden anxiety from his voice. “As you can see for yourself, I’ve been extremely busy. To be honest, I’m a little surprised at how fast I dug this hole. And I’m not trying to scam you: See for yourself.” He held up the split pipe fragment for her to see.

She barely glanced at the pipe in his hand. “My husband says you should have been done an hour ago and that you’ve probably been hiding in this hole, running up the clock. We’re not paying you two hundred for this. We’ll give you fifty.”

John could feel his face turning red. “Mrs. Blanchard, we agreed on two hundred at the beginning, and I promise you that I’ve been working. Fifty dollars is completely unfair!”

“You’re lucky you’re getting that much. We shouldn’t pay you at all after your unprofessional behavior today. In fact, what we should do is tell all of our friends and neighbors how terrible you are. Good luck getting hired then!” She smiled at him smugly.

This isn’t happening, John thought. “That’s really not fair at all. Please, Mrs. Blanchard. I’m sure we can come to an agreement of some kind. Maybe I can take a little less...”

Unconsciously, he licked his parched lips, which were covered with grit. Without thinking, he turned and spat into the hole, trying to clean the filth from his mouth. He watched the blob of

saliva arc toward the pipe below, and as it landed on the pipe he'd worked so hard to fix, he realized that no matter what, there was no winning with these people. No matter what, they were going to keep pushing him. The only way the fight would end was if he capitulated. Or...

The hole before him suddenly seemed so trivial. He looked at the broken pipe in his hand for a moment, then tossed it back into the hole with a splash. He turned back to face her. "You know what? Fine." His firm tone surprised him. "Deal with it yourself. We don't need your business anyway." Satisfied, he scooped up his shovel and headed back up the hill.

"You can't leave!" she screamed at him as he walked away. "Who's going to fill in this hole?"

"Not my problem!"