



## Lost and Found

*Claudia Torres Garibay*

There was a hole in his life, although his life was whole. The feeling of ‘something missing’ was a constant presence, along every material possession that any young man of his generation could wish for a more than comfortable life. The first time he actually experienced scarcity was the day when he ran out of toilet paper. Then he lost his balance and a small corner of his tooth when looking for another roll. The furloughs came short after, and he lost one fifth of his income. He shortened his showers, unscrewed some light bulbs, cut off junk food, and limited his screen time as ways to balance out his reduced budget. Lockdown helped him to save further, although he missed the regular opportunities to socialize with his friends. He found himself with more time to finish that puzzle and the book that he received for Christmas, and to chat to Ikah, his landlady. Masks were a welcome addition to his outfit that would allow him to cover his chipped tooth. Life was morphing in front of his eyes, and the feeling of something missing was transforming into physical sensations. In his furloughed day he noticed the songs of the birds amidst more quiet streets. Removing his mask at the end of the day allowed him to perceive the smell from home—who would have said that homes had a smell? His tongue explored the new profile of his tooth and was also rediscovering the flavor of raw vegetables that replaced unhealthy snacks in his diet. Other than that, his routine was mostly undisturbed. Isolation and physical distance were so welcome for his introvert personality. This was a life he liked, until he realized that he was not able to see the Ikah’s smile when she served clients in the coffee shop downstairs. She was about his mother’s age, but his platonic admiration for her and her car made him wish that in due time he could meet someone that would smile at him the way she did to her customers, and he could drive a car like hers. But now she was wearing a mask. Oh, how he missed her smile! How long would it be until he would be able to see her smile again? Hopefully not too long. Behind her mask he could see her eyes with an expression that grew in sadness as less and less people stopped by her counter as weeks went by. One day Ikah’s car was gone. Shortly after the coffee shop closed for good and Ikah stopped coming by. This was the first day he worked from home. How he missed the coffee, his daily short commute, his workplace! The feeling of something missing was now a reality, and somehow this gave him a sense of closure. It was as if shed tears would find a reason for grief or if a sense of wariness would find justification in tragedy. There was sadness and completeness in the days that followed. An unknown strength was growing in his heart, just in time for the real challenge.

Learning about Ikah’s sudden passing was a shock to his inner core. The announcement was accompanied by a request to pack everything in the coffee shop and in his furnished rented studio, along with an eviction notice. Apparently, this had been her last wish. How could he say no when Ikah had been so nice to him and when there was a legal notice? The two-floor dwelling was not large; however, going over familiar places that belonged to someone so loving and no longer in this world was taxing to his soul. He had not lived there for too long, but every item made him nostalgic. He wondered if Ikah would approve of his packing. Time was limited. He took days off from work. Ikah’s possessions deserved to have a good send-off, although he suspected that most of them would be unceremoniously disposed. Ikah’s family had already disconnected the internet service and utilities at the coffee shop; they seemed to be in a hurry to take ownership of the place. They gave him precise instructions on how to prepare everything for the movers; everything had to go. He took care of all her possessions, and on the last day packed his. With an empty place, he experienced true fulfillment for the first time in his life. Ikah’s son came to receive the keys and handed him a sealed envelope. “My mother asked me to give you ten minutes by yourself while you read this. I’ll wait outside.” He was moved by this detail. Ikah often left inspirational notes for him. How touching that she left him a last one! He expected something longer than a regular note since he would have ten minutes to read it. However, the note contained only one word: “Hole.” “Hole? Is there a typo? Did she mean ‘HOLA’ instead of ‘HOLE’?” he questioned himself. “Is it really ‘hole’? Is it ‘hole’ as in ‘hole in the heart’? Is it ‘hole’ as in ‘empty’? Is it ‘hole’ as in ‘something is missing’?” “Is it ‘hole’ as in ... ‘hole’?” He ran upstairs and lifted the loose tile in front of his studio door. This was the secret hiding place where Ikah left her notes for him, as the one that read: “Only one letter is needed to transform ‘hole’ in ‘whole’” along with a roll of toilet paper. There it was, another roll of toilet paper with an address written on it. He departed in a cab with his everything he owned towards the address listed on the roll. Ikah’s car was parked in the middle of a mechanic shop. When the shop clerk saw a young man with a suitcase, a backpack, a roll of toilet paper on his hand, and a puzzled expression, he knew it was the time to turn the car over to its new owner.

