



THE HOLE IN THE LIVING ROOM FLOOR

a short story by *daniel hudon*

“Of course, the real charm
of the place is that hole in the
space-time continuum.”

caption accompanying a cartoon by Tom Cheney
19 February 2007 // *The New Yorker*

Daniel Hudon

THE HOLE IN THE LIVING ROOM FLOOR

THE HOUSE HAD SEVERAL FEATURES THAT WE LIKED AND ONE THAT MADE IT UNIQUE. Perhaps too unique. It had good natural light, large rooms, high ceilings and new electrical wiring. And, unlike other old houses that had chimneys that didn't ventilate or holes in their roofs, this one had, in the middle of the living room, a hole in the spacetime continuum. The realtor described it as "the real charm of the place." I was skeptical, but my wife, Dolores, was intrigued.

We had been looking for a long time, the price was right and as far as we knew, ours would be the only house on the block, perhaps the only house in the known universe to have its own hole in the spacetime continuum. Any time of the day or night, we could stand in the living room, look down and see stars, galaxies and the splendors of the cosmos.

Over dinner, that was how Dolores tried to convince me.

"It would be a conversation piece," she added.

"We won't be able to get a dog," I said.

"You hate dogs. Besides, there will be less to vacuum."

"I might get vertigo. You're supposed to see stars when you look UP, not down."

"Take up star-gazing."

"You're missing the point. What if someone falls through? We'll be held accountable."

"We'll entertain in the den. Or we'll have kitchen parties."

“You can’t throw a kitchen party, they just happen. And it’s not like we can fill it in. There’s an entire universe down there.”

“Didn’t you ever hear the story of Archimedes who calculated the number of grains of sand it would take to fill up the universe? Now we can test it.”

“Right – he was killed by a Roman centurion. What if some string theorists find out? Once they start traipsing in we’ll have equations all over the living room floor as they hunt for extra dimensions.” We had watched a documentary on television and for weeks afterwards, our catchphrase was *What would a string theorist do?* This was after our Jane Goodall phase in which all decisions were preceded by, *What would Jane Goodall do?*

I had to give the worst-case scenario: “What if it grows and swallows the whole house?”

Dolores slipped her arm around my back, snuggled up to me and said, “It’s just a hole, honey, not a black hole.” As if that explained something. She was a big Stephen Hawking fan.

It was just a hole. I don’t know why that convinced me but it did. We phoned our realtor and made an offer.

* * * * *

Of course, it wasn’t just a hole. If it was, I should have been able to look down and see the unfinished basement; instead I saw vast darkness and innumerable stars. Or, from the basement, I should have been able to look up and see through the hole to the living room ceiling; but I saw only the sturdy opaque beams of the basement ceiling. It was a six foot by four foot amorphously-shaped cosmic portal in the middle of our living room floor.

We bought the house and moved in at the beginning of the spring. I covered the hole with a sheet of plywood and mentioned the fresh hardwood stain so the movers wouldn’t suspect anything. In the beginning, the hole was much more than we could have hoped for. After work, we played catch above the hole and the first person to drop something into it had to give the other a massage. Once, we purposefully dropped a baseball in to see what would happen and it immediately vanished into the blackness. We took astronomy books out of the library to try to understand what was down there. We stopped watching TV and spent entire evenings on our stomachs, peering into the depths of the universe. Some nights I dozed off in front of it and in the fleeting seconds before losing consciousness I got the luminous feeling of being like God looking down on creation.

“Mind the hole,” we said to each other whenever we crossed paths in the house.

It was a built-in silver lining. Whatever stresses and mishaps occurred during the day, we consoled ourselves by the fact that we hadn't fallen into the hole.

A couple of weeks after we settled in, the neighbors had us over for cocktails and they told us some of the history of the house. Neither Peter, a mutual fund manager, or Maggie, a biotech engineer, had ever been inside.

"We always thought it was haunted," Peter said, sipping his wine.

"Oh, we're not afraid of ghosts," Dolores replied, eyeing me for confirmation. I simultaneously nodded and shook my head.

"For the five years we've been here," Maggie said, "no one has stayed longer than a year."

"We never even saw one couple move out," Peter said. "They just disappeared after a couple of months."

I wondered what it would be like to fall into the hole.

* * * * *

One night I told Dolores of my intention to let down a long rope so that I could climb in and be suspended in the void. She forbid it.

"Curiosity has its limits," she said.

"It's what an astronaut would do," I said. We had just watched *Apollo 13*.

"You're not an astronaut."

Soon after that, I noticed that Dolores had lost her fascination with the hole. "It sucks all the life out of the room," she said. She could never remember where exactly it was and twice, upon getting up from the sofa, she nearly fell in. She began to avoid the living room entirely. Even if I was in there, she would talk to me only from the doorway, as if the hole could change its shape and engulf her if she came too close.

I, on the other hand, became obsessed with it. Why didn't it drain the air out of the house? Why had it opened there? Why was it the size it was? Was it temporary or permanent?

* * * * *

"I think we should cover it," Dolores said one day when we were out for dinner.

"Think of it as floor art," I said, knowing what was coming.

"Floor art won't devour you."

"This one is an original."

“We should have the neighbors over. It’s been four months.”

We made a deal. I would build a cover for the hole and she would let me uncover it when she wasn’t home.

I brainstormed overnight and announced my solution at breakfast: plexi-glass with painted stars.

“The three-dimensional effect would be awesome,” I beamed.

Dolores was clearly after something much more opaque but when she saw how pleased I was with my idea, she gave in.

On the weekend, I bought one large sheet of plexi-glass from the local hockey rink’s supplier and cut it into shape on my table saw in the garage. On the underside of the glass, in haphazard patterns, I stuck on the metallic-silver stars. I also bought a glass-top coffee table to place on the plexi-glass so that anything placed on top would look like it was suspended above the universe. In the evening I tested it: the silver stars glittered like the Milky Way itself. And, from directly above, the stars almost blended into the real stars far below. For kicks, I decided to see what would happen if I turned out the lights. To my surprise, the hole glowed enough that shadows of the silver stars were cast on the ceiling. The universe seemed to be breathing into my living room.

* * * * *

When the neighbors came over, I served them drinks and gave them the grand tour, saving the living room for last. They were both drawn to the now-covered hole.

“I just love your – what do you call it? – floor mural,” Maggie said. “It looks so real.”

“Watch this,” I said. I put my drink down on the glass table top, closed the curtains and turned out the lights. The light of millions of stars shone through the hole, glistened into the room and danced onto the ceiling.

“God!” Maggie said.

“Where on Earth did you get this?” Peter said.

“Well, it’s...” I started to say.

“It’s a long story,” Dolores said, masking her chagrin.

I turned on the lights and winked at Dolores but she didn’t see me.

“You must tell me,” Peter said. He turned to Maggie, “Honey, we’ll put it right in the living room, just like they did.”

“I’m afraid it’s a one-of-a-kind,” I said. The artist has stopped producing them.

“What’s his name?” Maggie said. “Tell him we’ll buy two!”

I explained that he wasn’t doing it for the money, which was why it was difficult to persuade him to make more. Maggie mock-scowled at me.

“Perhaps our neighbors are space aliens and this is their portal,” Peter said to Maggie.

I laughed, but Dolores kept quiet.

* * * * *

“What’s with you?” Dolores said, catching me lost in thought. We had just finished watching a documentary about the French aerialist who walked across a wire atop the World Trade Center. She waved her hands in front of my eyes. “Hello?”

I focused my eyes on her. I wanted to tell her that I was going into the hole tonight – I wanted that honesty. But I knew she wouldn’t allow it. The enormity of my risk weighed on me and I was both sullen and excited. I didn’t have to do it – it was a dare that no one put me up to, except myself.

I had ordered one hundred and fifty feet of climbing rope and a spacesuit off the Internet.

* * * * *

I tied one end of the rope to the base of the radiator and knotted the other end. When I finished the knot, I pulled on it with all my might to make sure it wouldn’t give.

At the other end, I tied another knot so that I would have something to grab onto. I threw the whole rope into the hole and it was so dark that I could only see the first foot or two. Carefully, I climbed into my space suit and snapped the helmet on. In a moment the room changed from familiar to alien – the lighting softened, objects seemed to have shifted, the couch appeared larger and the hole in the living room floor appeared smaller.

The suit fit tightly and I swung my arms about to make sure I had complete movement. I walked around the living room, trying not to knock anything over. Above the mantle, the mirror caught my reflection and I barely recognized myself. I leaned in close, breathing like Darth Vader, and smiled. It seemed I was either on my way to a Halloween party or to save the planet. In that instant, I had the urge to walk out the front door and bound up and down the street just to give the neighbors a chance to say, *Honey, there’s a spaceman in the middle of our street*. But, from fears of strange viruses to fear of the unknown, I was sure that would bring no end of trouble.

I yanked on the rope as hard as I could, let it go and pulled again. It held. Everything was ready for me to go into the hole, but I had a terrific case of the jitters. As a teenager, I had jumped off a cliff into Georgian Bay and I remembered standing on the ledge trying simultaneously to talk myself into and out of making the leap. An image of me jumping into the hole flashed into my mind, the same way that my doppelganger appears to jump in front of the subway every time it roars into the station, and I shuddered as I saw myself falling forever into the dark starlit universe. I resolutely blocked the image from my mind and removed the plexi-glass cover. The hole yawned in front of me. It was dark, yet fused with light. Now I was going in. I was going to do this. Now.

My plan was to lower myself in as if I was testing out an ice fishing hole. I lay down on my stomach next to the opening and slowly swung my legs out. Stay focused, I reminded myself. Do everything deliberately. The whole exercise was much harder than I expected and soon I was sweating. Once I let my legs down I wished I'd just gotten a rope ladder. Fool! Why didn't I think more carefully about this? It was too late. I snaked the rope between my legs and edged my stomach, then my chest, over the hole until I was propped up on the living room floor with just my two elbows. When I was sure the rope between my feet and knees was supporting my weight, I lowered myself all the way into the hole.

I should have expected that the rope wouldn't be taut – there was no Earth to pull it down. Knowing I didn't have to support my weight allowed me to relax my grip as I inched my way down the rope. I pushed gently on the lip of the hole and let the rope slip through my fingers as I was propelled away. Above, the dim light of the living room was surrounded by myriad stars. For all I knew, I had climbed into a different universe.

I floated.

Stars blazed all around, cold and distant, steady as diamonds. They didn't twinkle, didn't move. They appeared like pinpricks in the cover of night, hinting at some luminous beyond. I was suddenly desperate to see just one of them flicker, or to see a big ol' moon raise its lazy head into the sky. I waved my hand in front of my face and could only tell it was there because it blocked the light of distant stars.

Astronauts in the space station have the comfort of looking down to see our home planet filling half of their view. Airline pilots always know the Earth is below them. I had nothing. It was like I was shipwrecked in the middle of the ocean at night and all the lights of the other ships were too far away to save me. No flares would be seen. No scream heard. I was lost.

Pascal wrote: *The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me.* If only he knew! This was an ominous silence of terrifying beauty.

I continued letting the rope out and before I knew it, I almost let the large knot go through my hands. How had I gotten to the end already? I was startled.

My hands darted around. I didn't know which way was up or down, or if those directions meant anything in space. I looked around for the hole but couldn't see it. I clenched my fist to make sure I was still holding the rope. Why didn't I leave a brighter light on or wrap the rope in Christmas lights? I wanted to get out, back onto firm ground. I pulled hard on the rope, hoping to propel myself up to the hole, but the rope felt like it was free at both ends. I started to panic.

I brought the rope close to my chest and pulled it through my hands one over the other. Beads of sweat rolled down my forehead and stung my eyes. Stay calm, I thought. Take a deep breath. Take another. It wasn't supposed to be this difficult! The rope wasn't a plumb line, it was my lifeline. After a few minutes – or hours, or days -- I felt the large knot. I was at the end. Somehow I had turned the rope over in my hand and gotten myself all turned around. I didn't want to think about it.

I tied the knot around my waist and guided the rope through my hands. When at last I felt some tension it was in the direction below my feet. *What the hell?* But I pulled for all I was worth and felt myself flying toward the hole. My feet knocked onto the edge of the hole and I tried to hook them onto the living room floor. I was dangling upside down into a universe next door. With some effort, I twisted my torso around, grabbed the lip of the hole and heaved myself up. I rolled onto the living room floor, took off my helmet and gasped for air.

Suddenly I felt a sharp pain in my leg.

"Ow!" I cried. I sat up and realized I had been kicked. Dolores was standing over me with her arms folded.

"I had a dream you went in," she said, "and you couldn't get back out. I didn't think you'd really go in. Do you think you can just tamper with the universe and it won't devour you?"

She kicked me again.

"I didn't sign up to lose you through some idiotic daredevil stunt. What the hell do you think you're doing?"

I couldn't give her the truth because then she would be even madder at me for risking my life. Lying on the floor, I stared at the ceiling and gathered my breath.

Dolores must have seen the glow in my face because her expression softened. She bent down and looked into my eyes and said, “It was awesome, wasn’t it?”

I swallowed and looked away for a moment, then looked back at her. “It’s like how I imagined one of those California floatation tanks would be,” I lied, “except without the psychedelics.”

“Were you scared?”

“No. Like you said, it’s a hole, not a black hole.”

“Alright,” she said, “let me try it then.”

Now I was caught. If I told her about the risks, I was a hypocrite. If I downplayed them, I could lose her forever.

“My spacesuit won’t fit you,” I said, hoping that was enough to dissuade her. I had visions of filing a Missing Persons report, of not being able to face the neighbors – or anyone.

“Let me try it.” She grabbed the helmet from me.

I helped her into my spacesuit, tied the rope around her waist, tugged on it twice for good measure, and watched her disappear into the stars below.

* * * * *

Neptune completed another orbit around the sun. New mountain ranges rose and fell. Planetary systems spun into existence. The core of the Earth cooled. Plants in the living room turned to stone. I pondered my story as a testimony for my trial. *Yes, Your Honor, she used my spacesuit. No, Your Honor, she insisted.* I wondered about jumping into the darkness after her. I chastised myself for this foolhardiness. The rope twitched, went limp, moved, went limp again. How much oxygen was left in the suit? How long is enough for an impromptu space walk? Why didn’t I give her some kind of light?

I began reeling the rope in. I wanted to feel her weight at the end of it. Hand over hand, I pulled in about ten feet, and still hadn’t felt her. If only we could have set up some kind of walkie-talkie system. If only I could have treated this like a high-risk possibly deadly activity instead of as a routine bungee jump or day of paragliding. *People go into space all the time...* Was I really so bored? I had to change my life. But now was not the time to panic.

A few more inches, a few more feet.

At last, I felt a tension in the rope. But when I sent a pulse down the rope none

came back. Now I pulled hard and felt her coming toward the opening. Moments later, I saw her hand in front of her like a fist – she was flying like Wonder Woman. I grabbed her hand and pulled her up.

* * * * *

“Why did you pull me in?” she said with a voice that was light years away. She was still breathing rapidly as she lay on the floor and stared at the ceiling.

“The oxygen,” I said. “I didn’t know – “

“I was frozen,” she whispered. “It was like I had never seen a star before and there I was surrounded. All those lights. The very eyes of the night. So harshly beautiful. There, there, there and there. And I was so far from everywhere. Do you know I screamed? It’s true. I would have screamed more if it didn’t hurt my ears so much. Damn echo-chamber helmet!”

She laughed.

“It was all so absurd – being swallowed by the night so completely that you forgot everything. I couldn’t even have told you my name down there. When I felt the rope tighten I got a strange sensation of being called back to life, being needed somewhere, and I couldn’t wait to get there.”

She rolled her head to the side and looked at me. “I would have never come back,” she said.

* * * * *

“Neighbor, are you and Dolores free on Saturday?” It was Peter on the phone.

“C’m on, we got to get you out of the house.” He and Maggie had extra tickets to go whale watching and wanted us to come. It happens that we had just watched an old Jacques Cousteau documentary and had an urge to see “ze spell cast by ze sea.” Even if we didn’t see any whales, I loved that idea that at any moment, one could burst through the surface and dazzle us all.

“Yes, sure,” I said, “we’re free.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR // **DANIEL HUDON** is a college instructor and creative writer based in the Boston area. His publications include *Evidence of Rainfall* (Pen & Anvil) and *The Bluffer’s Guide to the Cosmos* (Oval Books).



KOMMA SERIES NUMBER ONE

Komma Series chapbooks are intended to be read in a single sitting and passed along. Look for them in Boston, Portland, or New York City: pick one up when you see one lying around without owner, read and enjoy. And when you're done, leave it behind for the next reader, in an ATM lobby, the train station, the coffeeshop or pub. To request copies in bulk quantity, contact the Boston Poetry Union, PO Box 15274 Boston MA 02215.

published in 2015

design // Zachary Bos

cover image // modified drawing of String House by Chuck Reed // 1961

// penandanvil.com