The Hole



It was on his first morning at Holloway House, when the shadows reared high against the bark of birch and hazel, and the only disturbance came in the form of light streaming through every pinhole in the canopy overhead, that Silas found the hole.

His unwashed curls, clumped together by layers of grease and misty air, hung thickly over his forehead as he gazed down into the pit. It was just an empty hole.

“But no headstone,” he ruminated quietly, bleary eyes drifting across the stone markers standing sentinel over five perfect mounds. The hole sat estranged from the others, a shallow hollow bereft of any signifier. The sight of it made him feel strange, and without conscious thought, his fingers traced the familiar contours of a cross suspended beneath his shirt.

He suspected this particular corner of the garden fell beyond the bounds of his contracted care. And yet, as Silas’ sheers made their first pass through the rambling roses that smothered the high walls of layered fieldstone—as though the roses shared in his quiet loathing of the garden’s oppressive geometry and sought to undo what they could—he had

unwittingly stumbled upon the small wooded cemetery. Its deceptive tranquility he recognized with the uneasy intimacy of a man well acquainted with his own lies.

As he made to withdraw from the eerie patch of forest, he felt the nauseating tickle of countless brittle feet crawling down the soft underside of his forearm. He yanked up his sleeve with an instinctive grimace, recoiling at the sight of the creature's wet carapace and bloated body, before flinging the swollen earwig into the dirt.

Later, as dusk gathered and fatigue settled into his limbs, Silas retreated to the modest red-brick cottage allotted to him during the term of his employment. After a Punch cigar and a futile attempt at letter-writing, which left the page sullied with blotted ink and his right hand seized by cramps, he decided that sleep was the only indulgence left to him.

Silas' dreams wandered through shapes and themes he would never recall, until they coalesced into the image of his wife.

She reclined among the disordered linen of their marital bed, propped up on one elbow, her dark hair thrown back in glorious disarray. Silas drew her into his arms and implored her to return to him, insisting that things were different now, and that he could not bear to live without her. The gardener's heart twisted painfully at her whisper of 'Yes', for this response roused a conscious fragment of his mind and reminded him that such mercy was impossible—that he was dreaming.

In these final moments of fantasy, just before dawn unspooled the fragile fiction of them, her canines sharpened into that of a savage hound and buried into his neck.

His eyes shot open to the sight of a white moth trapped on the inside of the window. Its wings struck the glass with the unthinking persistence of the rabid.

❖ — ❖ — ❖

The following morning, Silas set about taming the foxgloves and bluebells that had spread beyond their usual beds. Once again, the garden's high walls and strange corners pressed into him with suffocating intention. He was drenched in sweat by afternoon, slumped against the heated stone and mechanically working his way through a buttered roll. His appetite yearned for thick cuts of smoked ham to layer between two halves of it; he bit down absently, and something within the wheat gave way with a sharp crunch, flaking apart between his teeth.

He spat violently, scattering the chewed mouthful across the ground. Amid the slop gleamed the severed half of an engorged beetle, its legs twitching frantically.

Silas' breath caught as he examined the piece in his hand and saw the chitinous black head protruding from it, antennae quivering. A second cry tore from his throat and he flung the morsel away in revulsion. His cheeks blazed with fury, and seized by the sense that something was toying with him, his mind returned to the hole.

Propelled by a gathering tempest within him, Silas tore down the twisting, creeping passages that led to the thicket of birch and hazel, and descended upon the hole. He gazed into the pit, caught between horror and feverish delight, and saw that the shallow depression now yawned before

him. The earth had fallen away into darkness; overnight, the hole had deepened.

The gardener dragged his fingers through his hair and glanced up at what little of Holloway House could be seen beyond the trees. Crowning the hill above the green labyrinth below, it sprawled in a confusion of steep pitches, projecting gables and lofty windows. It loomed like a great owl keeping watch over its blighted domain.

His only contact had been the estate's steward, who hired him under strict instruction that the neglected acreage be restored. But anxiety curdled in Silas' stomach, where he imagined earwigs, moths and beetles churning in the dark, and he could no longer suppress the certainty that something was wrong.

The ascent toward Holloway House seemed an act of suicidal curiosity, and yet Silas picked his way forward like a wood mouse blundering into the carefully woven nest of a waiting predator.

Passing unbidden through great oak doors, the gardener quickly realized that a place could exert oppressive influence without the need for constriction; between high-vaulted ceilings and the unyielding stares from colossal family portraits, he felt reduced to the size of an insect.

A profound silence permeated the estate's vast interior, and Silas found himself drifting aimlessly through richly carpeted halls. He passed like a specter between pools of shadow and the jaundiced rays of dusk that streamed through distant windows. A particular blend of cinnamon and clove curled toward him on an invisible current, and he followed the fragrant thread along the hallway to a solitary door.

Gathering his courage, he knocked; tentatively at first, then with growing confidence. Silas heard something stir, and dread tightened the fibers around his heart.

The door swung violently ajar, but only to a narrow gap. The steward lingered behind it, only half visible in a three-piece suit and fitted waistcoat, his blonde waves short and meticulously combed. Silas was abruptly conscious of the state of his own appearance.

"Mr. Whitlock," he hastened to say, for the steward's stare had the same cold austerity as the portraits in the halls. "I don't mean to disturb you, but—"

"How did *you* get in here?" Mr. Whitlock hissed, his eyes flitting beyond Silas and into the hallway.

"I only wanted to know whether I might speak with the owner of the estate," Silas stammered, struggling to explain himself. "There's a hole in the cemetery, you see, and I've reason to believe it ought not to be there—"

"Attend to your duties," Mr. Whitlock snapped. "And do not enter the house without permission again."

A fit of harsh coughing erupted behind the steward, and he thrust the door closed. Muffled voices followed, then fell silent.

Silas withdrew into the dim corridor, cheeks burning with embarrassment. He was certain his heartbeat was an audible drum against the hush. In his haste to quit the house, his hip caught the sharp edge of a display case, and the sudden impact wrenched him sideways to face it. A relic of the Victorian appetite for exotic curiosities, it was built to showcase the dried and pinned remains of insects collected from distant corners of the world. But these pins were different, and there were only three.

An earwig. A moth. A beetle.

Gripped by the prospect that no corner of the earth could deliver him from his tormentor, Silas fled.

❖ — ❖ — ❖

Letters. So many letters, all of them returned unopened.

The gardener closed the drawer of the writing desk, hesitated, then pulled it open again and took out the stack of unopened letters. He moved toward the cottage's simple hearth, poised to cast the bundle into its eager flames, then hesitated a second time, and put them back in the drawer. He stood trembling, and even in the rosy glow of the fire, he looked ill.

The remainder of the night passed in a haze of White Horse whisky and thick cigar smoke. He lay curled by the grate, reduced to little more than a stray dog seeking warmth, and willed sleep to bring him his wife.

But sleep delivered him into the hands of a different memory.

Helena was all black curls and dark eyebrows. Calculatedly dressed to captivate, no detail of her silhouette was ever left to chance. She regarded the world through upturned green eyes—beautiful, and perpetually alight with mischief. With Helena, an argument was an invitation. And she loved to argue with Silas.

She was too young, but desire had made a captive of him and it soon swelled beyond the limits of self-control. The interior of The Moth unfurled across his dreamscape; a small, smoky pub where they could sit beside the crackling fire and indulge in the delicacies of suggestion. When an earwig crawled out from beneath the leaves of her summer salad, she had shrieked, leaving the humiliated owner of The Moth to defend the creature as a

testament to the freshness of his produce. Having drunk themselves beyond the reach of inhibition, Helena and Silas had eventually laughed at the spectacle until she was draped over him, her body resting languidly in his embrace.

There had been scarcely any furniture in the room where he undressed her. As the older man cast the scarlet garment to the floor, her beetle brooch struck the hardwood with a sharp chink, its brief music soon lost in the sounds of their intimacy.

The affair persisted, growing more destructive with each passing month as the prospect of Helena eventually choosing a younger, unmarried man filled Silas with a jealousy he could scarcely contain. His drunken visits grew increasingly unwanted and volatile, and the spectacle he made of himself soon exposed their deviance to the world.

In time, his wife broke through his denials and dragged out the truth. She took their children and left him to the silence of the house and the comfort of the bottle. He had once wanted Helena with a desperation he could no longer understand. The gardener reached for his wife in the unreality of his nightmares, but always the morning light unmade her, and the empty space beside him was a barbed reminder that she would never return.

❖ — ❖ — ❖

Silas awoke to a dry, hacking cough that spattered blood across the floor. The fire had dwindled to a bed of embers, and the waxing moon hovered beyond the window like a blinding ornament.

The phantom touch of crawling insects haunted every inch of him, and heaving himself upright, Silas lurched toward the door and burst from the cottage. Each breath bloomed white in the freezing air. He was drawn, as if by some unseen force, to the hole.

His legs moved with a strange delay, dulled by drink, and as he passed between the jagged walls of the garden, his surroundings seemed to grow watchful. Overnight, the garden had undone his careful work; thorny tendrils wove themselves into an impenetrable snarl, eager to exact their due. Yet there was precious little of his mind left to preserve, so Silas forced his way through the thicket, feeling the thorns tear at his flesh without so much as slowing.

Insects droned around him, their din mounting into a grotesque chorus that scuttled, flapped and buzzed. At last, he broke free of the brambles and collapsed beneath the birch and hazel, a low, unearthly cry escaping his throat. Open wounds streaked his arms where torn flesh hung in ragged flaps. Insects gathered on him in thickening layers, as if he were rotting, until they filled his eyes and blinded him.

Silas crawled sightlessly toward the hole, rasping through a slack jaw, bloodied saliva hanging from his chin in long, glistening filaments. The pit began to disgorge more of its contents: earwigs, moths and beetles. He hauled his swollen torso over the opening and prepared to plead with the abyss below, but the words only formed in his mind; his throat could no longer give them voice.

Panic gripped him as he realized his body had grown too engorged for speech. Still the insects poured from the hole and through his gaping mouth, an unending current of vermin disappearing into the blackness of his

stomach. As the betrayer expanded beyond what flesh could bear, his body ruptured, and the hole received the pieces without sound.

In a high window of Holloway House, the steward watched.