

JACK WILLIAMSON

THE HOLE IN THE WORLD

Dear Dad," Amy's note began, "I found your address on a letter from Mom's lawyer. You don't have to write back to me, but I hope you will. I want to know if you are happy with Miss Winkle. Mom says she's a vicious bitch. I hope that's wrong. I'm awful sad about the trouble I made between you and More. I know I was sometimes so bad you had to hit me, but I'll always love you. Even if you can't pay the support.

"If you can write back, please send it to Millie. She's my best friend. Her address is on the envelope. Dad, I want you to know I love you. I always will, no matter what."

The signature was a messy ink stain. She must have cried on it. Maybe she really did love him. She had even sworn she did, crying on the witness stand. She'd told the judge he hadn't hit her often. Never really hard. She had gotten the bruises and broken her arm when she tripped and fell down the stairs.

A cute little kid, but he couldn't risk an answer. Gretchen and her blood-sucking attorney would eat him alive with anything they got their greedy hands on. He ran the letter through the shredder. His worry today was the spot on his chin. He had first noticed it while he was shaving.

A tiny white spot with jagged edges, it looked like a fleck of eggshell. But it wasn't eggshell. His fingers couldn't feel it. It wouldn't rub off. Frowning at it, he studied his face again. Still firm enough, pleasing enough when he smiled. The white fleck was still there, but he had other matters on his mind.

He'd been alone all week, but Creighton and Zara were both due back today. Creighton had been off at company headquarters, setting up his new franchise. Zara was away in Dayton, where her sister was having a baby. The franchise meant money, and Zara loved money as much as he loved her. He was picking her up at noon.

And tonight --

Thinking of tonight, he let the razor foil caress his face again. His chin had to be smooth, because whiskers scratched Zara's delicate skin. She loved to have him begin with a massage of her sweet little feet and work up from there. He splashed aftershave in his hand and rubbed the spot again.

Still there, it looked larger. Maybe a floater? But floaters were dark and it was white. He shut one eye and then the other. Both eyes saw it. Maybe he'd had a drink too many at Steve's stag party. He tried to whistle on his way downstairs, but his lips were dry and a dull ache throbbled at the back of his skull and the house was too empty.

Gretchen had taken most of the furniture as well as the kids, but Amy had left her school photo tacked to the refrigerator door with a heart-shaped magnet. The spot blotted out half her freckled grin. He ran hot water out of the tap to make instant coffee and ate a stale doughnut before he hurried to the office.

Creighton wasn't in.

"He said he'd be here," he told the secretary, "to talk about the franchise -- "

"Ask him about it." She was a straight-spined, sharp-voiced, God-crazed spinster who had never liked him. "He called from Hawaii to say he'll be in later today."

"Hawaii?" Goggling at her, he saw the spot above her lifted nose. "I thought he was in Chicago, arranging my new franchise."

"Chicago?" She pushed up her glasses to give him an indignant glare. "Mr. Creighton has been on vacation in Hawaii. He'll be here this afternoon."

She swung back to her computer.

What the hell? Creighton hadn't mentioned Hawaii. He rubbed his chin and tried to check his sales totals for the month, but the spot blanked the figures out. His head was pounding. His throat felt parched. He got a drink of water and looked at his chin in the lavatory mirror. No longer white, it shone like a fleck of tinfoil. He washed his face and saw it still there.

Bothered more than ever, he called Dr. Kroman, the eye man on the top floor. He knew the nurse, a feisty little redhead. She said she could work him in if he came up at ten. He studied the spot again. Now it was nearly the color of blood and flickering unsteadily, though still there was nothing he could feel. The face of his watch was a crimson shimmer, but he could read the office clock. He went up at ten and the nurse put him in a heavy chair with his head in a vise.

Kroman was a fat, wheezy man who smelled faintly of something that didn't quite cover an unpleasant breath. Squinting through a battery of lenses, he endured the breath and a dagger of light stabbing his eyes. The spot made it hard to tell which lens was better, but Kroman seemed not to care.

"Sir, you're a lucky man!" Booming cheerily, Kroman backed away. "I find nothing organic. Your eyes are perfectly normal."

"But I've still got the spot." He sat blinking at it. "It's bigger now, turning yellow."

"It's nothing physical." Kroman shrugged at his anxiety. "Nothing at all. If you're really concerned, you might talk to a good psychologist."

"I am concerned. When I look past your head, all I see is a hole in the wall."

"Really?" Kroman chuckled as if at a joke and popped a breath-saver into his mouth.

"Doctor, I'm not crazy!" He squinted at Kroman, who was suddenly headless. "Not that crazy."

"I don't say you are." Kroman smothered another chuckle. "I'm no psychiatrist, but you shouldn't hesitate if you think you need help. A mental condition is no disgrace today."

The nurse was at the door, urgently beckoning.

"Solipsism!" Kroman started after her and turned back. "Ever hear of that? The philosophic theory that the self is the only reality. The rest of the world only illusion. Logically, you can't prove the existence of anything outside yourself. All you really know, or think you know, is what you see and hear and feel. The rest could be hallucination. A fascinating notion, don't you think?"

A cold fist had clenched on his stomach. He felt too sick to think.

"If your problem persists -- " Kroman's voice was a far-off drone he hardly heard. "You might want to consult a competent neurologist. The mind's still a mystery. Even the senses are sometimes tricky. You can still feel the fingers of an amputated arm."

The nurse beckoned again, but Kroman wasn't through.

"Think about it, sir! Just think about it. For all you could prove, God may have created your whole world exclusively for you."

He tried not to think about it. When the nurse came back to show him out, he wanted to kid her about the heat in her fire-colored hair, but the spot had blotted it out.

"Solipsism!" The word haunted him down to his car. "Solipsism."

A philosophic theory? Philosophic hogwash! The blustery wind was real, and its diesel taint. No doubt about the snarling traffic and a howling ambulance. The steering wheel was real, solid to his hands. The whole world a sham, set up by a trickster God to test his soul? He didn't believe in God. He didn't believe he had a soul. He'd never believed in anything except himself.

The spot had swelled and darkened, now a murky brown. The traffic lights were hard to see, but he learned to make them out by looking slightly aside. He was in the terminal when Zara's plane came in. People had no faces, but he caught her tight black jeans and the purple lei around her neck.

"Sorry, Jake." Her voice had an impatient edge, and she slipped away before he could kiss her. "You can talk to Ed."

Creighton was just behind her, about to walk around him.

"Ed?" He caught Creighton's sleeve. "Wait a minute."

"Harley?" Creighton blinked at him in sleepy surprise. "If you're here about that franchise, better find another fish to fry."

"But I thought -- " The spot hid Creighton's eyes, but he saw the sunburn and the pink paper lei. "I don't understand."

"You can blame your ex-wife's attorney." Creighton moved to follow Zara. "He called last month, trying to locate you. He convinced us that you're not the man we wanted."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Your new ex-wife." Creighton looked after Zara, who was walking on, the tight black jeans twitching seductively. "She wanted time to make up her mind. We've had a wonderful week together, and I helped her make it up." He caught a hint of Creighton's grin. "No problem there."

His car was hard to find. Bigger and blacker than ever, the spot made it harder still to drive. He rear-ended a bright red Taurus stopped at a light, and sat with the driver cursing him for a stone-blind idiot till the cops came. He couldn't see much of them, but they gave him a ticket and called a wrecker and stopped a taxi to take him home.

The driver helped with the key. He stumbled inside and blinked to find himself. Amy's photo was gone when he squinted for it, and most of the refrigerator. He had to feel his way to the stairs. The railing slid out of his hand before he reached the top, and he felt the house crumbling under him. Clutching at nothing, he fell into nowhere.