

# Hole to China

*by* Tara Laskowski

Hartman's kid was digging a hole in the backyard when I went over to get fired. Hartman handed me an iced tea, in a florescent orange glass with a little lemon wedged on the rim, as though this were pleasant, and sat down in his lawn chair, knees cracking, motioning for me to sit next to him. He grabbed a handful of peanuts from the bowl on the table. "Trevor's got his work cut out for him. Digging to China and all," he said with a chuckle, sipping his gin and tonic. I was getting fired; he didn't waste the alcohol on me.

His kid looked up and I pitied him that he had his father's long, slightly bent nose. He would inherit his old man's nose, his nose hair, and probably those long, hairy fingers, too. The kid drove his metal shovel, which was almost as tall as he was, into the ground every few seconds, causing a few particles of dirt to go flying. I had no idea how long he'd been at it, but he'd only really succeeded in making a small dent in the ground and ruining a patch of his old man's grass.

"It's gonna be the biggest hole ever," the kid said, in that way kids do when they're showing off for someone. "I don't care if I have to stay out all night."

Hartman laughed and motioned his drink toward the kid. It was late in the day; the sun would set in a half hour or so. "All night? Can you believe it?"

"He'll give up in about twenty minutes," I said, and Hartman's smile fell away.

"Bobby," he said. "We have to talk."

He was wearing a golf shirt. The kind they have in Sears with prices that end in \$.97 — the crappy, cheap versions of Polo that men with attitude problems wear. It was this terrible block pattern of hunter green, maroon and beige that made him look like a forest had thrown up all over him. He leaned back in that chair with the confidence of a man in a power position, the big-fish-small-pond, used-car-dealer grin on his face that made me want to start smoking

again. As if reading my mind, he patted his shirt pocket and pulled out a pack of smokes, lighting one gripped between his teeth, not his lips, and exhaled dramatically. At about the same time, his kid started singing.

"I'm Henry the Eighth I am, Henry the Eighth I am I am."

"Perfect damn British accent, ain't it?" Hartman said. "The kid's brilliant. Brought home all 'A's on his last report card."

"I just have one question. Do you think you'll pay me up to the end of the month?" It was ballsy to ask that, considering I was the one responsible for the theft of a '99 Corvette right out of our lot, but that's how you had to be with Hartman. Direct. Otherwise, he'd sit there all night talking about his kid and the stupid fucking hole he was singing to. I'd left the keys in the ignition overnight. It was the third time I'd done something like that, even though Hartman had warned me about it. He gave me a cut in pay one week as an incentive to remember.

"Bobby, Bobby." I recognized his car-selling voice: suave, tireless and easy-going. He had all the time in the world. "You know I'm sorry to do this, Man. We've worked together, for what, four years now? But you've got to understand I can't have this happening on my lot."

He wasn't suing; I'll give him that. He probably could've forced me to pay for the loss, which would've really shit up my life with Roberta, but he didn't. He was just letting me go. Just patted me on the shoulder and told me to come to his house so we could "chit-chat it over." I thought maybe I could get him to change his mind, visiting his house and all. He didn't really want to fire me. It was more of a pride thing. I knew there were a couple other salesmen who were talking. They wanted me gone.

"Listen," I said. "I know I screwed up, but I really swear if you give me another chance, I wouldn't do it again."

He laughed, leaned forward and actually patted me on the hand. He enjoyed this kind of thing, I realized—me sitting across from him on his own turf, begging. Hartman sighed and tugged at the collar of his shirt. "Bobby, I've gotta tell you--"

But whatever he was going to tell me was interrupted by the harsh trill of his phone in the kitchen. He stood up, crushing his cigarette in the orange glass ashtray on the table, and exhaled, holding up his index finger. The sliding screen door opened effortlessly at his hand, silent on its track.

I sat there in the dying light. I wanted to take my baseball hat off, but I could feel my hair matting to my head in the back and I knew it would look like hell. Hartman's kid was digging faster, his face smudged with dirt, a good pile building up behind him. He wasn't singing anymore—his face looked determined, bold, almost angry. He didn't look up. From my perch on the deck I could see little earthworms hanging out of the sides of his hole.

"Hey kid," I yelled. "You know you're not going to do anything but fuck up that lawn."

He looked at me then, scratching his ear frantically with a dirty hand. I looked into the house, but Hartman wasn't there. He probably wouldn't like me saying 'fuck' to his kid. But the kid acted like he'd heard it before. "I'm going to get to China. And when I get there, I'm going to see everything upside down."

I raised my eyebrows and picked up a handful of peanuts, sticky from the humidity. Ok, kid, I thought. Hartman came back then through his sliding screen door and I noticed he was barefoot. He had a tan except for an outline like a pair of thong sandals on his foot, and I wondered where he'd gotten it since he always wore dress shoes on the lot. He was carrying a pint of whiskey and he set it down on the table between us.

"Well, Bobby. These things are tough."

I nodded, feeling my eyes begin to water. It wasn't from fear, it wasn't from panic, just anger. The kind of anger where you feel really sick inside, like you've just pulled down your pants and let someone kick you good and hard between the cheeks because you were too much of a pussy to stand up straight. His whole lawn was doing it to me, his fancy umbrella in the middle of the picnic table, the stupid kid in the middle of the lawn digging, and how the sun was setting just over the trees, giving everything an even more dirty

look. It was dusk and Hartman's face seemed the only thing lit up in the dim light. I felt like puking. I was beginning to think the son of a bitch might've stolen that car himself, just to get rid of me.

"Let's do a shot, man. For old time's sake."

We'd never done a shot together in our lives. In fact the only time I remember going out socially with Hartman besides the occasional lunch pick-up at Mc D's or Burger King, was about two years ago when the long-time receptionist, Sally, retired and we all went out to celebrate. Hartman had drunk a lot of beer and stood too close to me. He had told me with watery eyes, in the confessional tone some guys get when they've had one too many, that he felt like no one really loved him.

"I don't think so," I said now. "I think I should go."

He shook his head. "One shot. Come on, what are you afraid of?"

The whiskey went down rough—I wasn't used to drinking hard liquor. But I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of coughing. I swallowed it and sat back carefully. He couldn't see my face in the dim light because I could no longer see his. "Yee-haw!" He yelled, slapping his thigh. "Let's do another!"

We did three more. I was sitting there, head spinning. Hartman was quiet, too, like all of a sudden our masculine energy had shit out of us and ran off into the air and we were lying around exposed and puffy. It was quiet in his backyard except for the sounds of the shovel. I'd forgotten that kid was still out there.

"You trainin' your kid to be a slave or something?" I asked the darkness in front of me, laughing.

He laughed, too. "No, man. He's digging a hole. A big fucking hole. He said he bet he could dig the biggest hole ever dug, and I told him to go ahead and try. Gotta have dreams, aspirations, you know?"

He was smoking again. I could smell the nicotine and it snapped deep in my gut. The fireflies dotted his lawn, and it reminded me of a time when I was younger and my father and I had captured a bunch of them in a jar for a nightlight in my room. For a second I just wanted to cry.

"I'll dig all night if I have to!" The kid yelled, but his voice was tired, strained. He would give up in a little bit. Ten, fifteen minutes at most. Time enough so he thinks we've forgotten about him again and then he will put his shovel on the dark ground and sit at the edge of his hole, legs dangling into it, and think that it's probably gotta be the biggest hole anyone has ever dug. At least anyone his size, anyway. The thought of that made me laugh.

"Hey, Bobby?" Hartman's voice came out of the darkness, and it, too, sounded small. "Want to do one more shot for the road?"

I closed my eyes and let the warmth of the booze flow over me. I hoped wherever the guy was who stole that Corvette was driving fast, top down, heading away from here. "No, Man," I said, reaching across the table. "Give me a cigarette instead."

