

THE QUARRY

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Direct Line

The first chapter of a young adult fiction novel (in the making) which explores the contention between fate and free will. Temperance Broadfoot begins life with a special gift. One given to her by an accident at birth. Temperance has the power to communicate with Steve, the all-powerful Creator of Life. In her quest to find her place in the world and become the person she want to be she finds that having a direct line to the big man upstairs is not as useful as it sounds. Especially when the decaying world she lives in is looking for a scapegoat.

Chapter 1

‘Could all persons with a Green Card please proceed to Gate number Ten? I repeat, Green Cards to Gate Ten,’ the disembodied voice said, its instructions echoing around the cloud filled arena. Green Card Number 62498365-2Alpha stared at the trait selection card in her hands. An A4 puce coloured card; empty boxes and nothing to show for her time so far. She had not really been listening to Steve the Creator or any of the other orientation seminars, and now realised that her inattentiveness may be the start of her downfall. She glanced furtively around at all the other faces. They were all shiny and

new, like polished belt buckles. On her left stood another Green Card. Her honey coloured hair seemed attuned to the light emanating from the luminescent stars above and below her. Her green robes flowed behind her, as she stood still gazing, ethereal, at the centre of the arena. Alpha stared, envious. Honey blonde began to take steps towards Gate Ten, which appeared like a sentinel on the far side of the arena, huge neon numbers flashing above it.

‘Um, excuse me...’ Alpha began.

Honey blonde turned. She had penetrating blue eyes that glowed like sapphires. She smiled like liquid, lips melting into the softness of her precise chin.

‘Do you...um...I mean... Hi first,’ she stammered. ‘...and then do you know where Gate Ten is?’ Alpha began, grossly aware of her lack of finesse. Around her bustled other bodies, Greens and Blues, all moving like waves from the orientation buildings on the far northern end of the arena. Around her now she could make out sounds of white noise taking on voices:

‘I think I’m going to put in for Generosity...’

‘Oh no, you want Ambition, trust me my boy.’

‘...who would want Greed?...Selfishness?’

‘I think Seductive might come in handy Down There, know what I mean...’

‘Ha! Compassion! As if... ‘

‘Hello?’ said the voice closest to Alpha, ‘I said, it’s over there, in the far south western corner. Can you see the numbers?’ Honey blonde was pointing, seeming to take on the form of an archaic Roman statue. Her selection sheet was neatly folded in her palm. All filled in with neat crimson ticks and circles.

‘Oh thanks. I ah, it’s all a bit weird you know.’ Alpha failed to mask the awe she felt building within her. She nervously touched her hair remembering with disgust the red dirt colour framing her pudgy pudding face. At the Nationality Rounds, she had pulled out Irish Australian. She had been pleased, but it was now apparent, in the wake of this transcendent blonde beauty that perhaps the crown of red hair sprouting from her skull

like maniacal thought bubbles was not the best start to this Life thing. If there was one thing clear to her at this point in her existence it was that Steve, despite what he has told them all a moment ago, had not created every being equal.

‘I’ll go with you if you like, I’m a Green Card too as you can see.’ Honey Blonde offered her hand to Alpha, ‘What’s your number? I’m 05005Zeta, but just Zeta will do, I’ve not met another Zee so far, but then I’ve only spoken to you and that Blue over there.’ She pointed to a Blue who was slapping other Blues roughly on the back. His black hair and almond-shaped eyes suggested he had plucked Korean of some kind from the draw. Lucky for him, Alpha mused, tucking her unruly curls behind her ears.

The two began walking together in no particular hurry and almost immediately the conversation turned to the next round of selections. The final round was to be free of Steve’s influence. Alpha was beginning to feel more certain that this was his way of ensuring all care and no responsibility. She peered at her card again, noting the heading in big chunky lettering ‘Free Will’. She would now need to make the final choices that could make or break her whole life. She recalled now, the first educational film she’d been shown, merely hours after her conception. The large theatre had seated a million or more. There has been speeches from alumni, those who had returned from Life and a whole bunch of boring orientation information, most of which she had successfully tuned out. In the final educational seminar, they were all shown the one and only film of Steve. Lulling back on a sun lounge, wrapped in a white terry-toweling robe, he grinned confidently from behind his oversized sunnies sipping some kind of blue drink complete with a bright pink umbrella. Suppressing hysterical laughter from behind his shades he warned that all choices would have direct and severe consequences after Birth.

‘Some choices can be altered by where and how you might be born, but for the most part, the qualities you choose, will stay with you throughout your whole life. So choose carefully’ he said, before disrobing, sculling down the beverage and diving into a crystalline blue pool. Alpha had heard that this pretty boy had only ever really worked a week in his whole life, so it was really no surprise that he had obviously very little interest in the whole process.

‘How much longer do you have?’ Zeta asked Alpha, interrupting her from her thoughts.

Alpha checked her Casio. The hands seemed to have moved rapidly from her last check. ‘Holy Crap, I am due for Birth in fourteen minutes! I thought we had days to do this!’ Her heart began to quicken in her chest, the rhythm of a fast moving train. Her head spun. She showed Zeta her watch. Zeta flashed hers back; she had been here a lot longer but still seemed to have hours left. ‘Why is yours going so slow? I don’t get it!’

‘Ok, you need to calm down and remember your training.’

‘Training? What training!’ Alpha stared in disbelief as the minute hand began to speed up. She noticed that the blood in her was draining rapidly to her feet, she felt faint, the seconds ticked rapidly and just when it was all about to go black, a searing pain echoed through her cheek, resting somewhere in the back of her brain. Zeta stood before her open palmed, a look of serenity on her face.

‘You hit me!’

‘I had to; you were going to lose all your time panicking. You have to just calm down, remember what they told us in orientation. Time is relative. It flies when you are excited and anxious and slows down when you are calm or bored. Did you take in nothing?’ Zeta said.

‘Not really, I tried to listen, but it was all so boring.’ Alpha felt the hot sting on her face and glowered at Zeta. Zeta sighed and swiftly grabbed Alpha’s card from her sweaty palm.

‘I see your problem; you were allocated Impulsiveness and Impatience as your two allocated qualities. You are going to have to try and balance that out with some of the other traits before you get Down There or you are probably going to be back here before you can blink’. Zeta roughly flicked the card back to Alpha. Alpha held her card steady examining the information noticing that there had indeed been several qualities already greyed in.

‘I though we got to choose everything?’ she implored.

Zeta sighed. ‘You really didn’t pay any attention in orientation did you?’

Alpha had no time to answer before Zeta's watch began to chime. The overture from *The Nutcracker Suite* began to play from her wrist and both girls looked at it curiously. Steve's grinning head appeared suddenly on the watch face. 'Hey. Look's like someone is about to be born! You better cruise on over to Gate ten my friend and remember, don't eat yellow snow!' The transmission ended and they both looked at each other.

'Well, looks like my Birth is about to happen. Maybe, I'll see you sometime Down There. I think now that we met up here, we are supposed to find each other again Down There.' Zeta's excitement seemed to enhance her beauty even more. Her blue eyes twinkled as she leant in and gave Alpha the tiniest of kisses on the cheek. She smelled of strawberries and summertime and although she promised they would meet, Alpha knew instinctively that Life for her would probably be very different.

Alone again and watching the passing crowds of unnamed individuals, it was painfully clear how little she had prepared for this. Around her, people seemed to be charming and confident. She contemplated just throwing the ridiculous little card away. What good was free will if you were too stupid to figure out what to do with it, Alpha mused. She sat herself down on the nearest cloud and sank deeper into her own distress, when from across the room, a Blue spotted her and began to walk her way. He was an older man, probably late forties. It was then she noted her youthfulness and recalled something about appearing at the prime of your life. This guy was obviously a late bloomer, she noted, whilst dismayed that her own existence seemed to peak at about fifteen, then gradually decline for the remaining years.

'It appears to me, that you could use a little help.' The man stood before her in his blue robe. His silver hair swept grandly off his face, the beginning of wrinkles teased the corners of his eyes as he gazed down at her full of heroic confidence.

'I, um, I didn't really pay much attention at orientation. I have no idea what I'm doing. I'm a complete spaz.' She felt unreasonably obliged to give this man a full confession.

‘Nonsense, just tick in the order you think it best. Start with some Confidence to outweigh this natural Anxiety I can see in you,’ he began, reaching for her card brushing her thumb with his own mighty hand, ‘then see how you feel.’

Alpha poised her little pen and flicked her eyes across the grid until she found a row labeled ‘Confidence.’ Under each heading the scale went from zero to ten. Tentatively she put her pen on the number ten. A light orange mark appeared and she immediately felt better. In fact she felt great. As the tick formed on the ten, her heart pounded with a new sensation. She looked up sharply to this old man before her noticing with glee the deep trenches around his eyes, the wobbly paunch of his belly. ‘I feel amazing!’ she exclaimed. Beaming, she stood up and pushed past the old man who stood decrepit and wounded. She felt as though she was positively drowning in her own brilliance. The man frowned, he snatched the card from her grasp and held her by the shoulders.

‘Now, you should know better than that. Don’t start with tens. You can always go up, but you’ll feel gutted if you start at the maximum and then pull back. I bet you feel like a brand new penny right now, don’t you? Well, you have to remember that this is Life. Confidence is great but... are you even listening to me?’

Alpha could see his lips moving but registered nothing he said. He had, at once, become so boring. ‘Yeah, yeah, all I hear is blah blah blah old man.’

He grimaced. Then taking her card in his hand, and using his own pen, changed her ten to a four.

In seconds her newfound sense of self-amazement vanished. She felt like dirt. She glared at the man, overwhelmed by her own sense of failure.

‘I’m sorry I had to do that to you. But you can’t go around like that in Life. You have to find some balance,’ he said calmly. She hated him, she hated this process and most of all she hated Steve.

‘Ohhh, this Life thing is so much worse than I thought. How the hell am I supposed to choose who I want to be? I have no idea what this place is going to be like. What if I make all the wrong choices? What if I pick things that seem fine here, but are fucking

useless Down There?’ Alpha slumped into an outcrop or clouds. They cushioned her fall, gently enveloping her. ‘This is all bullshit. I’ve got half a mind to tell Steve what a fuck up he has made with this whole...’ No longer had the words popped from her lips when a resounding sharp whistle cracked through her skull. The voice of Steve was like that: a half-tuned frequency, fingernails on a blackboard, the sound a shovel makes on concrete. She nursed her head between her knees and sobbed.

‘Questioning Steve are we now? He has a way of making sure you keep your complaints to yourself,’ the old man grimaced in sympathy. It had been a while since he had questioned Steve and his ears were still ringing with the memory.

‘I wonder if it’s the same Down There, you think Steve knows when you’ve got a gripe?’ Alpha mused. Her ears remained in tact. Questions about Life were not usually a problem, they did, after all, have the same destination.

‘I don’t really know. All I know is, you have about two minutes to make up your mind before you are called. I suggest you stop dallying, my girl.’ The old man held out his hand and helped her to her feet. He brushed her tears away with his finger and smiled warmly. ‘It will all be fine. Just pick three to five traits that you think will make you happy and then wait your turn. There’s no way really of knowing what it will be like for you. It’s different for everyone, or so they told us at orientation. If you had listened.’ He playfully knocked her chin with his knuckle, stood up and disappeared into the crowd. Alpha watched him go making a note of him. She hoped they would meet Down There and felt certain as he left that a part of her went with him.

Right. Think. She told herself resolving to make her choices and be done with it. She stared helplessly at the words: Piety, Humour, Resilience, Tenacity, Spite. There was no division between good and bad qualities and the ten-point scale, as she has just found, was not the easiest way to select. She flipped the card over in her hands again and reread the instructions of the front cover. The idea seemed simple enough, using a forty-point total, she was to select her personality for entry into the world Down There. Her survey card included over one hundred and twenty qualities to choose from which meant a whole lot of deciding. Trying to allay her panic again, she resolved to just begin ticking. She started with Passionate, four points, and suddenly the process seemed so much more

important. She added a little Reluctance, six points, and then, after much convincing and debate, she tentatively rubbed them out. The combination of Excitement with Passion made her show four Blues and two Greens her card in a spin of jubilation, so she removed all but one point of that.

With ten points left unassigned, and debating the merits of being Flippant or Devoted, a panpipe version of a Bee Gees track began to play from her watch. ‘No, no, I’m not done yet!’ she gasped. The tune got louder and began to vibrate on her wrist. Suddenly Steve’s face appeared again, parroting the recorded message she had seen on Zeta’s watch. A baby somewhere needed a soul. Needed a Green Card. Frantically and without another thought she allocated her total points. She ticked Selfish, Greedy and Lazy as her first three, hoping that these would be helpful qualities. Tick by tick, she cared less about the process and more resigned to her eventual fate. Moments later, Doubtful of her future, pregnant with Wanting, and loaded to the teeth with Skepticism she hiked her way across the crowded arena to Gate Ten.

At the gate, an angel greeted her. She was chewing gum and looked bored. ‘I’m 62498365-2Alpha.’ Alpha said, examining the nonchalant figure.

‘Do I look like I give a shit,’ the angel replied, blowing a massive pink bubble that burst and slipped sheepishly back into her mouth. She grinned at Alpha and wordlessly nodded to a guard who stood a few metres away. Alpha contemplated asking this angel about the qualities she had selected, but balked after noting the absent minded way the angel began to stare at sections of her fringe. Taking the cue to leave, Alpha made her way to the bloated guard. ‘I’m 62498365-2Alpha,’ she tried again, hoping that this red-faced balloon may be a little more helpful.

‘That’s just super! Are you all ready to go?’ he replied, his cheeks jiggling with the effort of speaking.

‘I guess so,’ she said.

‘And your soul mate, have you made a meeting spot in Life with them?’

‘My what?’ her eyes widened. ‘I’m sorry. My what?’ she demanded again.

‘Ah geez, don’t tell me you didn’t sort out your meeting place with your soul mate!’ he barked and pulled out a small two way radio. ‘Merv, we got another Green here that hasn’t sorted her SM situation. Copy.’ A crackled voice echoed indecipherable responses to which the guard responded with a wordless nod.

‘Look I’m sorry kid, but you ain’t got time to do nothing about it now. There’s a baby that needs ya.’ The guard paused, removed his hat from his balding head to wipe his brow and looked at Alpha with a rough mixture of pity and boredom. ‘Well, good luck Down There,’ he said.

‘Wait. You said I have a soul mate. What is that? What was I supposed to do?’

‘Look kid, I gotta lotta Births today, my back is killing me and my wife’s about to leave me for the schmuck over at orientation. I don’t have time to deal with your problems,’ he looked away, ‘Next!’

‘No wait! I only met two people here.’

‘Next!’

‘Please, I didn’t make a meeting place with either of them. Is my soul mate one of those?’

‘Next. Kid. It’s time. Adios.’ The guard waved her on, took her card from her clutched and in one swift movement, swiped his access card through some kind of reader. Alpha could feel her legs going out from underneath her. Her memories of orientation, what little there were, began to slip. She felt as though her whole body was imploding, sucking inwards and shrinking. She panicked and reached out for the only thing she could grab as she shrank further and further into what felt like a watery puddle. In one deft movement, she swiped the guards two way radio from his belt and descended into the puddle, the radio seeming to melt into her palm, disappearing somehow into her own flesh.

‘Steve! Help. I don’t know who my soul mate is! Steve!’ she cried into her palm.

But it was too late. Temperance Broadfoot, daughter of Angelica and Angus, was being born in a barn, somewhere southwest of Launceston.

