

# The Black Hole

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Matilda went wild at sixty-five. Legs left unshaven for the first time in fifty years, hair still and proud, knotted with forgetting. She'd roam the streets at night, a traveler without design. Matilda was a gardener of sorts, digging up all previous assumptions, scattering the seeds of her memory across the unspoken laws of human society.

Matilda felt remarkably free and lost at the same time. "God has taken me over," she shouted gleefully to her daughter, Marianne, one evening after the police found her taking a sponge bath in front of the Johnsons' sprinklers. Naked, except for her husband, Raymond's underwear and his old red and green plaid slippers, the ones she hated and wanted to throw out before he died, Matilda smiled broadly at the moon, a moon she never bothered to look at in her younger days.

Perhaps it was Raymond's death last June which set her in motion. After 46 years of bickering and finding fault with one another, his absence left a blank space, a void, a vacuum of sorts. There was nothing to resist or to lean on. Her identity was hard to fathom.

After Raymond died, Matilda could not find any reason to leave her house in the daytime. The bright light of the sun made the world seem both brazenly insignificant and far away. Night, however, resembled the inside of her brain where thoughts would appear in bold clarity against the comforting darkness. She took to sleeping in the day, roaming the streets at night. Although her daughter tried to argue her out of her reclusiveness and begged her to refrain from her night wanderings, Matilda experienced herself as alive and vital

in her solitude and confusion. Although she often felt lost, she no longer felt bored. She no longer asked for anything other than what she had.

"You can't keep shutting yourself away from the world, Mom, and you've got to stop leaving the house at night. Please try and pull yourself together, " begged Marrienne.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," replied Matilda. She felt a vague longing to say more but the words wouldn't come.



No longer eligible to depend on the laws of the universe, Matilda gave in to the demands of what she called the black hole. Socks, shoes, checkbooks and vitamin pills were scooped up into the black hole constantly. Its power to attract all the objects in her possession was uncanny. Spoons, forks, books, bras all met the same fate. The black hole was her master.

She spent her days looking for the objects she lost. She would look for what was missing and then forget what she was looking for so that she was left only with the hazy sensation that something essential was missing. Most objects could never be found again except with Marrienne's help. Daylight kept Matilda a prisoner. But as the sky changed colors at dusk, Matilda would also change. She stopped searching. She grew more confident, less confused.

The night felt like velvet. Its softness would caress her. All became equal in darkness. Matilda could walk freely down Phillips Street, unnoticed and completely at ease. She could talk as loud as she wanted and hum the newly-remembered childhood melodies which had begun to spontaneously emerge from her lips.

Matilda had stopped washing her clothes, then stopped wearing her clothes. She wore Raymond's clothes now. She wore his underwear and shirts. She put his pants on inside out, tying them at the waist with the remaining portion of the ruptured clothesline. She'd slip her feet into his mildewed slippers, feeling a dim memory the caress of him and all the spirited anger they shared which now exuded a fading but precious perfume. She would walk out into the night, feeling the air against her cheeks, feeling herself walking out as Raymond.

When Raymond was alive she had fought against his domination of her. Now she could wear him in leisure. She could feel his presence without being overwhelmed by it. She remembered his body lying dead in the mortuary. He seemed more whole and present than she had ever remembered him being in life. She felt him now to be more a part of her than ever before. He floated up to become God.

"God save me," she would cry when confronted with the obstinacy of the black hole. And then she would laugh. God was close to her now. She was wearing God. God was part of her.

In her walks down Phillips Street and back, Matilda covered a lot of territory. But once she started losing her way, wandering across Junction Corner or through the Bounty High School soccer field, making her bed beneath the trash cans outside the locker room, both the police and Marrianne decided that Matilda's life would have to change.

Marrianne looked into her mother's still-beautiful face. Matilda was laughing and screaming at the moon. "God has taken me over! God has taken me over!" All the years she had seen her mother dressed in a shirt-waist dress, high heels and nylons evaporated before her. Marrianne knew she had lost her mother forever. While Matilda laughed, spreading her arms out towards the star-lit sky,

Marrienne felt abandoned in the starkness of the black night and the isolation of memories.



Marrienne decided that the best thing for everyone would be to put Matilda into a nursing home. There was only one nursing home in their small town. It was called the Golden Pavilion.

The Golden Pavilion. Its name held out some sort of promise. An awkward parody of Japanese grace and design, it was really a bold example of American kitsch. Once one passed through the pillars in the entryway, once the memory of the Japanese lanterns left one's range of vision, once the scent of lilacs left the nostril, all attempts at evoking Japan were gone. Even as one entered the darkened entryway, an odor mixed with urine and ammonia overwhelmed all other senses.

Matilda had looked at the word "Golden" after Marrienne shut the door behind her. She held out that word for a longer moment than was usually possible. Golden. Golden. Golden years. Golden money. Golden proof of life's insubstantiality. A change had happened. A lifting from the earth. Matilda held Marrienne's hand as she walked through the hall.

For Marrienne, no name, no smell, no dark hallways could hide the shock of the people who lived in the Golden Pavilion. Not all the residents were old but they all seemed finished with this world. Sounds of moaning could be heard. Many of those who could not walk were tied in wheelchairs, some with heads down, some with drool streaming from mouths which once demanded attention, which once offered common sense or humor or anger or fear or doubt. They sat in the main room past the dark entryway. They sat staring into or past or through or away from the giant television screen which stood in the middle of the room and served as its centerpiece.

Sounds and images poured out from the giant screen with promises of brighter teeth, younger skin, better days.

Marrienne escorted Matilda into the Golden Pavilion with tears in her eyes.

Marrienne introduced Matilda to a fat woman who met them as they walked in the door. She smiled broadly at Matilda but Matilda looked past her into the TV set where a fast, red car was zooming over the hills to a café next to the ocean. A woman with long, dark hair ran across acres of manicured green grass. She jumped into a tall man's arms. They kissed, drank wine and began to dance.

"My name is Lynn," the fat woman said. There was food between her teeth and her eyes looked angry. "Let me show you to your room."

Matilda continued to hold onto Marrienne's hand. She squeezed it tight, feeling as if her daughter was slipping away. Matilda imagined herself floating as they walked down the darkened hallways, passing people whose emptiness reflected something familiar and easy. Matilda could sense that they too had opened their minds into the unknown arms of God.

Matilda's room was very small and narrow. Its only furnishings were a single bed and a freestanding metal closet. "Well, Mom," said Marrienne, suddenly cheerful, 'this should make things less confusing for you." Then Marrienne and the fat woman talked about Matilda's symptoms and tendencies while Matilda walked over to the window and looked outside to where the word "Golden" stood against the dark gray sky.

After Marrienne and the fat woman left, Matilda sat on the edge of the bed feeling no different than she ever had before. She opened the suitcase Marrienne had packed for her. None of Raymond's

clothes were to be found. Matilda unpacked and repacked the suitcase, looking for anything which might have belonged to him. She no longer cared what the black hole took as long as it was not something of Raymond's.

She folded and unfolded and refolded the clothes from the suitcase, feeling lost and alone. She stacked the clothes in piles and put them in the closet then took them out and spread them across the bed. She took off the dress Marianne had insisted she wear that morning. She tried on sweaters and shoes but nothing seemed to fit. She took off everything but Raymond's jockey shorts, which she had managed to wear beneath her dress that morning without Marianne's interference. She suddenly felt very tired. She lay down on the narrow bed and slept until she was woken.

A young man whose skin still smelled of childhood woke her. He dressed her carefully, choosing from among the clothes strewn across the bed. Then he gently took her arm and walked her to a large, windowless room and offered her a seat at the table in the back next to the wall.

Matilda sat and watched as people were brought into the dining room. An old man was wheeled in beside her. He did not speak. He wore a flannel shirt just like Raymond's. The shirt was gray and white plaid with black buttons down the front. The man looked distant and sad. Matilda reached out for his hand and squeezed it hard. She leaned towards him slowly and whispered in his ear, "I've always loved you. I've always loved you. I've always loved you." The old man dropped his head into his hands and started to weep. He wept and wept. He turned to Matilda and looked her squarely in the face and smiled as if life had finally given him what it once promised.

