

The Hole

By Bradley Lloyd

Marcus ran from his house in a wild rage. He ran and ran until his side hurt and he couldn't run anymore. He was in the woods near his house. He had never been here alone before, not until now—and never in the dark.

The forest shadows grew long in the dim light, and Marcus imagined that the trees were reaching out for him. The branches became large, sharp claws that might tear him apart if he made a sound. Marcus didn't move. He didn't think the trees could see him if he didn't move. For a long time he just stood there.

After a little while, though, he wasn't so afraid anymore. He wasn't afraid, because he was big now. He wasn't scared—he was mad.

He was mad because tonight was the first night his little brother, William, would sleep in his room. His father had told him that William was getting too big for the crib, and it was time he moved out of his parent's room and into Marcus's room. His father had even made a bunk bed for the two of them. Marcus was to sleep on top. He didn't want to sleep on top. He had tried once, but after five minutes he gave up. All he could see was the ceiling in front of his face and it made him feel trapped and it seemed hard to breathe. Every night his dad would tuck him into the top bunk, but after the light was out and the door was shut, Marcus would crawl down to the bottom as quick as he could.

Marcus hated William. He wanted his own room—his room. William shouldn't be there. And plus, whenever Marcus did something bad, his mother would tell him to be good and set an example. Once William pulled a large fistful of hair out of Marcus's scalp, and so Marcus pulled some of William's hair. Then William cried. Marcus had tried to put his hand over the baby's mouth to stop him, but it was too late. His parents had already heard. When they found out what he had done, Marcus was punished. Sent to his room and punished. He hated to be punished. And now, he wouldn't even have his room. It was all William's fault.

Marcus remembered once when he told his dad he hated William. His father told him that it wasn't right to hate your brother and that he should feel terrible about himself. He felt miserable.

Marcus kicked at the dirt and leaves on the forest floor. He wondered if his parents knew he was gone yet. He hoped they did. He wanted them to be sorry.

It was almost completely dark now, and time for Marcus to go to bed. He didn't care. He wasn't going to bed tonight. He would stay up all night just sitting in the forest. Then, tomorrow, maybe he would go to South Carolina. He had never been there before, but that was where his mom used to live, and he'd seen lots of pictures. He wanted to see the lotion. His dad said the lotion was so big that you couldn't see the other side. Marcus had marveled at the lovely blue color in the pictures. He thought it was kind of funny, because the lotion his mom put on her hands every night after doing the dishes was thick and white. He figured that her lotion must be from the other side that you couldn't see. But it smelled good. He would go to South Carolina and just sit in the sand and smell the lotion. He would smile, too. Everyone in the pictures smiled, and it was very bright. Maybe it was a rule you had to be happy there in South Carolina by the lotion, and no one could be sad. Maybe it was a rule you had to smile, or maybe everyone smiled all the time because it never got dark.

It was warm at the lotion, but here it was getting cold. Marcus sat down in the dirt with his back to a tree. He brought his knees up against his chest and hugged them tightly. He could see a few stars through the treetops now. It wasn't so dark in the forest, really. Not as dark as his room. He even saw an airplane, its lights flashing against the darkness of the sky. He had never been on an airplane. He wondered if airplanes could fly to the stars. He didn't think so. Probably only rocket ships could fly to the stars. Maybe an airplane could get to the moon, or to the sun, because they were bigger and closer.

He wondered how much it would cost him to send William to a star on a rocket ship so he could have his own room again. He had gotten a dollar from the tooth fairy when he fell off his bike and knocked out his two front teeth on the pavement. He'd spent it on candy, though. Oh well. His parents probably wouldn't let him send William to a star.

Marcus picked pieces of bark off of the tree behind him, even though his dad said that could kill the tree. He began throwing the pieces in the dirt, seeing how far they would go. He broke off a piece in his hand and flicked it in front of him, watching it fall

to the ground just a few feet ahead. Flick . . . plop. Flick . . . plop. Flick . . . plop. Marcus began to get sleepy. Flick . . . plop. Flick . . . plop. Flick . . .

The last piece didn't make a noise when it hit the ground. In fact, Marcus hadn't really seen it hit the ground. It had just kind of disappeared. He got down on his hands and knees, searching the forest floor where he thought it should have landed. He didn't really care where it had gone, but he was getting tired and wanted to move around. That's when he saw the hole.

It was about as big as a dime . . . or was it a quarter, he couldn't remember. Anyway, it was just big enough for him to stick his finger in. He almost did, but then he thought there might be a spider or snake or a baby dragon or something in it that would bite his finger. He looked around him and found a stick. Carefully, he stuck the tip of the stick into the hole. The stick was pulled from him so quickly that it scraped his hand, and Marcus jumped backwards. The stick was gone. It was scary, but neat, too.

Marcus tried to figure out what had happened. Maybe there was a spider or snake or baby dragon in the hole that had grabbed the stick. The hole wasn't very big, though. Marcus didn't think it was that.

Marcus stood up, looking over the hole. He tried to look down into it, but couldn't see anything. It wasn't like the gopher holes in his back yard, because he could see the dirt in those. This hole had nothing in it. It was like someone had cut a little circle out of the night sky and pasted it on the ground—maybe with a glue stick like they used in his kindergarten, because that could make anything stick. Maybe he just couldn't see into it because it was dark out. He wanted to put his eye right up to the hole, but he was too scared.

Instead, he gathered up a few stones, dropping them in the hole one by one. Nothing happened. The stones just disappeared. He picked up a big stone, so big it wouldn't fit inside. He held it up and dropped it right over top of the hole. But that was gone, too. Marcus walked around until he found a rock so big he could hardly lift it. He took it to the hole, and dropped it, just like the other stones. The hole didn't get bigger. The rock didn't get smaller. But the rock disappeared into the hole.

It was almost like magic. It was Marcus's magical hole. He wondered what would happen if he tried to put something really big in the hole, like his bicycle—the one that

made him fall off and lose his teeth. He had gotten it last Christmas, but he didn't know how to ride it. He didn't want to ride it. It had training wheels on it. He didn't like to ride it with the training wheels. Once when he was riding it the older boy that lived up the highway had laughed at him. The boy could laugh because he could ride a bike without training wheels. After he fell, the boy laughed at him because he didn't have his teeth. Just like the people in school laughed at him, until the teacher told them they would all lose their teeth and then they'd grow back, but bigger. The boy up the street had all his big teeth, already. He was stronger than Marcus. A lot stronger.

"Maaaaarcus!" The call broke through the forest, sounding muffled as if it were from far away. It was his father. Marcus thought of home. He thought of his mother, her eyes sad and worried because she didn't know where he was. He felt bad. He shouldn't have left. He shouldn't have tried to run away. He shouldn't hate his little brother. He shouldn't. He knew he shouldn't. Maybe he should go home. He would figure out what to do later. Besides, he was cold and tired. But what if he were punished? What if his father was coming to punish him? He began to cry.

He started to run toward home. The trees danced around him and the shadows covered him in confusing blackness. He didn't know where he was anymore. He just ran. He wanted to get out of the forest. He wanted to be safe.

"Maaaaarcus!" His father was closer now, just ahead of him it seemed. Marcus could hear him, but he couldn't see him. What if he was swallowed up by the laughing trees? Marcus cried out, but his words were eaten up. They were eaten up and taken away, just like the hole had taken the stick, and the rock. The hole.

"Marcus!" Strong hands grabbed his shoulders, and Marcus sobbed. He felt his father's arms around him strong and tight. His father was stronger than the boy up the street. "Marcus, where have you been?" His father sounded relieved, glad that he was back. It felt good. "What are you doing out here all by yourself? What happened? Haven't I told you never to come here alone?" Now he sounded angry, and Marcus's stomach twisted itself into knots. What if he were punished?

"What got into you, Marcus? A big boy like you should know better than to wander off alone!"

"I got lost." He had run away. It was a lie.

His father carried him back home. Nothing was said the whole way back. His mother met them before they even entered the house. She looked worried, but all she said was, "Marcus, don't ever do that again. You had me worried sick. Your father and I were looking all over for you."

"I got lost," said Marcus. His dad carried him into his bedroom. At least, it used to be his bedroom. William was asleep in the bottom bunk. His father helped him out of his clothes and tucked him in. The blankets were cold, and the ceiling was in Marcus's face. He felt like he couldn't breathe. What if the ceiling fell on his face when he was sleeping?

"Tonight's the big night, kiddo," his father said with a smile. He didn't sound angry anymore. Marcus didn't think he'd be punished. "You take good care of your little brother, now," he said with a wink of his eye as he walked out of the room, turned off the light and shut the door. As soon as he was gone, Marcus grabbed his pillow and hopped down. He slept on the floor, crying himself to sleep. When he woke, he remembered dreaming, but not a normal dream. No monsters in chains, no boys on bikes that would poke at him with sticks, no parents that turned into frogs. Only black—like the hole.

Black—and then William, stepping out of the bottom bunk and onto Marcus's face. Before Marcus could do anything, the little animal had scurried out the door. That's what his mom would call William sometimes—the little animal. Marcus was mad, but he didn't do anything. He wanted to go back to his hole. It scared him a little, how the black just swallowed things up, and he knew he shouldn't go back into the forest, but he was going to. It was like the hole was calling him, calling his name, even. Marcus. Marcus.

Marcus dressed really fast. It was a Saturday, so he didn't have to go to stupid kindergarten. His parents weren't up yet, but with William awake they probably soon would be. Marcus quietly opened the door, planning to head out to the garage where he would get his bike, but before he was gone, William waddled around the corner and saw him. "'Doing?'" William asked in his baby voice—the one that got him whatever he wanted.

"Shhhh!" whispered Marcus. "I'm not doing anything. You just be quiet." Marcus picked William up and put him in front of the T.V. and turned it on. Then he slipped out the door. He went to the garage and got his bike. He walked it across the lawn and

towards the woods. It was very early, and his shoes became wet with the dew on the grass. Before long, though, he was walking on the hard packed dirt and leaves of the forest floor. The leaves crunched under his feet, like they were breaking into pieces. That's because it was the Fall—or the Autumn, as his teacher said you could say, but he liked the Fall better. The trees in the Fall would lose their leaves like Marcus when he fell lost his teeth. They never did find his teeth. His mom took him back to look, but they had disappeared. All that was on the ground were some stains, where his red blood had dried and turned black on the ground.

Marcus walked towards where he thought the hole was, pulling his bike along. The woods were still dim in the early morning light, and it was hard to remember where he had been. His arms were tired, too. He looked around. The shadows of the forest were long and dark, like evil giants. Marcus felt little prickles along the back of his neck and on his arms. He felt something around him, like someone was hiding behind a tree. He was scared, but not like last night. He couldn't stop. He had to find the hole.

He recognized the tree he had sat under as soon as he saw it. It was a large tree, knotty and old with chunks of bark hanging off the trunk like dead skin. His forehead had looked like that once in the summer when he was burned because his mom forgot to put lotion on him at the park. It had really hurt. Probably the tree was in pain, too. It looked like it.

He leaned his bike up against the old tree. The hole was only a few feet away. It looked bigger than before, about the size of a golf ball and perfectly round, too. Marcus went to it and looked inside, but he was careful not to touch it. Even in the daylight, he couldn't see anything inside of the hole. It was like the lotion, he couldn't see the other side. It was just black, a deep black that seemed to go on and on, a black that was so deep he could feel it.

Marcus walked over to his bike. He remembered how the stick had scraped his hands the other night, so he made sure he wouldn't be touching the bike when it got to the hole. He balanced the bike on its training wheels a short distance from the hole. Then he gave it a push. The front wheel bounced over the rough dirt, landing smack dab on top of the hole. Then the bike was gone. The hole ate it up. It made him scared, but it felt

good, too. He liked to feed the hole. He wanted more, something bigger to give it. Something different, something the hole would like.

He would feed William to the hole.

Marcus ran back to his house, too excited to think. He ran so fast it was hard to breathe. When he got home, he didn't see his parents. They probably were still sleeping. William was sitting on the living room floor, playing with his feet in front of the T.V. "William, come with me!" Marcus whispered in his ear. "I have something I want to show you." William seemed more interested in his feet, though. "Billy," he tried, using his mother's nickname for William, "I have apple sauce for you!"

"Sauce?" cooed William, his eyes getting big. It was his favorite food.

"Yep, sauce. Just come with me." Marcus led his little brother, still dressed in his pajamas, outside. William's hand was very small, and Marcus held it tightly enough so that his hand—or maybe William's—was sweating by the time they entered the forest.

To Marcus, it seemed like a forever walking in the woods. William was too slow, and too small. "Just a little bit more," Marcus kept telling him. Finally he saw the tree again, and he led William to the hole. It seemed even bigger now, like a baseball, or a big open mouth that would call him to come closer, hungry.

"See that hole, Billy?" Marcus pointed to it.

"Hoe?" William repeated.

"Yeah, hoe. There's sauce in that hoe. Just reach in and grab it."

"Sauce?" William said, bending down over the hole with his little fingers outstretched. Then his hand was gone, and so was William. Marcus smiled.

Then his smile faded. He didn't feel like smiling. He felt bad. He turned his back on the hole, but felt it grow bigger.

Marcus began to run home. He started to cry, and everything got blurry. He tripped over a tree root, falling into the dirt and scraping his hands. He got up and ran faster. As his house came into view, he slowed down and tried to stop crying. He didn't want his parents to know what he'd done. He was covered with dust from his fall. He would have to wash it off.

He went into the house trying to be really quiet. His parents were still asleep. He walked past their door on tip toes, and went into the bathroom. He turned on the water at

the sink and ran it until it was hot. He used the soap and held his hands under the water until it hurt.

As he wiped his face with his hands, he saw a caterpillar walking across the rim of the sink. Marcus didn't know how it had gotten there. He knocked it down and watched it squirm in the hot water. Before it was sucked down the drain, he squashed it with his fist. Ribbons of yellow water wound their way down the drain from the carcass, swirling and then disappearing into the black hole. It was dead. It didn't help.

The loud knock on the bathroom door startled Marcus. "Marcus, is that you in there? What are you doing?" It was his mother. He turned off the water, dried his hands and opened the door.

"It's me," said Marcus to his mother. "I fell down in the dirt outside and got all dirty." He didn't even look at her but walked straight to his room and shut the door. Before long, he could smell breakfast being prepared in the kitchen. Normally, he liked the smell of his mother's Saturday morning breakfasts. They were lots better than cereal. Today, though, the smell made him sick.

"Marcus!" It was his mother again. "Why don't you and your brother come out here and eat some breakfast?" Marcus walked out into the kitchen. His father was sitting at the table, drinking coffee and reading the paper. His mother was making orange juice at the counter. Marcus kept his gaze to the floor.

His father put his paper down and looked at Marcus. "And where's your little brother on this fine morning?" he asked. "Didn't you wake him up?"

"No," answered Marcus, not looking at his father. "I don't know where he is."

"What do you mean?" asked his father. "I thought he was still asleep in your room."

"No," replied Marcus, but it was too much. He began to cry again.

"Marcus, what's the matter?" asked his father, getting up from his chair.

Marcus was crying too hard to answer. He only got out one word. "William . . ."

"William? Marcus, where is William? Where is your brother?" His mother looked worried.

Marcus couldn't answer. He sobbed, and lay in a shaking heap upon the kitchen floor. He could hear his parents calling for his brother through the house.



Finally, his father walked over to him and picked him up from the floor. He shook him. "Marcus, where is your brother!" he demanded. "Show us where he is."

Marcus tried to breathe deeply, but he was hiccupping badly. No matter how he tried, he couldn't stop crying. "The forest," he choked out. "He . . ."

"He's in the forest!" shouted his father.

His mother looked very pale, and her voice was quiet. "Do you know where in the forest, Marcus? Do you know where he is?"

Marcus nodded.

"Marcus, you have to show us where he is!" his father said. "Do you think you can do that?"

Marcus nodded again. Before he knew it he was being dragged outside. His father's hand was large and tight around his wrist, and Marcus had to struggle to keep up. His mother was also by his side. They were talking, but Marcus didn't hear them.

Soon, they were in the forest. The shadows closed about them. Marcus could feel it again--the black, not of the forest shadows, but of the hole. It was hungry. He could even hear it. Marcus. Marcus. He stopped by the sick tree.

"Marcus, where is your bother?" His mother asked softly, with fear on her face. "Did someone take him? Did he wander off?"

Marcus just stared at the hole. It was big, like a basketball, and blacker than before, he thought.

"Marcus, please! Answer me!"

Marcus just pointed at the hole. He had stopped crying, but couldn't talk.

"Oh dear God!" his mother cried.

"Marcus, do you mean he fell down that hole? Is he in there?" He had never heard his father sound like that before—afraid. Before Marcus could answer, his parents were on their hands and knees in the dirt by the hole.

"No!" Marcus shouted. "Don't touch it!" But his warning was too late. They were gone.

Marcus didn't know what to do. He just stood there, all alone. There was no one left but him. And it was his fault.

The hole spoke again. It laughed at him. It was growing. He could see it growing. Already it was within inches of his toes. The darkness was spreading, eating up the ground like a slow, black fire. Soon it had gotten the old tree. It disappeared without a sound into the hole, just like the stick, and the rocks, and the bike, and William and his parents. Soon it would get him, too. Marcus knew it. He turned and ran.

He didn't know where to go. So he went home, to his room, his old room. The house was like a skeleton--all life was gone. He wanted to run to his parent's room—but he knew they wouldn't be there. He jumped into his bottom bunk and pulled the covers over his head. He lay there for a long time, and the hole grew. He knew it was growing, coming closer. He closed his eyes under the covers, and saw blackness. It began to get dark, but Marcus didn't know if it was night, or if the hole was eating the sun—taking large bites out of it like it was a big orange.

Looking out from under his covers, he could see through his window. The last rays of light were fading in the distance. He couldn't see the forest anymore. It was gone. Now all that was there was the hole. Marcus knew what it was after. It was after him. It wanted him. It would grow and grow until it had destroyed everything unless it had him. Maybe then it wouldn't even stop. Maybe it would just keep growing until the world was gone, or until the universe was gone. It would be like the lotion. It would never end.

It was at the edge of his yard now. He could see it, even in the dark, because it was darker than the dark. Marcus wanted to run, but the hole was calling to him. Marcus. Marcus. He couldn't move. He just watched it through his window, coming closer and closer and closer.

Marcus could see stars out of his window, and an airplane, its lights flashing above. And then the lights didn't flash anymore. Then the window was gone. If it ate the walls, would the ceiling fall and crush him first? The hole advanced across the carpeting. It was huge, and Marcus tried not to look into it. He pulled the covers over his head, but he could still hear it calling. "Please, don't eat me," Marcus whispered. "Don't touch me." But the hole didn't answer—it only called his name. It had always been there, waiting, probably. It had waited for him to find it and to feed it, and it was too late to stop it now. Everyone was gone. There was no one to save him.

Marcus didn't move. Maybe the hole couldn't see him if he didn't move. But then the covers disappeared—pulled from him suddenly, and he couldn't help but see. The hole circled around the legs of his bed, then the bottom bunk. Everything got blurry. He covered his eyes with his hands, and everything was darkness.