

excerpts from **The Hole Family**
Kristen Nelson

Button

Button is the only button in the Hole Family. He doesn't say much because when he opens his angry mouth, big black crows fly out.

When Button is alone—really, really alone—he sings Opera. His favorite is Madam Butterfly and when he sings Swallowtails, Mazarine Blues, Camberwell Beauties, and Monarchs fly out of his mouth. Forgetting to migrate, forgetting to pollinate, forgetting to die when their short lives are over, they simply float moving in tune to his sad, sad songs.

Button took mushrooms once in high school while his parents were on a big fancy trip. He thought he could force the butterflies to come out in public instead of crows. Instead, he finally understood with the help of a fungus, that Satan sent those crows, that Satan was buried deep inside his guts. Satan's wings were charred and black, no longer beautiful, and he would only consciously create black-winged creatures from Button's stomach. The butterflies were the subconscious bits of beauty that even Satan couldn't prevent escaping when Opera soothed him to sleep. Button tried to cut Satan out of his stomach with a kitchen knife.

Princess called the cops and was credited with saving Button's life. Button barked crows for days at anyone who came close. He knew he missed his one chance to live a Satan-free life.

Sprite

Sprite is not a little girl anymore. She is ten and was saved two weeks ago in her best friend's church. The Holy Spirit came to her, a visitor in the congregation, before He ever entered her best friend. She was sitting in a pew while her best friend's family stood waving their arms and crying. She felt a bright white force reach down and pull her up to stand on the pew. She sobbed and waved her arms and the Holy Spirit spoke through her. "Alabala, alabala, walla comma, alabomma, prima la la." Then she passed out.

When Sprite woke, the preacher stood over her with her best friend. "Young lady, do you accept Jesus Christ, the son of our one true God, into your heart as your personal savior?"

She thought, *I'm a young lady*. She tried hard to remember if she ever met Jesus. "Yes," she squeaked.

"Thank you, Jesus! Praise the Lord! We know you, Father, and thank you!" The preacher cried.

Her best friend's family petted Sprite's head and took her out for crab cakes and shrimp cocktail after church, but her best friend wouldn't talk to her. She said, "I can't be your best friend any more." All week at school, her former best friend hung out with other girls, who all snickered behind their hands when Sprite walked by. But that Sunday at church, the Holy Spirit spoke through her former best friend, "Alabala, alabala, walla comma, prima la la," and thank you Jesus, they could be best friends again.

Sprite told Blanket all about her experience at church, about the Holy Spirit, about her new friend Jesus, about the dramatic circumstances that had almost ended her friendship, and about how she was now a young lady. Blanket told Sprite that she couldn't go to church anymore and when the Holy Spirit tried to speak through Sprite again in Blanket's kitchen, it only got as far as, "Alabala, alabala..." before Blanket splashed Him out of Sprite with a cold glass of water in the face.

Sprite got very, very angry and yelled, "You can't get between me and Jesus! I'm not a little girl anymore."

Sprite ran into her room to talk to Jesus for a while. When he didn't answer, she got bored and ran outside to play checkers with Harold in the Airstream.

Blanket

Blanket spends a lot of time with children and over the years she has collected many kids. Neighborhood kids, students at her school, friends' kids, neighbors' kids, lovers' kids, international kids. The friends go, the neighbors move, the lovers leave, the countries splinter in civil war, but the kids stick around, move in, or at least keep in touch with Christmas cards.

Kids trust her. Blanket runs a school that is more like a family than a business. There is little thought of money and budgets. Mostly, she looks at kids and figures out what they need. The kids at the school give her long deep hugs, and when they are older and wearing baggy jeans bagging groceries at the grocery store, they still hug her.

Blanket trusts kids more than adults. Parents are sometimes a problem, especially if she tells them that their kids need help with something—like backwards letters, or auditory problems, or attention deficits. It's the kids themselves that show her these problems, so she can't ignore them, and she won't let their parents either.

Adults trust her, too, because she is shorter than almost all of them. She makes the experience of going to the DMV pretty good for those around her. She'll start listening to you and all of a sudden your number is up. You won't know much about her except maybe that she runs a school if you bring up kids, but she will know and make you feel better about all of your great tragedies.

Blanket has no problem sticking her nose where it doesn't belong. One day at the mall with several of the young cousins buying knock-off Trapper Keepers and crayons and erasable pens, she watched as an angry young man dragged a crying kid into the men's room. She heard yelling and then the crying stopped. She told all of the young cousins to "wait right here" in a voice that made all of them crowd onto a bench together and sit very still.

She marched into the men's room and a few minutes later she came out holding hands with a small boy who was now crying silently and had several large red welts on his face. She walked up to the young cousins and sat the little boy down on the bench with them. He sat and softly tapped his fingers and palms on the bench until he stopped crying. Sprite said, "You must be a musician." And handed him her tootsie roll pop. It was almost to the center, but she didn't mind when he bit right in and smiled at her. She held his hand as they walked to the car. Musician was now the youngest of the young cousins.

Blanket used to do a lot of drugs of the natural sort. When she married, she married a cop not a hippie. This was a tough decision for her, but his eyes were wounded and blue. She got lost, when staring into those eyes in candlelight he told her that he loved kids and wanted “a gaggle of them.”

Blanket parked the Airstream permanently in the backyard of a house in the suburbs after their wedding. For their one year wedding anniversary, the cop set up a jungle jim in the backyard next to the Airstream. A few years later they had their first baby. A few years later Blanket miscarried triplets. She birthed them in the bathroom in the middle of the night, by herself, while the cop was off making detective. The detective lasted for one more birth. His wounds took over the older he got, and sad but resigned, she helped him pack and walk away. Blanket never married again. Some nights, after all the kids were in bed asleep, she sat swinging on the jungle jim, smoking a joint, staring at the Airstream.

Addict

Addict would rather stay in her dreams than wake up. In her dreams there is an element of control and joy. In her dreams there is a lover. He loves her. Really loves her. He is beautiful, trim, smart, passionate, funny. They tickle and roll around in a nest of sex. In her dreams, Addict never has to say good-bye.

Some days, Blanket walks into Addict's dark bedroom. She places a mug of coffee on her bedside table, kisses her forehead, and closes the door softly on her way out.

In Addict's dreams there is no reason to eat. Her stomach shrinks. Her body is the right size and that size is small. There is no cream instead of skim milk to put in her coffee. There is no cheese to cut into too big pieces. There is no oil in which to drench healthy vegetables. There is no bread. Her thighs don't shake, there are no stretch marks behind her knees, no jiggley arms to not wave with. She stays empty and in control and without hunger.

Some days, Sprite walks into Addict's bedroom, curls up beside her, and whispers a Hail Mary into her ear. Once, Sprite pressed a small St. Christopher medallion into Addict's palm, wished her safe travels, and closed the door softly on her way out.

Addict does not dream in wine, beer, or tequila. There is no haze that clouds her eyes. Her nose doesn't ever go numb. She doesn't ever stand up and fall back down. She doesn't ever find herself mixing tears and vomit into the toilet.

Some days, a man is in her bedroom—nameless and always in the process of leaving. He finds his clothes while she pretends to sleep and ignores the smell of stale beer and smoke filling her room and her sheets. He winces as he trips and closes the door softly on his way out.

Some days, Harold walks into Addict's bedroom after knocking. She says "come in" and sits up with her hair a mess. They don't talk about other members of the Hole Family and neither of them follows particular sports teams. They sit and smoke a few of his cigarettes with the windows and the doors closed. After two or three he says "thank you," and she says "thank you." On these days, Addict cries herself back to dreaming.

Musician

Musician spent most days at Blanket's house overturning buckets, banging on them with ladles, and entertaining anyone who would listen. For his tenth birthday, Blanket gave Musician her old guitar. He learns how to play, grows up, and travels to France. He will learn very few words of French—s'il vous plea, ou et la Bibliotech, merci. He will use these on the subway while he bangs sticks loudly on overturned buckets and plays his guitar. He gets easily lost in the music and stays in the subway long after the other buskers collect their coins.

Most of the money Musician collects in his overturned black hat, he spends on strings for his guitar and croissants in the morning if he remembers to eat. He also buys international stamps that he puts on envelopes marked "par avion" that he sends back to America, to the girl he has loved since she shared her lollipop.

Musician writes from Paris promising to marry Sprite once he makes it big, makes an album, or at least makes real music. Sprite writes back promising to wait.

One week Sprite does not receive a letter from Musician. Every night that week she dreamt of the angry young man in the mall on the day that Musician became the youngest cousin. At the end of the second week when no letter arrived, she knew not to expect any more.

Eventually a letter arrived from Paris that is not from Musician. The letter informed the Hole Family that Musician's head was bashed in with a blunt object on the subway. The writer of the awful letter, another busker, is sorry. Whoever killed him, stole his hat and guitar. On that day, Sprite moved into the Airstream. She stopped going Out There. Every morning she coated her hands with Dove and then Eucerin, thinking of her dead grandmother. Every afternoon she cried quietly, thinking of her dead grandfather. Every evening, she set up the checkerboard and stared at it without making a move, thinking of her dead friend Harold.

Something slowly changed in the Hole Family. Seven weeks after that awful letter about Musician, Addict walked into the trailer freshly showered, placed a worn St. Christopher medal in the middle of the checkerboard, and closed the door softly on the way out of the Airstream. That same night, Lagrimas ripped up her long list and invited her sister over for a perfect Martini with a twist. That same night, Button burped up Satan. That same night, late that night, Blanket woke up Sprite, ushered her out of the Airstream while dousing everything with gasoline, lit a joint, and handed Sprite the burning match.