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From her spot curled up on the sofa, Jiffy Pembroke, a middle-aged librarian who had given up the battle for her midriff, watched the 24-hour news channels obsessively. Her husband of 22 years, Paul, saddened by her disconnection from the ‘real’ world of their domestic bliss, and her inability to be 33 again, was moving the last of his things to a brand-new Toyota Tundra outside in the driveway. “I think that’s about it?” It was a question rather than a statement.

“Hmm?” Jiffy did not take her eyes from the screen. It was Anderson Cooper. She had to watch everything he did.

“I said, I think I’ve got everything now.” She didn’t hear the sadness in Paul’s voice, although she did pick up a slight whiff of his Agua di Gio aftershave. She would miss that. *I guess I could just go buy a bottle and spritz it around*, she thought. Would that be pathetic, or a creative solution to his absence?

Paul’s fiancée, Prishka, stood in front of her, blocking the screen. Tall, lanky, exotically Indian (the red dot kind, not the protesting-pipelines kind). “Jeffra,” she said kindly. “I hope things go well for you.” She patted Jiffy on the hand consolingly as Paul’s last crate of music equipment was dragged to the U-Haul by two underpaid college students.

“Thank you.” She tried to look around the woman’s narrow, blue-jeaned hips, but only saw one of Anderson Cooper’s ice-blue eyes. “I do appreciate that.” Prishka sighed and moved out of her field of vision.

Paul crouched down in front of her, careful not to block her view. “Jif, we’re going now.”
Was he crying?

“Mmm.” She stared straight ahead. “Well, I hope things go well for you.”

“Look at me.”

“Why?”

“Just...do it. Please. One last time.” His voice cracked.

Oh, for Pete’s sake, she thought. *Fine*. She swiveled her eyes from the television to her soon-to-be-ex-husband’s face. “Jesus, Paul, you have a mustache.”

“I’ve had this mustache since September.”

“Really?” His eyes were bleary. The mustache looked like an unenthusiastic, sandy-grey caterpillar.

“Jif. I hope you get some help.” He covered her hand with his own. The warmth registered, but she felt nothing. “You know, it’s not how I wanted things to go.”

“That’s what you said.” A choking wave of emotion threatened to overflow the strained levies of numbness.

This Saturday, a cool California morning dotted with hummingbirds and low clouds, Jiffy was considering suicide, mostly as a concept rather than a choice. To her cat, Mr. Cranks, she said “I wouldn’t do it, you know. I just think it’s interesting.” Her research consisted of browsing websites devoted to methodology, and news stories about current and past events of suicide. The

zookeeper from Singapore who let himself into the white tiger enclosure and provoked the animal with a broom seemed cruel (why involve an innocent animal?) and the man who racked up huge debt, tied a rope between his neck and a tree, and sped off in a brand-new convertible (top down) was creative and not a little disconcerting.

Her cell phone chirped, the ring tone a theme song from her favorite BBC detective show. It was Ellis, her gay boyfriend. “Is he gone?”

“Yes.” She picked a chewy caramel from a box of chocolates and popped it into her mouth. “They just left with the last of his stuff.”

“Was it awful?”

“Not so much.” She chewed, picking the pieces of sticky sweetness from the edges of her teeth. “She was horrible. He was annoying. Nothing new.”

Ellis sighed like a deflating election balloon. “We have to celebrate. Where should we go?”

“Mmmm.” The muted television scene of a huge sinkhole in the middle of the city had captured her attention. “Did you see the Sinkhole?”

“Huh?”

“Can you come over, Ellis?” She grabbed the TV remote, prepared to turn up the volume as soon as she hung up the phone.

“I guess. I’m not working today.”

“Okay. See you when you get here.” She clicks the phone off and turned up the TV simultaneously.

An exotic woman (probably Indian, like Prishka) in red stood at the edge of the sinkhole, a microphone bobbing just below her perfect, heart-shaped face. “The sinkhole apparently appeared twenty minutes ago, in a busy intersection at Grand and 4th Avenue. City crews are en route to identify the source of the sinkhole, and to create a plan to repair the damage. Here with me now is Frank Bestie, a postal worker who was delivering mail when the phenomenon occurred.”

“Bestie?” Jiffy snorted. “What kind of a name is Bestie?”

The balding postal worker, socks held up with those elastic bands, looked like a frightened deer. “I was just dropping off mail at this bank here, and I heard a really loud booming sounds, and then singing.”

The woman with the microphone registered the singing comment a beat late. “Right, and then you—wait, singing? Did you say you heard singing?”

He nodded vigorously. “Yes, ma’am. Singing. Coming from that hole.”

The puzzled newscaster wasn’t sure quite where to go with that line of questioning, so she changed the subject. “Did you happen to notice if any cars or pedestrians fell into the hole?”

“I don’t think so. But I wasn’t looking right at it when it opened up. I heard the noise, then the singing, then I looked, and all I saw was this big, black cavern.”

“Was the so-called singing possibly coming from somewhere nearby, and you just thought it was coming from the sinkhole?”

“No, no. It was definitely coming from right in the middle of that portal.”

“Portal?” Reporter lady looked pretty worried now. Jiffy chuckled at her uneasiness and picked another chocolate out of the box.

“I know it’s not conventional thinking, but I believe this sinkhole is a portal. There is a lot of research to back me up on this, actually. Last year alone, there were several sinkholes that were confirmed portals. To hell.”

The news lady’s eyes grew wide, and Jiffy nearly choked on her chocolate buttercream. “Portal to hell!” She laughed, then quick keyed Ellis on her cell phone. “Ellis!”

“I’m on my way, Jesus.” Judging from the bumpy noises, he was already driving. “What is it? You want me to pick up rum on the way?”

“That would be great, but no, I was calling because there is a guy on TV who says there is a sinkhole that is a portal to hell.”

“I thought that was your bathroom.”

“Fuck you. I can’t help it if I have IBS.” She grabbed a truffle. “I’m sensitive.”

“Yeah, ‘kay. Should I get rum or no?”

She made a muffled affirmative, then clicked the phone off so she could watch the squirming reporter and the postal worker slash hell portal expert do their dance of awkwardness.

Ellis arrived fifteen minutes later, rum in hand. He helped himself to ice and two clean cups, filled half the glasses with the clear liquid, and topped it off with a small splash of Coke. He handed one to Jiffy, who took it gratefully. She hadn’t moved from her vantage point on the sofa, still enthralled with the news crews at the sinkhole.

“What I find fascinating is how convinced this guy is that this is a portal to hell,” she said, swigging a huge sip. “Mmm. You got Shellback Rum, didn’t you?”

“Only the best for you.” Ellis flopped down on the opposite end of the couch, sinking into the dark blue velvet and down cushions. “Your couch is a portal. To laziness.”

“I like to be comfortable.”

“Yeah, but this thing grabs you and doesn’t let go. Oh, well.” He used a striped straw to sip his drink.

They took their sacrament in silence. Jiffy pondered the black emptiness of the sinkhole on the television screen, seen from above by way of an intrepid traffic helicopter pilot angling for investigative reporter status. “I wonder how close he’ll fly to it,” Jiffy said.

“You mean, you wonder if you could see inside, like see how far down it goes?” Ellis leaned forward, resisting the gravity of the couch. “From here, you can’t really see the bottom, can you?”

“Well, it is dark,” Jiffy answered doubtfully. She had thought the same thing, though; the gaping chasm seemed as dark and empty as her love life.

A blast of synthetic trumpets and a thumping drumbeat interrupted her pity party as Breaking News bled across the screen and blotted out the sinkhole. “We have breaking news at this hour,” the blond Barbie-doll anchor said anxiously. She touched her earpiece, frowned, and blinked at the teleprompter in front of her.

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Jiffy shushed him so she could hear. “It might be important.” Ellis snorted as the blond woman read. “The President today announced plans to—” He grabbed the remote and switched the television off.

“Why did you do that?” Jiffy grabbed for the remote, but he kept it out of her reach.

“Enough of this doom and gloom nonsense. Anything that twit says will just push you further into a downward spiral,” Ellis said reasonably. “Now, honey. Let’s talk about the real breaking news. The real breaking-up news.”

“Fuck.” She slumped into the couch, dejected. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Of course, you don’t.” He poured more rum into her tumbler, splashed the remains of the Diet Pepsi into it and swirled it with his finger. “But talk about it we must.”

“He came in, he brought HER with him—”

“What’s her name? Pushcart? Pashmina?”

“Prishka.” She took a sip of rum. “He brought her, they took the rest of his stuff, they tried to talk to me, I ignored them. They left. End of story.”

“Oh, no, no, no.” Ellis shook his head. “Not the end of story. You are terribly damaged.”

She sighed and stared at the black mirror of the television screen, where she saw a middle-aged woman with nothing to live for, and her gay boyfriend. “Maybe.” She turned to look at him. “Why don’t you move in with me? Then we could hang out all the time.”

He rolled his eyes. “We’ve talked about this, sugar. It just wouldn’t suit my...lifestyle.”

“I don’t care who you bring back here. I’m totally nonjudgmental.”

“I know that, Jif. It’s just that I’d feel weird about it.” He sat up as if electrified. “I know! I have an amazing idea! Let’s go see the sinkhole!”

“You mean, drive down there?”

“Yes!”

“What about parking?” The poor girl was really considering the annoyance of putting on clothes that didn’t fit and shoes that pinched. “I don’t want to.”

“You never want to do anything.” Ellis stood up, grabbed her wrist and pulled her up too. “No arguments. We’ll see the sinkhole, have some lunch, maybe go shopping. It’ll do you good. I think you need a change of scenery.”

“Maybe you’re right. But I’m not wearing a bra.”

“Who cares? Don’t wear a bra. I promise I’ll control my urge to jump your gigantic bosoms.”

“Snot.” She fake-slapped him on the shoulder and moved to find some clothes that didn’t make her feel like a stuffed sausage.

“I’ll drive,” Ellis yelled.

The sinkhole was situated near the waterfront, about three blocks inland, right next to a Nordstrom outlet store. Ellis found parking fairly easily, and within five minutes they’d walked to the site of interest.

Several other gawkers ringed the hole, gazing into the dark depths below. A few police officers also circled about to be sure no one did anything illegal. Yellow caution tape, the cover-your-ass fringe at all civil accidents, waved merrily in the breeze.

“I can’t even see the bottom,” a homeless-smelling man said as Jiffy and Ellis took their places in the circle of onlookers. “Can you see the bottom?”

Jiffy squinted. “Not sure. It does seem pretty deep. Has anyone gone in to check it out?”

“Nope.” The man sneezed and wiped his nose on his already-filthy sleeve. “Just the cops have been roamin’ around to be sure nobody goes in on accident.”

“I doubt they could stop that,” Ellis interjected. “I mean, if someone really wanted to go in.”

Jiffy gazed into the chasm. Black, black as a midnight in the middle of a moonless desert. Black as the yawning maw of a still, silent dragon. Black, empty, just like the place inside her where she used to keep love and longing and any kind of enjoyment of life.

She thought about a lot of things at that moment. Politics. A world in chaos. Ugly sweaters. Her ex-husband and his perfect new wife. Peanut butter, that tasted so good but only made you fat. The way every day felt when nothing felt good.

So, she ducked under the caution tape, and jumped in.