

THE SINK HOLE

To be read in a Florida accent, or as Tom Hanks in Forrest Gump

I was living in a bungalow in the suburbs at the time. I had one room, my brother had another and my sister the third, and none of us was married. I was woken up in my bed one night by a crash. My bed took a drop. I heard the grind of moving earth. In the pitch black my bed was bucking. Jesus, I was being sucked down. By now I was shouting and screaming, riding my bed like a boat in a storm. I saw the door open and my brother stood in the doorway with the hall light behind him. 'Joe, are you all right?' he croaked. But I was already half gone through the floor. Then the earth smothered me.

The earth was pressed in my ears and there were deep rumbling horrible noises, sounds so low and nasty, the lowest notes of the organ at Miami Cathedral speakin' of hell and sin. I tumbled then got squeezed then tumbled again. The new domain creaked and went silent. I half-opened my eyes then shut them again. Darkness so frightening, so blind, the darkness of a coffin. I listened for my brother and I knew he was separated from me, he up there, me here with the worms.

The train of earth moved again, carried me deeper. I didn't know if I was about to be suffocated. I peed myself. My body was jostled. I curled up holding my pyjama jacket around me and I prayed: Oh God, Oh God, Oh God. In the packing around me were hard edges, pieces of my bedroom, all packed in this chute which hadn't settled. Then I fell free and landed on a slope of cold clay

I was in cold and darkness. I heard a familiar little rattling of pebbles running down a slope and a splash, a plop. I moved a little towards the sound of the water. The place had the cold smell of a refrigerator, there was cold wet grit on my lips, my fingers squelched in clammy material but I could crawl free.

I felt the water. I washed my face. Black black black all around. I thought, I can't deal with this, being dead and alive at the same time.

I began to grieve for my life up there. Oh God, while I'd had it I'd wasted it and now it was gone. That gave me my only strength. That I'd never grabbed my life while I had the chance made me so bitter and angry with myself. I bawled and cursed. We never have swearing in the house. Here in my grave I

started on a blue streak. Then my voice dropped to a whimper, I lay on that clammy mound and waited to go mad.

But no. I started to reckon on my situation in detail instead. I was deep down. Not even worms came this deep, did they? Would anybody try and dig me out? What they would do was be put a fence around the bungalow – I'd seen that before. Then they'd put up a sign: *For Demolition*. The heavy machinery would have to wait until the surveyor's report and how many weeks would that be? It would just be my brother and sister digging for me, by flashlight, risking their lives. They could dig for a month. I knew I was buried too deep.

Echoes of that water told me I was in a large chamber. I felt around me. Smooth rock. This is the Florida limestone, I thought, sluiced by centuries of groundwater, a Swiss Cheese underground. I touched the brook and it ran fast across my fingertips. I drank some. Then I let myself tumble in. I had to rather than wait for a slow death.

In the current my feet slid on smooth rock. No plant, no animal, down here. I kept a hand above my head to know when the ceiling came down and I would get my last breath. A rushing sound warned me of a fall ahead. In all the darkness, is a waterfall a waterfall any more, if it's never seen? I don't know, it may just be noise and commotion. Once, twice, the flow went through airless tunnels and I held my breath then came up gasping. The panic had gone. I was through with this blind swim. I let myself float on my back, my eyes screwed tight shut, and my mind was taken over by childhood memories, just as they say happens, hurried and intense and sweet.

Then out I came in a creek. I felt night on my cheeks and saw the star-lit sky. I was among reeds and tipped out rubbish which I could smell. It was just some ditch nobody had ever looked at. I lay there receiving the milky sky and a dog came down and went for my foot. It took an ankle. I kicked it away, found my voice and roared at it. I crawled up to a thrie-beam barrier beside an asphalt road. There were houses. I was only a few hundred yards from home.

The bungalow was already cordoned off when I got back. The gumballs of two police cars flashed on a group of people, my brother and sister at the centre. I was back from the dead, my flesh as white as the moon, and my sister took fright, hysterical already. She wanted a great deal of calming but my

brother hugged me readily enough. We were taken by police car to a hotel off the highway and checked in at City expense. Counsellors would be available in the morning if we needed them, we were told.

At breakfast, we queued awkwardly for the buffet in a line of businessmen in open shirts. They were cracking jokes about the terrible coffee. We had pancakes at a booth table overlooking the highway. My sister scolded the waitress for the dirt on the table and told her to return with a cloth. Then in came a cub reporter. She told us that's what she was and her newspaper had got the night's story from the police. She was a college kid dressed up like an anchor woman, fresh as a daisy, halfway to where she was going in the world. She was wearing a dab of make-up, a two-piece anchor-woman suit and gym-shoes over ankle socks. She shook all our hands and told us she was Susan Marant. My sister sat up straight, said how she'd been asleep when the ground began to shake and how she'd felt at once it was God's wrath visiting us. Susan Marant wrote all that down then turned to me.

'Well, Joe, that was a remarkable escape you made there. You've practically come back from the dead. How does it feel?'

'I don't know how it feels, but this sure is a nice breakfast.'

'I'm going to see if I can't fill two pages with your story. Will you come and talk to my editor?'

'Miss Marant,' said my sister coldly, 'we may have other engagements. We're going to the church to see The Reverend Mathews. We need his spiritual direction and counselling at once. And seeing as we're homeless now we must lay ourselves on the mercy of the church. Besides, Joe always spends the mornings cleaning the vestry.'

Miss Marant was pretty firm too. 'How about you let me take Joe to the office for an hour and then I'll bring him wherever you want him to be.'

At her newspaper Miss Marant kept me two hours. They took my photo and people came in and out of different doors to look at me and shake my hand. 'You're a brave son of a bitch, how you didn't go to pieces we'll never know,' someone said in front of Miss Marant. They all wanted to hear the story from my own mouth. Someone else said, 'This is going national tomorrow, Joe, you look out,' and another said, 'The talk-shows are going to love you.' I was pleased how everyone was so excited.

Miss Marant took me down to the street. She put her hand on my arm.

‘You’re in for another big ride, Joe, can you handle it?’

‘A ride where?’

‘A ride up.’

‘It sounds go’ood.’ I heard myself say the word good as if it was a roller-coaster of o’s. Whoa! I felt so alive and confident just then.

She looked at me and I looked at her.

‘So, that sister of yours seems pretty religious,’ she said.

‘She’s a good woman,’ I said. ‘My brother and I just try to be as good as she is.’

‘Is she going to like you on television? Because that’s where you’ll be tomorrow, you know. You’re going to be endorsing pancakes and hotels – I wouldn’t be surprised.’

‘I guess she’ll talk to The Reverend Mathews. I don’t know what he’ll tell her.’

‘But you’re willing?’

‘Yes I am.’

‘You might bunk at my place tonight, how’s that?’

‘As long as you don’t ask me to sleep on the ground floor? You know this Florida of ours is a Swiss Cheese.’

‘No, I’m seventh floor of a condo, so don’t worry.’

‘That sounds like heaven.’