

THE BLACK HOLE

Henry Winkle lifted his eyes from the flower bed he was weeding and turned then skyward at the sound of his wife's booming voice, "Henry – lunch is ready!"

He straightened slowly, feeling the strain of benign for too long. Wiping the soil from his hands, he made his way across the lawn to the back door. Phoebe's formidable bulk blocked the entrance. "Shoes," she scowled, "...and wash your hands before you sit down.!"

Henry obeyed silently. As he took his seat at the table, his wife gave a protracted sigh and pointed through the window. He obediently retraced his steps outside and wheeled his old golf bag out of sight behind the shed.

Back in his seat, Phoebe plonked his lunch in front of him. Several peas bounced onto the tablecloth and Henry rescued them and popped them into his mouth, "Normal men use a wheelbarrow but no, not you. For some reason you insist on using that hideous thing." Phoebe reached for the ketchup and shook great dollops over her chips. "I only put up with it because it's the only thing that gets you out doing something useful."

Henry let her drone on. His golf bag was his only souvenir of his wonderful life before he met Phoebe. He had been married to his first wife then and gloriously happy. She had been his best friend and shared his love for golf. A sudden and abrupt illness had taken her from him and torn his world apart.

Phoebe steamrolled into his life at its lowest, most vulnerable, ebb. She took him in hand and reshaped his life, which included selling his beloved golf clubs. Their five year marriage had been loveless and lacking warmth and intimacy. He wondered why he had ever agreed to marry her. Now he was looking at retirement. He stifled a sigh as he cut into his sausages. The future lay ahead of him like a black hole in which Phoebe was waiting to drag him.

Phoebe was a member of the local Am Dram society. Every Thursday evening Henry drove her to the parish hall for their rehearsals. This year, a production of “The Importance of being Earnest” was underway. As usual, Phoebe was cast in the leading role. It wasn’t that she was a gifted actor; it was merely that she was so loud, insistent and no-one dared argue with her. This had had its drawbacks in the past, such as a previous year’s production of “West Side Story”, when she had played a portly sixty-two year old Maria. On the positive side,

everyone agreed that was the best comedy they had ever staged.

On Thursday evening Henry made his last journey home from the office by taxi. He was slightly the worst for wear. He had been surprised by a retirement party for him, which had lasted all afternoon and evening. Henry had had quite a lot to drink, something he wasn't allowed to do at home. The highlight of the day, apart from 12-year old malt, had been the presentation of a gleaming set of new golf clubs, complete with bag and trolley. He had been speechless, so overcome with emotion was he. He hugged his present as the taxi took him homewards. Maybe Phoebe would let him play golf again now - or would she make him sell them? He bristled with alcohol fuelled confidence. Not this time she wouldn't.

She was waiting outside the front door when he got home. As the taxi pulled up, she charged towards it, “..and where do you think you’ve been until this time?” She stopped and sniffed, “You’ve been drinking.”

“I retired today.” He reminded her, “They had a bit of a do for me.”

He teetered as he took his wallet out to pay the taxi driver. Phoebe scowled, “So you forgot that it’s my Am Dram night tonight and the dress rehearsal at that? I’m late now thanks to you, you selfish little drunkard.”

The taxi driver exchanged a look with Henry as he took the money, “Good luck mate!” Henry smiled sheepishly. He went to the back of the taxi and dragged his present out. As the taxi sped off, he stood and faced his wife. She was staring; mouth agape, at the golf clubs. “And what is that?” she said in a low dangerous voice.

He rocked on his heels, “golf clubs.” Her lip curled, “I can see they’re golf clubs.” She snarled, “What are they doing with you?”

“They’re mine, “he offered, “The office bought them for my retirement.”

Phoebe started to laugh, “What for? You’ll not need them. I’ll got plenty of jobs lived up for you now you’ve retired. You’ll not have any time for that nonsense.” She added, “Leave them in the garage for tonight. You can put them on eBay tomorrow.”

“No you will not.” Henry barely recognised his own voice. Phoebe’s jaw dropped in surprise but she

recovered quickly, “Oh, I think you will, Henry Winkle. Get in that house now!”

Before he could object, Phoebe grabbed him and began to propel him towards the house. Beyond the open door, the interior was in darkness. Henry began to struggle in mounting panic. It was his worst fear...the black hole waiting to engulf him.

Henry puffed as he wheeled his old golf bag up to the car. His neighbour walked up the drive to help, “Hello Henry. Off to the tip? Here, I’ll give you a hand.” Between them they heaved it into the boot. The neighbour wiped his brow, “Phew. That weighs a ton.”

Henry chuckled. “Last time I’ll be doing this,” he said, “No more gardening for me from now on. I’ll be spending all my time on the golf course now. I retired yesterday, you see.”

His neighbour laughed. “Well good for you Henry. You’ve always hated gardening!” He nodded towards the boot, “It’s about time you got rid of the old bag!”

Henry smiled.

He couldn’t have agreed more.