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He was something out of a nightmare but his music was straight from heaven. He was a ragged little man out of a hole but he was

*money in the bank to Stanley's four-piece combo. He was—
whoops!...*

The Holes and John Smith

By Edward W. Ludwig

Illustration by Kelly Freas

It all began on a Saturday night at *The Space Room*. If you've seen any recent Martian travel folders, you know the place: "A picturesque oasis of old Martian charm, situated on the beautiful Grand Canal in the heart of Marsport. Only half a mile from historic Chandler Field, landing site of the first Martian expedition nearly fifty years ago in 1990. A visitor to the hotel, lunch room or cocktail lounge will thrill at the sight of hardy space pioneers mingling side by side with colorful Martian tribesmen. An evening at *The Space Room* is an amazing, unforgettable experience."

Of course, the folders neglect to add that the most amazing aspect is the scent of the Canal's stagnant water—and that the most unforgettable experience is seeing the "root-of-all-evil" evaporate from your pocketbook like snow from the Great Red Desert.

We were sitting on the bandstand of the candle-lit cocktail lounge. Me—Jimmie Stanley—and my four-piece combo. Maybe you've seen our motto back on Earth: "The Hottest Music This Side of Mercury."

But there weren't four of us tonight. Only three. Ziggy, our bass fiddle man, had nearly sliced off two fingers while opening a can of Saturnian ice-fish, thus decreasing the number of our personnel by a tragic twenty-five per cent.

Which was why Ke-teeli, our boss, was descending upon us with all the grace of an enraged Venusian vinosaur.

"Where ees museek?" he shrilled in his nasal tenor. He was almost skeleton thin, like most Martians, and so tall that if he fell down he'd be half way home.

I gulped. "Our bass man can't be here, but we've called the Marsport local for another. He'll be here any minute."

Ke-teeli, sometimes referred to as Goon-Face and The Eye, leered coldly down at me from his eight-foot-three. His eyes were like black needle points set deep in a mask of dry, ancient, reddish leather.

"Ees no feedle man, ees no job," he squeaked.

I sighed. This was the week our contract ended. Goon-Face had displayed little enough enthusiasm for our music as it was. His comments were either, "Ees too loud, too fast," or "Ees too slow, too soft." The real cause of his concern being, I suspected, the infrequency with which his cash register tinkled.

"But," I added, "even if the new man doesn't come, *we're* still here. We'll play for you." I glanced at the conglomeration of uniformed spacemen, white-suited tourists, and loin-clothed natives who sat at ancient stone tables. "You wouldn't want to disappoint your customers, would you?"

Ke-teeli snorted. "Maybe ees better dey be deesappointed. Ees better no museek den bad museek."

Fat Boy, our clarinetist who doubles on Martian horn-harp, made a feeble attempt at optimism. "Don't worry, Mr. Ke-teeli. That new bass man will be here."

"Sure," said Hammer-Head, our red-haired vibro-drummer. "I think I hear him coming now."

Suspiciously, Ke-teeli eyed the entrance. There was only silence. His naked, parchment-like chest swelled as if it were an expanding balloon.

"Five meenutes!" he shrieked. "Eef no feedle, den you go!" And he whirled away.

We waited.

Fat Boy's two hundred and eighty-odd pounds were drooped over his chair like the blubber of an exhausted, beach-stranded whale.

"Well," he muttered, "there's always the uranium pits of Neptune. Course, you don't live more than five years there—"

"Maybe we could make it back to Lunar City," suggested Hammer-Head.

"Using what for fare?" I asked. "Your brains?"

Hammer-Head groaned. "No. I guess it'll have to be the black pits of Neptune. The home of washed-up interplanetary musicians. It's too bad. We're so young, too."

The seconds swept by. Ke-teeli was casting his razor-edged glare in our direction. I brushed the chewed finger nails from the keyboard of my electronic piano.

Then it happened.



From the entrance of *The Space Room* came a thumping and a grating and a banging. Suddenly, sweeping across the dance floor like a cold wind, was a bass fiddle, an enormous black monstrosity, a refugee from a pawnbroker's attic. It was queerly shaped. It was too tall, too wide. It was more like a monstrous, midnight-black hour-glass than a bass.

The fiddle was not unaccompanied as I'd first imagined. Behind it, streaking over the floor in a waltz of agony, was a little guy, an animated matchstick with a flat, broad face that seemed to have been compressed in a vice. His sandcolored mop of hair reminded me of a field of dry grass, the long strands forming loops that flanked the sides of his face.

His pale blue eyes were watery, like twin pools of fog. His tightfitting suit, as black as the bass, was something off a park bench. It was impossible to guess his age. He could have been anywhere between twenty and forty.

The bass thumped down upon the bandstand.

"Hello," he puffed. "I'm John Smith, from the Marsport union." He spoke shrilly and rapidly, as if anxious to conclude the routine of introductions. "I'm sorry I'm late, but I was working on my plan."

A moment's silence.

"Your plan?" I echoed at last.

"How to get back home," he snapped as if I should have known it already.

Hummm, I thought.

My gaze turned to the dance floor. Goon-Face had his eyes on us, and they were as cold as six Indians going South.

"We'll talk about your plan at intermission," I said, shivering. "Now, we'd better start playing. John, do you know *On An Asteroid With You?*"

"I know *everything*," said John Smith.

I turned to my piano with a shudder. I didn't dare look at that horrible fiddle again. I didn't dare think what kind of soul-chilling tones might emerge from its ancient depths.

And I didn't dare look again at the second monstrosity, the one named John Smith. I closed my eyes and plunged into a four-bar intro.

Hammer-Head joined in on vibro-drums and Fat Boy on clarinet, and then—

My eyes burst open. A shiver coursed down my spine like gigantic mice feet.

The tones that surged from that monstrous bass were ecstatic. They were out of a jazzman's Heaven. They were great rolling clouds that seemed to envelop the entire universe with their vibrance. They held a depth and a volume and a richness that were astounding, that were like no others I'd ever heard.

First they went *Boom-de-boom-de-boom-de-boom*, and then, *boom-de-de-boom-de-de-boom-de-de-boom*, just like the tones of all bass fiddles.

But there was something else, too. There were overtones, so that John wasn't just playing a single note, but a whole chord with each beat. And the fullness, the depth of those incredible chords actually set my blood tingling. I could *feel* the tingling just as one can feel the vibration of a plucked guitar string.

I glanced at the cash customers. They looked like weary warriors getting their first glimpse of Valhalla. Gap-jawed and wide-eyed, they seemed in a kind of ecstatic hypnosis. Even the silent, bland-faced Martians stopped sipping their wine-syrup and nodded their dark heads in time with the rhythm.

I looked at The Eye. The transformation of his gaunt features was miraculous. Shadows of gloom dissolved and were replaced by a black-toothed, crescent-

shaped smile of delight. His eyes shone like those of a kid seeing Santa Claus.

We finished *On An Asteroid With You*, modulated into *Sweet Sally from Saturn* and finished with *Tighten Your Lips on Titan*.

We waited for the applause of the Earth people and the shrilling of the Martians to die down. Then I turned to John and his fiddle.

"If I didn't hear it," I gasped, "I wouldn't believe it!"

"And the fiddle's so old, too!" added Hammer-Head who, although sober, seemed quite drunk.

"Old?" said John Smith. "Of course it's old. It's over five thousand years old. I was lucky to find it in a pawnshop. Only it's not a fiddle but a *Zloomph*. This is the only one in existence." He patted the thing tenderly. "I tried the hole in it but it isn't the right one."

I wondered what the hell he was talking about. I studied the black, mirror-like wood. The aperture in the vesonator was like that of any bass fiddle.

"Isn't right for what?" I had to ask.

He turned his sad eyes to me. "For going home," he said.

Hummm, I thought.



We played. Tune after tune. John knew them all, from the latest pop melodies to a swing version of the classic *Rhapsody of The Stars*. He was a quiet guy during the next couple of hours, and getting more than a few words from him seemed as hard as extracting a tooth. He'd stand by his fiddle—I mean, his *Zloomph*—with a dreamy expression in those watery eyes, staring at nothing.

But after one number he studied Fat Boy's clarinet for a moment. "Nice clarinet," he mused. "Has an unusual hole in the front."

Fat Boy scratched the back of his head. "You—you mean here? Where the music comes out?"

John Smith nodded. "Unusual."

Hummm, I thought again.

Awhile later I caught him eyeing my piano keyboard. "What's the matter, John?"

He pointed.

"Oh, there," I said. "A cigarette fell out of my ashtray, burnt a hole in the key. If The Eye sees it, he'll swear at me in seven languages."

"Even there," he said softly, "even there...."

There was no doubt about it. John Smith was peculiar, but he was the best bass man this side of a musician's Nirvana.

It didn't take a genius to figure out our situation. Item one: Goon-Face's countenance had evidenced an excellent imitation of Mephistopheles before John began to play. Item two: Goon-Face had beamed like a kitten with a quart of cream after John began to play.

Conclusion: If we wanted to keep eating, we'd have to persuade John Smith to join our combo.

At intermission I said, "How about a drink, John? Maybe a shot of wine-syrup?"

He shook his head.

"Then maybe a Venusian fizz?"

His grunt was negative.

"Then some old-fashioned beer?"

He smiled. "Yes, I *like* beer."

I escorted him to the bar and assisted him in his arduous climb onto a stool.

"John," I ventured after he'd taken an experimental sip, "where have you been hiding? A guy like you should be playing every night."

John yawned. "Just got here. Figured I might need some money so I went to the union. Then I worked on my plan."

"Then you need a job. How about playing with us steady? We like your style a lot."

He made a long, low humming sound which I interpreted as an expression of intense concentration. "I don't know," he finally drawled.

"It'd be a steady job, John." Inspiration struck me. "And listen, I have an apartment. It's got everything, solar shower, automatic chef, 'copter landing—if we ever get a 'copter. Plenty of room there for two people. You can stay with me and it won't cost you a cent. And we'll even pay you over union wages."

His watery gaze wandered lazily to the bar mirror, down to the glittering array of bottles and then out to the dance floor.

He yawned again and spoke slowly, as if each word were a leaden weight cast reluctantly from his tongue:

"No, I don't ... care much ... about playing."

"What *do* you like to do, John?"

His string-bean of a body stiffened. "I like to study ancient history ... and I must work on my plan."

Oh Lord, that plan again!

I took a deep breath. "Tell me about it, John. It *must* be interesting."

He made queer clicking noises with his mouth that reminded me of a mechanical toy being wound into motion. "The whole foundation of this or any other culture is based on the history of all the time dimensions, each interwoven with the other, throughout the ages. And the holes provide a means of studying all of it first hand."

Oh, oh, I thought. *But you still have to eat. Remember, you still have to eat.*

"Trouble is," he went on, "there are so many holes in this universe."

"Holes?" I kept a straight face.

"Certainly. Look around you. All you see is holes. These beer bottles are just holes surrounded by glass. The doors and windows—they're holes in walls. The mine tunnels make a network of holes under the desert. Caves are holes, animals live in holes, our faces have holes, clothes have holes—millions and millions of holes!"

I winced and thought, humor him because you gotta eat, you gotta eat.

His voice trembled with emotion. "Why, they're everywhere. They're in pots and pans, in pipes, in rocket jets, in bumpy roads. There are buttonholes and well holes, and shoelace holes. There are doughnut holes and stocking holes and woodpecker holes and cheese holes. Oceans lie in holes in the earth, and rivers and canals and valleys. The craters of the Moon are holes. Everything is—"

"But, John," I said as patiently as possible, "what have these holes got to do with you?"

He glowered at me as if I were unworthy of such a confidence. "What have they to do with me?" he shrilled. "I can't find the right one—that's what!"

I closed my eyes. "Which particular hole are you looking for, John?"

He was speaking rapidly again now.

"I was hurrying back to the University with the *Zloomph* to prove a point of ancient history to those fools. They don't believe that instruments which make music actually existed before the tapes! It was dark—and some fool researcher had forgotten to set a force-field over the hole—I fell through."

I closed my eyes. "Now wait a minute. Did you drop something, lose it in the hole—is that why you have to find it?"

"Oh I didn't lose anything important," he snapped, "*just* my own time dimension. And if I don't get back they will think I couldn't prove my theory, that I'm ashamed to come back, and I'll be discredited."

His chest sagged for an instant. Then he straightened. "But there's still time for my plan to work out—with the relative difference taken into account. Only I get so tired just thinking about it."

"Yes, I can see where thinking about it would tire any one."

He nodded. "But it can't be too far away."

"I'd like to hear more about it," I said. "But if you're not going to play with us—"

"Oh, I'll play with you," he beamed. "I can talk to *you*. *You* understand."

Thank heaven!



Heaven lasted for just three days. During those seventy-two golden hours the melodious tinkling of The Eye's cash register was as constant as that of Santa's sleigh bells.

John became the hero of tourists, spacemen, and Martians, but nevertheless he remained stubbornly aloof. He was quiet, moody, playing his *Zloomph* automatically. He'd reveal definite indications of belonging to Homo Sapiens only when drinking beer and talking about his holes.

Goon-Face was still cautious.

"Contract?" he wheezed. "Maybe. We see. Eef feedleman stay, we have contract. He stay, yes?"

"Oh, sure," I said. "He'll stay—just as long as you want him."

"Den he sign contract, too. No beeg feedle, no contract."

"Sure. We'll get him to sign it." I laughed hollowly. "Don't worry, Mr. Ke-teeli."

Just a few minutes later tragedy struck.

A reporter from the *Marsport Times* ambled into interview the Man of The Hour. The interview, unfortunately, was conducted over the bar and accompanied by a generous guzzling of beer. Fat Boy, Hammer-Head and I watched from a table. Knowing John as we did, a silent prayer was in our eyes.

"This is the first time he's talked to anybody," Fat Boy breathed. "I—I'm scared.

"Nothing can happen," I said, optimistically. "This'll be good publicity."

We watched.

John murmured something. The reporter, a paunchy, balding man, scribbled furiously in his notebook.

John yawned, muttered something else. The reporter continued to scribble.

John sipped beer. His eyes brightened, and he began to talk more rapidly.

The reporter frowned, stopped writing, and studied John curiously.

John finished his first beer, started on his second. His eyes were wild, and he was talking more and more rapidly.

"He's doing it," Hammer-Head groaned. "He's telling him!"

I rose swiftly. "We better get over there. We should have known better—"

We were too late. The reporter had already slapped on his hat and was striding to the exit. John turned to us, dazed, his enthusiasm vanishing like air from a punctured balloon.

"He wouldn't listen," he said, weakly. "I tried to tell him, but he said he'd come back when I'm sober. I'm sober now. So I quit. I've got to find my hole."

I patted him on the back. "No, John, we'll help you. Don't quit. We'll—well, we'll help you."

"We're working on a plan, too," said Fat Boy in a burst of inspiration. "We're going to make a more scientific approach."

"How?" John asked.

Fat Boy gulped.

"Just wait another day," I said. "We'll have it worked out. Just be patient another day. You can't leave now, not after all your work."

"No, I guess not," he sighed. "I'll stay—until tomorrow."



All night the thought crept through my brain like a teasing spider: *What can we do to make him stay? What can we tell him? What, what, what?*

Unable to sleep the next morning, I left John to his snoring and went for an aspirin and black coffee. All the possible schemes were drumming through my mind: finding an Earth blonde to capture John's interest, having him electrohypnotized, breaking his leg, forging a letter from this mythical university telling him his theory was proved valid and for him to take a nice long vacation now. He was a screwball about holes and force fields and dimensional worlds but for that music of his I'd baby him the rest of his life.

It was early afternoon when I trudged back to my apartment.

John was squatting on the living room floor, surrounded by a forest of empty

beer bottles. His eyes were bulging, his hair was even wilder than usual, and he was swaying.

"John!" I cried. "You're drunk!"

His watery eyes squinted at me. "No, not drunk. Just scared. I'm awful scared!"

"But you mustn't be scared. That reporter was just stupid. We'll help you with your theory."

His body trembled. "No, it isn't that. It isn't the reporter."

"Then what is it, John?"

"It's my body. It's—"

"Yes, what about your body? Are you sick?"

His face was white with terror. "No, my—*my body's full of holes*. Suppose it's one of those holes! How will I get back if it is?"

He rose and staggered to his *Zloomph*, clutching it as though it were somehow a source of strength and consolation.

I patted him gingerly on the arm. "Now John. You've just had too much beer, that's all. Let's go out and get some air and some strong black coffee. C'mon now."

We staggered out into the morning darkness, the three of us. John, the *Zloomph*, and I.

I was hanging on to him trying to see around and over and even under the *Zloomph*—steering by a sort of radar-like sixth sense. The street lights on Marsport are pretty dim compared to Earthside. I didn't see the open manhole that the workmen had figured would be all right at that time of night. It gets pretty damned cold around 4: A.M. of a Martian morning, and I guess the men were warming up with a little nip at the bar across the street.

Then—he was gone.

John just slipped out of my grasp—*Zloomph* and all—and was gone—completely and irrevocably gone. I even risked a broken neck and jumped in the manhole after him. Nothing—nothing but the smell of ozone and an echo bouncing crazily off the walls of the conduit.

"—is it.—is it.—is it.—is it."

John Smith was gone, so utterly and completely and tragically gone it was as if he'd never existed....



Tonight is our last night at *The Space Room*. Goon-Face is scowling again with the icy fury of a Plutonian monsoon. As Goon-Face has said, "No beeg feedle, no contract."

Without John, we're notes in a lost chord.

We've searched everything, in hospitals, morgues, jails, night clubs, hotels. We've hounded spaceports and 'copter terminals. Nowhere, nowhere is John Smith.

Ziggy, whose two fingers have healed, has already bowed to what seems inevitable. He's signed up for that trip to Neptune's uranium pits. There's plenty of room for more volunteers, he tells us. But I spend my time cussing the guy who forgot to set the force field at the other end of the hole and let John and his *Zloomph* back into his own time dimension. I cuss harder when I think how we were robbed of the best bass player in the galaxy.

And without a corpus delecti we can't even sue the city.

... THE END

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