

#ontheedge

A gaping hole opened in the southwest quadrant of Mr. Harris's field, swallowing his best corn crop. Having seen a TV program about similar mysterious holes gluttonously devouring the earth in Russia and Indiana, he wrote it off as God's Will.

"These things happen," he told his neighbor, Mr. Phillips. Both were among the last remaining members of a dying species of independent farmers in the Corn Belt.

"I reckon so," replied Mr. Phillips. With a weathered finger, he absentmindedly tapped a wooden post separating his land from Mr. Harris's, and although he wasn't a malicious man, Mr. Phillips sure was glad God hadn't opened the hole on *his* property.

The two gentlemen prated on about the diameter of the aperture before Mr. Harris finally tied twine around a rusty wrench and tossed it to the other side of the hole. He then measured the twine to sate their curiosity. It was an opportune time for a local news reporter to appear with a mouthful of questions.

"How big is it?" the reporter asked.

"A healthy eighteen-feet across." Mr. Harris sounded oddly proud wiping dewy grass from the knees of his trousers.

"How deep is it?"

"I haven't enough twine for that, ma'am." He seemed perfectly content not finding out either, but the reporter phoned a modest construction company to wheel in measuring tape to lower into the Stygian pit.

The construction worker arrived shortly after and squatted on his haunches to appreciate the natural profundity, saying, "It's a deep one. I'm sure of it!"

Before the first mile of tape slid into the hole, the worker's herniated disc started acting up from hunching, so he rested on the lip of the hole, allowing his legs to dangle above the abyss. The wheel clicked into a locked position as the last bit of tape extended. The tape was three-and-a-half-miles long, the longest anyone had in the pleasant town of Shubert, or in Stella, the next closest town, for that matter.

"Would you look at that," said Mr. Harris. "More than three-and-a-half—" but before he could finish stating the obvious, a hollow sound crawled up the cavity shaking the bellies of the onlookers and causing the dirt beneath the construction worker to crumble, taking him down, down, down.

For countless minutes, the jaws of the stupefied onlookers rested on their chests, or else accentuated a double chin. The ensuing silence was absolute. Then, like the shoulder-jerking blow of a ship horn, another ominous sound rose, and this time the onlookers, including Mr. Harris and Mr. Phillips, ran tangentially from the circle.

The reporter, once she'd reached her car, phoned for backup.

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A nondescript van carrying a second reporter and some hideous equipment from an interstate news station raced down Mr. Harris's rutted driveway, stirring a dust plume in its wake. They came to document the rescue effort unfolding for the fallen construction worker. To make way for the rescue equipment, the *southeast* quadrant of Mr. Harris's field had been flattened along with Mrs. Harris's garden of white Asters and blue Veronicas. Despite grieving the loss of her perennials coupled with an overwhelming presentiment, Mrs. Harris offered all in attendance chilled tomato juice which everyone declined except sweet ol' Mr. Phillips.

“It sure is a hot day for those men to be wearing all that equipment,” Mr. Phillips said, slaking his Wyatt Earp mustache in the glass.

“I wouldn’t want to go down there,” Mrs. Harris replied.

“Me neither.” They shared a rollicking laugh, optimism being the American way.

As their conversation distorted into gossip, a man was lowered into the hole. Three hours later, he was pulled back up, sweat running from his fingertips, gray skin a shade darker than his lips, telltale rings around his eyes. He fainted and was revived. Mrs. Harris brought him a glass of tomato juice which he emphatically refused with the back of a hand.

Mr. Harris bent in genuflection next to the deflated man. “Tell us what you saw, poor fellow.”

“It was like entering the belly of a beast.”

That night the following banner ran across television screens during the QRZ news report: RESCUE WORKER ADMITTED TO HOSPITAL FOR HALLUCINATIONS AFTER SPENDING THREE HOURS IN MYSTERIOUS SHUBERT HOLE / RESCUE UNSUCCESSFUL...

Each day thereafter, a rescue team arrived. Each day, another bewildered member was admitted to the hospital for hallucinations and heat exhaustion. Each day, when Mr. and Mrs. Harris visited the hole before imbibing on morning coffee, Mrs. Harris suggested it be measured again.

“It looks bigger to you too?” asked Mr. Harris.

“Afraid so.”

Mr. Harris had stopped untying the twine from the wrench and had to lob it across with increasing force.

Mrs. Harris: “So?”

Mr. Harris: “Six inches.”

“Another six inches?”

Mr. Harris nodded solemnly though a tinge of pride could still be found in the crease of his cheek. They recorded the hole’s expansion in the back of a ledger used for corn wholesales, then Mrs. Harris scrambled eggs while Mr. Harris filled a coffee maker with bitter grinds. A charnel-house stench began emanating from the hole to assail the farmers.

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The capricious hole groaned and groaned and disturbed bellies and, before no time at all, ate the rest of the corn. One night, it even took the light-blue Harris house while Mr. and Mrs. Harris slept.

“What a shame,” said Mr. Phillips. “Affable folks. Their bushes never hung over my fence. Trimmed! Everything was trimmed! You couldn’t ask for better neighbors, or friends.” His eyes glistened with remorse.

The hole soon ate Mr. Phillips and his property too and gradually consumed all of Shubert until all that remained was a street sign memorializing 718 Trail and 647 Avenue.

Nebraskan residents from nearby towns visited the hole on weekends and their days off but could only get so close as Nebraskan officials had mustered their store of plastic barriers to cordon off a gap of several yards around the edges. Families approached the orange and white perimeter with anticipation, and they weren’t disappointed except for the fact that, because the hole was so deep, the bottom was undiscernible. From time to time, a child would exclaim, “I see something red!” Everyone would follow his finger to the depths of the breach, searching in the mouth of the monster before giving up and patting the boy’s head. “What an imagination he

has!” they’d say.

Visitors snapped photos of the hole’s insides with its gradient of soil moving from tawny to black, with its tree roots sticking out in painful contortions and water pipes hanging dry. They all read the warning on the yellow pennant sign: IF YOU HEAR A GRUMBLE AND YOU FEEL A TUMBLE, RUN! Someone thought it would be funny to change *run* to *rumble* with garish spray paint.

The grumbling and the tumbling continued, rising and falling with a few more lost feet between its teeth. Tourism to the hole remained steady until a luxurious carpet of snow laid on Nebraska and slumbered. As the hole became unmanageable in size, a beleaguered Nebraska ran out of orange-and-white plastic barriers, and of course, neighboring states wouldn’t interfere to help. The hole tried to force the hands of the governors of Iowa, Missouri, and Kansas anyway when it aggressively asserted itself across their borders.

Even then, the governors, doped on hubris, pandered to the populace: “It started with Nebraska, it should end with Nebraska!” which translated to “It’s Nebraska’s responsibility because the hole opened within its imaginary borders.” Hence, what followed wasn’t an inspiring, multistate collaboration to extend the safety barrier around the hole or to study it. No! Instead, an increasing number of people simply fell in.

Bickering ensued leaving everyone smacking their lips for the bitter aftertaste, just as bitter as Mr. and Mrs. Harris’s morning Joe, but of course, some people like bitter coffee. Of course, the bickering often didn’t transpire face to face; instead, memes flooded social media comparing the Nebraska before the hole to a hole, a wasteland, nothingness. So much hate a resolution seemed impossible. So much yelling no one heard what the other side was saying. Sadly, they were often saying the same thing.

The memes and bickering born in Iowa, Missouri, and Kansas died there when the hole, seemingly indifferent to the impassioned voices, swallowed all three states and half of Nebraska—#morningjoe.

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“Mr. President—”

“The Senator from Illinois is recognized.”

“I ask that the quorum be vitiated.”

“Without objection.”

“Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, we’ve witnessed the senseless death of nearly ten-million Americans over the past six months on our soil, on soil crumbling beneath us and showing no signs of clemency. Had states consolidated their efforts to secure the perimeter of the sinkhole, many of those deaths could have been prevented. Granted, a sinkhole of this magnitude and voracity is unprecedented in our nation, or in any nation, but I would’ve hoped affected states would’ve done the *right thing*, that they would’ve enacted basic security measures to prevent citizens from falling into this pernicious hole. Unfortunately, what we are witnessing instead is uncooperative squabbling that’s not only dangerous but un-American. And many of those engaged in divisiveness rather than unity are not here today to hear the introduction of Bill S.967 because, to be frank, the land they represented disappeared, and I am certain members of both parties are saddened to see their colleagues’ untimely retirement from the Senate. That is why I am introducing a resolution today that would save thousands of lives by mandating states in which the sinkhole is present to secure the perimeter with standardized fencing or barriers. I believe my colleagues on the other side of the aisle will agree with commonsense measures to save lives.”

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The author of this historical document wishes to remain bipartisan, so the two sides of the Senate aisle will be referred to as the Fuchsia Team and the Amber Team or the Bare-Eyed Cockatoo Team and the Earthworm Eel Team, although there is just one team, the For-the-People Team—#civilservants.

Here's the (impartial) partial transcript of the Environment and Public Works Committee debate concerning Bill S.967 without embellishment:

Bare-Eyed Cockatoos: The border [of the hole] needs to be secured...

Earthworm Eels: But this bill imposes upon local and state authority...

Bare-Eyed Cockatoos: Think about the safety of the people!...

Earthworm Eels: Think about our Founding Fathers!...

Bare-Eyed Cockatoos: Aren't people's lives worth saving?...

Earthworm Eels: Isn't the Constitution worth preserving?...

Needless to say, the bill died in committee, and a hero emerged—Earthworm Eels—for keeping government small and protecting the nation from the overzealous, tax-loving freaks that are the Bare-Eyed Cockatoos—#chirpchirpmotherf@#%&.

What inevitably followed given the inaction of a myopic Congress was a bizarre and sad pattern that left Americans callous, and callouses are ugly. Every day it seemed dozens of people fell into the hole. A group of drunk teenagers or a curious toddler or even those desperate for the end, so-called Hole Jumpers, who, instead of worming to an unknown future, plummeted to guaranteed death.

The gourmand hole fattened up on more states, and national news outlets ran footage of promising young adults, full of potential in their sophomore years, mistaking unstable soil for solid soil and thereby taking fatal falls. They'd been drawn to the beast's growling, growling that set the earth to shaking, or at least the remaining states. Or, perhaps, it was the sunset clearly visible without eyesore buildings that moved them—an ocher orb turning the heavens into cotton candy and ice cream, a delectable masterpiece stretching the horizon daily.

“What will future generations think? They'll ask why we didn't do something about the hole, why we didn't create commonsense laws to protect the people.”

The crowd chanted and raised their ire and sticks with signs. The laws never came, and the sticks turned to flowers and candles placed in grassy spots where loved ones once stood. A melancholy floated through the air, touching families via flatscreen TVs, and the families sent prayers up, up, up until the air thinned at such great heights.

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The hole filled with water.

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Clerk One: “...and that's how it happened, the hole and this mess.”

Clerk One and Clerk Two agreed it was probably time to go back inside; besides, they had smoked all their cigarettes, their hands now hiding in the pockets of their characterless business attire, protecting them from the chill lifting from the D.C. sea. They took one last look around at the blue sky laced with clouds, a sky unobstructed by tall rectangles and other geometric shapes. One last look at the thinned land packed with people whose homes had been devoured. Where the hole sliced through hills, people clung to the sides like human ornaments on a dirt Christmas tree. One last look before returning to shuffling congressional papers up and down hallways.

Fifteen senators remained to argue. The rest had succumbed to the hole that cut the shape

of a cereal bowl into the United States. As the final days pressed on, the hole ate into the foundation of the Capitol Building, and it wasn't long before the floors cracked and crashed into the water like ominous icebergs. The senators, taken one by one, went down with their hands and crowns of white hair raised, until one senator remained:

“I guess I'll fix this alone,” he said, before the floor opened beneath him like a trapdoor.