

WINNER OF THE SHIRLEY JACKSON AWARD

'A Korean take on Misery' TIME

hole

THE HOLE

HYE-YOUNG PYUN

TRANSLATED BY SORA KIM-RUSSELL

Praise for *The Hole*
Winner of the Shirley Jackson Award

‘A Korean take on *Misery*.’

– *Time*, ‘Top 10 Thrillers to Read This Summer’

‘Spare yet viscerally compelling, *The Hole* seizes you right from the powerful opening scene all the way to its nightmare conclusion. Masterfully unsettling.’

– Leon Craig, author of *Parallel Hells*

‘This book will stay with you long after you turn the last page. A skillful, layered exploration of where horror resides on the narrow terrain between care and cruelty, between love and loathing.’

– Heather Parry, author of *Carrion Crow* and
Orpheus Builds a Girl

‘Hye-young Pyun’s *The Hole* is a masterwork of suspense, and a profound meditation on grief, solitude, and secrecy. At once unsettling and richly moving, *The Hole* is a vital novel, a gift from a wildly inventive writer.’

– Laura van den Berg, author of *Find Me*

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‘Like Hitchcock or Abe, Pyun peers head on into the unnerving depths of human grief with the most methodical of eye, logically narrating our descent into such a clear, uncanny terror we hope to remind ourselves its only just a book, one wound from end to end with an exquisite magic that refuses to let go.’

– Blake Butler, author of *300,000,000*

‘While reading *The Hole*, you’ll find yourself suddenly doubting everything. Pyun is asking us a tough and terrifying question that none can dodge: *Is your life safe?*’

– Kyung-sook Shin, *New York Times*
bestselling author of *Please Look After Mother*

‘By the time Hye-young Pyun’s taut psychological thriller *The Hole* has tightened its grip on the unsuspecting mind, it’s too late to escape. The shadows lurking in the novel become manifest, and dark poetic justice reigns . . . *The Hole* is an unshakable novel about the unfathomable depths of human need.’

– *Shelf Awareness*

‘Winner of many of Korea’s top literary prizes and accolades, Pyun proves to be an effectively chilling storyteller whose expert narrative manipulations should earn new followers.’

– *Booklist*

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‘[Be] wary; you’ll be thinking and dreaming this novel long after you’ve put it down.’

— *Words Without Borders*

‘A claustrophobic, riveting story calculated to get under your skin.’

— *Korean Literature Now*

‘Fissures in life offer a glimpse of the truth that starts not from others but from us and that we are all oblivious to.’

— *Maeil Business News Korea*

‘*The Hole* is rooted in character but has the suspense of a thriller . . . For readers who are unafraid of knowing that our life and our loved ones are strangers to us.’

— Krys Lee, *World Literature Today*

‘Reminiscent of Stephen King’s *Misery*, Hye-young Pyun’s *The Hole* shows off her unique style of steadily rising terror with this dark tale of a man utterly cut off from his life.’

— *Munhwa Ilbo* (Korea)

‘[A] disconcerting and often sinister story.’

— *Korea Herald*

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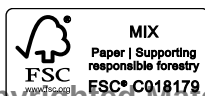
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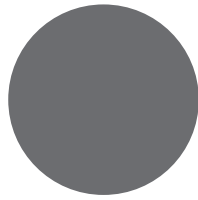
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1

OGHI SLOWLY OPENED HIS eyes. The light was blinding. Something flashed at the center of a grayish haze. He closed his eyes, opened them again. The difficulty of this reassured him. This meant he was alive. The physical burden of struggling to open his eyes, of squinting against the light, was proof.

A ceiling tiled with plasterboard and lined with fluorescent bulbs appeared. Every single light was on, which meant it had to be a hospital. Only a hospital would require so much illumination.

He tried turning his head but it was difficult. The best he could do was move his eyes from side to side. ‘Oghi?’

He heard a voice. A woman’s. At first he couldn’t make out anyone, then gradually a white tunic came into view. The woman, he assumed she was a nurse,

walked right up to him. He could smell her. It wasn't a nice smell. Sharp. Like she'd just finished eating. What time was it?

Oghi wanted to say something. He didn't have to ask where he was, he already knew. Where else could he be but a hospital? He clearly wasn't on the verge of death. Not if he could smell her.

'Are you awake?'

The nurse leaned in close to examine Oghi's face and pressed the pager button on the wall.

'The doctor will be with you shortly. Do you know where you are?'

She looked at the clock and noted the time on Oghi's chart.

Oghi struggled to part his dry lips. No sound came out, only a little air.

'You're in a hospital. You've been asleep a long time.' The nurse's voice was loud. 'I'll check your blood pressure while we wait for the doctor. He'll have to examine you when he gets here.'

The nurse took out a gray blood pressure cuff. Oghi stared at his arm held aloft in the nurse's grip as the cuff encircled his bicep. Strange. He couldn't feel the cuff fill with air and tighten. Nor could he feel it deflate. It was the same when the nurse unwrapped the cuff and set his arm back down on the bed.

The nurse jotted something on the chart and smiled at Oghi to show that she was done.

What about my wife? Oghi asked.

No sound came out. His jaw did not move, his vocal cords did not vibrate. Flustered, Oghi rolled his tongue inside his mouth and carefully swallowed his saliva.

The nurse said she would be back and left the room. Oghi struggled to move his jaw. It wouldn't budge. If he strained, his dry lips parted slightly. This time he tried saying *ah*. He heard a faint whisper as the air that had languished deep inside his lungs escaped from between his lips. That was it. No matter how hard he tried to form a sound, what reached his ears was not his voice. All he heard was a steady mechanical beat coming from the equipment connected to his body, and from outside in the hallway, courteously hushed sounds, the gentle squeaking of nurses' shoes.

After a while the nurse entered with the doctor. Though he'd never seen him, the doctor seemed to know Oghi. The doctor beamed and spread his arms exaggeratedly wide.

'Oghi, so good to see you! How long has it been?' he asked.

Oghi was wondering the same thing. How long *had* it been? How long had he been gone?

'Do you know where you are?'

Oghi stared at the doctor.

'You're in a hospital, aren't you?'

Oghi tried to nod. A pointless effort.

‘Now then, blink once for yes.’

Oghi did as he was told. He closed his eyes once and opened them.

‘Good, that was very good.’

The doctor’s voice sounded strained. Like he was talking with his fists clenched. Oghi had never received such a rousing cheer before just for blinking.

My wife?

Oghi tried again to speak. The doctor lifted his right eyelid, then his left. Then he seemed to be pressing and touching different parts of Oghi’s body. Oghi couldn’t feel any of it. The doctor checked the numbers on the machines behind the bed, wrote things down on his chart, and whispered instructions to the nurse.

‘Good job, Oghi! You’ve done splendidly, and now you’ll have to be strong again. Understand? The real fight starts now. Your willpower is the most important thing from here on in. That’s what you need: willpower, not medical power. I’m going to have my hands full trying to help you get better. I’ll do my absolute best. But my task is nothing compared to yours. Understand? It’s not me, the doctor, who has to fight now, it’s you. But first, we need to run a few tests, so we’re moving you to another room. Okay? Blink once to show you understand.’

Oghi again did as he was told.

‘Excellent! Good job. Very, very good. I’ll see you again in a moment.’

With that last bit of exaggerated praise, the doctor left with the nurse.

The doctor had praised Oghi for regaining consciousness. A good job. Oghi chewed over the doctor’s words.

Was his waking up really a good thing? The phrase the doctor had used – willpower, not medical power – nagged at him. Those words said everything.

After a while, the nurse came back. She unplugged a number of cords that connected Oghi to the machines, then double-checked the bed and slowly wheeled him out into the hallway.

Oghi lay there and watched as the hospital ceiling and fluorescent lights rushed past. He had a feeling he would be in that bed for a while. Not just a few hours but for days to come. All this talk about the importance of willpower must have meant that, unless he wanted it badly enough, he would have a tough time getting better. It meant there was absolutely no chance his body would mend on its own, that even repeated treatment would not guarantee recovery. The doctor’s and nurse’s reactions told Oghi that he’d taken a long time to wake up. He’d probably received all sorts of medical care already. The cables, the respirator, the tubes snaking in and

out of him told him that his had not been an easy fight.

The bed rattled and glided along and then came to a stop. They were in front of an elevator. It looked like it was meant for transporting patients only, but perfectly healthy people kept crowding in after them. As each new person squeezed in, the nurse nudged Oghi's bed further to the side. The people on their feet stole glances at Oghi on his back.

It was only after he was on the elevator that Oghi realized he was back in the real world. Not the hospital room with its excessive illumination, the nurse gently examining him, the doctor patting him on the back and telling him 'great job' when all he did was blink his eyes. What he'd really returned to was this noisy, crowded, queuing, waiting, leering world. The world where, as his doctor explained, the only way to survive was through sheer force of will.

Oghi had nothing to do during the examination. There was no need for him to lie down in the MRI scanner, no need to stick out his arm so they could collect his blood, no need to remove any medical sensors himself. Unable to feel a thing, Oghi was shuffled from one bed to another, had sensors attached to him and removed from him, blinked as the doctor instructed, but mostly he lay there with his eyes closed. When the examination was nearing its end, he drifted to sleep.

As his vision went dark, Oghi saw over and over the car carrying him and his wife crash into a tall concrete barricade. He was clearly imagining it. He knew this because he could see himself inside the crumpled vehicle. And yet his head ached badly. As if he had slammed his head against a wall or been struck with something dangerous and sharp.

Inside that hazy white light that he knew was there even with his eyes closed, Oghi thought about whether he was going to survive, and, if this was the shape he had to live in now, what he should do, and whether he wanted to live anyway.

He brooded over what the doctor had said. He floundered back and forth between the pessimism of ‘exercise willpower’ and the optimism of ‘a little more.’ But he couldn’t help seeing more meaning in the adverbial phrase than in the imperative. Didn’t it mean he would be okay if he just put in a little more effort? If he tried harder, wouldn’t he be able to move his jaw to speak and walk on his own two feet into the examination room? There was no doubt. Oghi was counting on the world of ‘a little more.’ He wanted so badly to live.

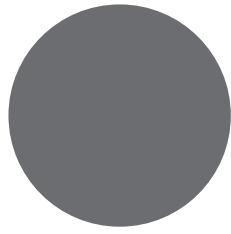
How much time had passed since the checkup? Several days? A few hours? He couldn’t be sure. The inside of his head was fuzzy, as if he were still dreaming, but his eyes smarted from the light. He felt like they’d just been tested for glaucoma, the

light squeezing his pupils was excruciating. Oghi blinked slowly to check that he could still will his eyelids to move. He was relieved to find that part of his brain still responded to his command.

The door made a soft sound as it opened. Someone crept into the room. Oghi watched. The person, who'd come over to the side of his bed now, was dressed in white, and as he watched, its body stretched out long and thin and went up to the ceiling. Oghi stared in fear at the person crouched on the ceiling tiles above him.

It descended slowly toward Oghi. He closed his eyes. He shut them tight. He was determined not to open them. That was the only way he could fight his fear. It couldn't be a hallucination. He'd definitely heard the door open. More than that, the person sticking its face close to Oghi's now gave off a familiar smell.

His wife's smell.



2

WOMEN HAD OFTEN SERVED as turning points in Oghi's life.

That was certainly true of his mother. She'd died when Oghi was ten. Oghi thought at first that her death was caused by illness. She was frequently bedridden and took prescribed pills with every meal.

Oghi didn't realize he was mistaken until after he overheard his relatives whispering in the hospital corridor. His mother had swallowed too many pills at once, causing her organs irreparable damage.

He only got to see his mother one time in the hospital. He couldn't remember whether that was because his father didn't allow him to visit or because her stay was so short. Cables snaked between his mother's prone body and machines attached to the

walls. Sustaining a life seemed to require a tremendous amount of assistance.

Oghi's mother gestured for him to come closer. He couldn't bear to take her hand. A hole had been cut beneath her larynx; a breathing tube inserted there led down into her lungs. He had never seen anything like it before. Instead of taking her hand, he probably burst into tears or froze in fright. He may not have understood exactly what it meant to take your own life, but ten years was still old enough to have a rough idea of it. Seeing his mother in such a terrible state filled him with pity and fear.

His mother's death was Oghi's exit out of childhood. His obtuse, indifferent father either didn't notice the change in him or pretended not to. Oghi stopped caring about anything. He no longer complained about having to eat foods he didn't like or whined about needing to buy a gift to take to a friend's birthday party. He did not stamp his feet at the grocery store because he wanted something. He did not stubbornly insist on reading comic books for hours on end or playing computer games all night. Every now and then his father tried to talk to him. Each time he did, Oghi was reminded of his mother. He saw the hole drilled beneath her larynx, he saw the breathing tube. He couldn't help but clam up.

Problems arose at school that Oghi had no control over. News spread that his mother had killed herself,

and his classmates began bullying him viciously. At the time, he couldn't wrap his brain around why his mother's death should make him a target. Only after much time had passed did Oghi understand that the other children were probably just afraid.

Initially, they simply avoided him without making it obvious. But by turning reticent and failing to join the chattering, giggling crowd, Oghi made it easy for them to bully him.

One day, as Oghi was being shoved around and hit by each of the other kids in turn, he bit one of the boys hard on the leg in defense. Oghi lost a tooth, and the boy lost a chunk of flesh. Oghi's tooth was just a baby tooth, but the boy's leg was left with a permanent dent.

After that no one teased or messed with him anymore. They all whispered that Oghi was as crazy as his mother. To show them just how crazy he was, Oghi would grin at them and then switch to a cold glare.

If Oghi's mother escorted him out of childhood, then his wife led him into the world of adults.

As college graduation loomed, Oghi prepared to enter the job market. This was before the IMF financial crisis, when the schools were still flooded with help wanted ads from businesses. Oghi was eager to get married quickly. His wife said it was too soon. She wanted to go to grad school, and she

wanted Oghi to do the same. Though he knew he would have to live hand-to-mouth doing part-time work while barely covering his tuition and living expenses, he went to grad school anyway without much in the way of a plan. He, too, was looking for any excuse to postpone taking a dead-end office job. He threw away his job applications with no fear or regrets. And if the grad school plan didn't pan out, he could just send his resume out again.

His wife had told him she wanted to be a journalist. She wanted to be a reporter like Oriana Fallachi and do amazing, groundbreaking interviews with famous people. She carried a photo of Fallachi around in her wallet. Not one of her as a war correspondent on a battlefield, nor one of her interviewing Kennedy or Deng Xiaoping. It was a photo of her sitting in front of a typewriter, staring blankly into space, dressed in a stiff Chanel suit and wearing a pearl necklace – a vanity shot, taken for *Vogue* or *Elle* magazine. Oghi had no idea if that ridiculous photo actually depicted the 'journalistic spirit' his wife was always going on about, but he did know that it showed what kind of person his wife really wanted to become.

Back then Oghi looked lovingly on his wife's shallow vanity. She knew exactly what her goals were, and though she believed in them, she failed at nearly everything she set out to do. Yet she brushed off

each failure, hardly any worse for the wear. Then quickly found herself a new role model and extolled their virtues ad nauseam. By doing so, she seemed to come to an understanding of the difference between longing and ambition. While poised to withdraw her opinions, her preferences, and her own will at a moment's notice, she drew a line between what she could let go of and what she would hold on to. Though this tendency made her appear fickle and directionless to others, Oghi found it attractive.

Oghi had a fear of people who prided themselves on following a single path through life, who pursued their goals relentlessly, turning a blind eye to everything but that goal until they achieved it. People like that were so replete with willpower that they readily scoffed at the weak-spined. They criticized those who relied on luck, and they refused to acknowledge even the most trivial of coincidences. They were excessively stubborn and self-righteous, oblivious to how pride could turn into violence, and constantly spoke down to others. They did not hide the fact that they thought they were better than everyone else, and they mocked the sense of loss – of having lost out, been passed over, fallen behind – felt by those who didn't agree with them. Every now and then, they would make a show of being open-minded and magnanimous, their attitude one of grand dispensation, but this came less from a love