

THE QUARRY

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Shrouds Without Pockets

‘Hello?’ I shout into the grey abyss around me for what is probably the hundredth time. ‘Can anyone hear me?’ I’ve been in this horrible place for what seemed like an eternity. I can’t honestly say how long I’d been here seeing as my watch hadn’t been there when I’d woken up. In fact when I’d woken up I’d had nothing but my clothes.

I’d walked, run, sprinted and even just sat down and waited in this place to try and make something happen, but so far I’d accomplished nothing.

I reached into my pant pocket to pull out my phone, but like the past ten times I found nothing there. I kept going to call my wife, Jean, and each time I found no phone.

Someone had stolen from me, that much was for sure. Then again, that was less of a problem given that they'd also stolen me. I was still in one piece though, I thought someone might have hurt me while I was out, but there wasn't any sign anyone had so hopefully Jean and my daughter Abbey are okay as well.

I'm just standing here in an infinite grey void with no idea what I'm doing here. I'd simply woken up with no recollection of how I arrived or what I'm supposed to do. The last thing I could remember was getting in the car with Jean and Abbey.

This place was an anomaly to me, just an infinite grey mist stretching out in all directions. I couldn't even make out a distinct floor.

It wasn't hot or cold either, or any temperature at all. In fact, I couldn't feel anything in this place, not even the pressure of my feet upon the ground.

There were shapes out in the void. They could be people, they did seem to be moving, although I had no way of knowing for sure. No matter how hard I'd run, I hadn't seemed to get any closer or further from them.

Or maybe all the shapes were a reflection of me. Maybe I'd been drugged and put here as part of an experiment.

I'd heard of places like this before. It's an optical illusion that makes it look like you're in empty space, but it's really just a round room with mirrors and smoke that trick your mind into walking in circles.

That must be it, that's the only explanation that makes sense. With this revelation in mind, I set my shoulders back and strode forward purposefully, hoping to run into the wall I knew was right there.

I walked for a minute.

Then two.

Then I started jogging for five.

And then as my heart started to beat faster and I realised this wasn't working I screamed in anger, and started sprinting.

After a second I suddenly tripped on my own feet and collapsed forward.

I nearly screamed as I fell forward into the abyss, only to be stopped by whatever invisible floor allowed me to stand.

I rolled over and lay on the floor for a second, feeling my rage turn back to despair. This damned place was endless, what could I possibly do?

“I have to find them!” I said out loud, that’s what I could do. Being in the car with Jean and abbey was the last thing I remembered, so maybe they’re here too, in this void or in another room if it really was an illusion.

I stand up and start running, this time screaming; ‘Jean! Abbey! Are you here?’

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‘Come on girls!’ I shouted, sitting in the leather seat of the car, ‘The shoe shop closes in an hour!’

I heard a distant giggle as a response and sighed, smiling slightly to myself as I saw them get out and close the front door behind them in the rear view mirror.

I closed my door, letting the cool AC in the car start to cool me down as Jean and Abbey walked down the drive towards the car.

I sat and watched the cars go past in front of us. We’d bought a house on a main road as that was the only house that we could afford when we got the happy news Abbey had gotten into a selective school nearby. That hadn’t stopped me being unhappy about being near a main road, though; it was so loud and dangerous.

The passenger and back door opened and slammed closed as they got into the car.

Before I could start driving, Jean laughed slightly to herself and reached over and undid the top button of my shirt.

‘We’re going to buy shoes, not a house, you can relax.’

I smiled at her, and felt my shoulders slump a little as they un-tensed. This move had really taken a lot out of me.

‘So, are we ready to go to buy some shoes for this new school?’ I asked as I put the car into gear and began to role forward.

‘I don’t want new shoes Dad,’ Abbey said sadly all of a sudden, ‘I want to wear my old school shoes, at my old school.’

‘I know Abbey, I know.’ Jean responded, as I saw an opening on the road, ‘But this school is going to be good!’

I heard a honk from the right as I pulled onto the road.

Before Abbey could respond I felt a sudden strong force hit me and slam me against the arm rest, and then nothing.

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I was panting hard as I ran, my voice hoarse from all the shouting.

That flashback had seemed so real I had to suppress a shiver as I felt the AC blow against my arms.

As I slowed to a walk my heart slowed and the fire in my veins subsided, leaving an empty feeling in my stomach.

So I’d been in a car accident. Whoever made this place must’ve taken me after that. No wonder I hadn’t seen their car, they probably meant to run into us.

Suddenly, I heard a gentle cough from behind me and my heart leapt into my throat.

I span as fast as I could and nearly jumped out of my skin.

There’s a thing standing in front of me.

The thing had arms, legs and a head, but beyond that it had no features, it was just made of mist. It was the strangest thing I’d ever seen.

I swallowed my first response, which was going to be a scream, and simply asked, ‘Hello?’ My hands were shaking. ‘Who are you?’

‘Greetings.’ It nodded at me. Its voice was eerie, echoing like it was talking right next to my ear, although I could clearly see the shape floating a metre away from me.

That was not the answer I expected. I also didn't expect the British accent that came with it. We just stood there for a second; I guess it didn't want to answer the second question.

'Did you put me here and take my things?' I asked suddenly, my most pressing questions coming to mind.

It laughed at me, 'I know not who put you here, and as to your things...' It trailed off, 'Have you not heard before? Shrouds have no pockets. You have naught but your soul.'

'Shrouds?' I asked, confused. 'Is that what you call someone in this experiment?'

Again the thing just laughed, this time turning away from me. It began walking away.

I started following, asking it more questions as I realized it was getting further away from me, my voice slowly turning to a shout as it moved away from me.

'Wait! Please just tell me why I'm here, what do I need to do to get out? Where are my wife and daughter?'

If it could move away from me it must know how to break the optical illusion in the room, if I could just stay with it maybe I could escape.

So I sprinted after it, even as it got further and further away, less distinct against the grey backdrop, until I realized it wasn't discernible from the other shapes out in the void.

Out of breath I dropped to the floor.

'I do have pockets, they just don't have anything in them.' I muttered under my breath, before breaking out laughing.

I laughed for a long time, although it slowly turned into a sob and then crying.

I had no idea what I was doing or even where I was.

I finally sighed and lay still.

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I'd spent a lot of time on this floor.

Or at least I call it a floor. I'd felt very afraid and ill when I'd first woken up, floating in the void, I'd panicked and it'd taken me a while to get over the vertigo, and I still really didn't like looking down.

If this is an experiment, maybe they'll let me go if I refuse to participate.

If I just sit here and do nothing for even longer surely I'll prove I won't take part and they'll let me out.

I'll die eventually with no food or water and they can't let that happen, I think.

I've probably been missing for hours now, let alone all the time I was unconscious. My mind turned to Jean and Abbey again.

I reached behind me to take out my wallet so that I could look at my picture of them.

As I put my hand in my back pocket I realized the stupidity of what I was doing. 'No pockets, remember,' I said to myself with a chuckle.

But I put my hand in my pocket anyway, and to my surprise, I found something. Instead of my wallet, I found only one thing.

A photo. Of my wife and daughter.

We'd had a professional photographer take it before we moved house. We'd gone down to a national park near our old house and all sat together, laughing and playing while the photographer stood back and took photos. There were a lot of good photos, things to put on the Christmas card we send out every year, but this one had been my favourite.

All three of us were rolling on the grass, me and Jean tickling Abbey as she tried to wriggle away. I felt a smile begin to form on my face. Even through the hard times, changing schools and moving houses we'd stuck together. And most importantly we could still smile together.

But then my smile started to fade and I came back to the grey abyss around me.

Why did I have this pictures and nothing else?

Were they here to taunt me? To threaten me?

In a fit of rage I stood up again and with the photo clutched in my hand I started walking again.

I was going to figure this place out, and most importantly, how to get out and find my wife and daughter.

As I took my first step everything went black.

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Blood. Why could I taste blood? And the pain, all over my body. It was excruciating, like having every bone in my body break at the same time. I desperately hoped that's not what had happened

Sirens were blaring somewhere nearby, or at least I think it was nearby. It could have been right next to me but my ears felt so muffled I couldn't tell.

'Quick, we're losing him he needs a blood transfusion now!' I heard a voice shout.

I tried to open my mouth to talk only to feel my mouth fill with the iron tang of even more blood.

I choked on it, and felt pain stab into my chest and stomach.

What was this, where was I?

I felt myself slipping again.

I heard a flat line beeping somewhere as it all went dark again, the shouting starting up again, but I couldn't understand it anymore.

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What the hell was that?!

Did I just die?

Or am I dead already and only just remembering it?

I realized I was collapsed face first on the floor, just staring down into the abyss.

I picked myself up and brushed myself off, even though there wasn't dust in this place.

Whatever this place is. Purgatory? Hell?

Or did they drug me again and that was a delusion?

'Oh!' I heard a voice exclaim behind me in a rich British accent, 'It's you again.'

I turned slowly as I saw another shape, a shroud I guess, standing in front of me. It must be the same one, it had the same British accent and definitely seemed to recognise me, not that I'd be able to tell it from any other shape in this abyss.

'I'm dead aren't I?' I asked, anger seeping into my voice, 'That's what you meant when you said shrouds don't have pockets, that's why I don't have anything but my clothes.'

'Yes, that's the one. Welcome to what I guess must be Purgatory.' It said with a small amount of humour, its arm like appendages raising and gesturing around 'It took you a while to realize.'

My anger rose at that, but before I could shout at the shroud I realized there was no point, it was just some dead person too.

Suddenly something occurred to me, 'Why do I remember the flat line? If I was dead how could I hear it?'

'The soul only moves so fast, and it gets anchored to things, like your body, hence why many shades remember dying. Your soul still hasn't let go, has it?' it said gesturing to the photo

I'd forgotten about the photo, I must've kept clutching them when I passed out.

'Why do I have this?' I said staring at my closed fist. 'I thought shrouds didn't have pockets'

It laughed deeply at that, ‘You’re right, shrouds don’t have pockets, but our souls are not just us, they are also all the things we touch, and that memory must be a strong one for you to bring it with you here.’

I felt the numbness that had set in lift slightly, and my hand unclenched from around the photo and let me look at it again.

‘Does that mean I can find them?’ I asked looking back up at the shroud, ‘If I’m anchored to them?’

‘I don’t know, they might not even be here, they might’ve moved on, or maybe they survived whatever sent you here.’ It said in a tone which made it sound like it was shrugging, even if I couldn’t see the movement.

‘Wait, move on? Move on to where?’

‘Heaven I assume.’ It responded. ‘I don’t think this is all there is to the afterlife, that would be most boring.’

‘How do I get out of here?’ I asked, my hand clenching around the photo again

‘How should I know?’ it chuckled ‘I wouldn’t be here if I knew, I’m just a shroud like you. Some people do leave though, though it takes a wiser man than me to do it.’

‘Well I’ll do it,’ I said stamping one foot on the invisible ground. ‘I’ll get out of here, and I’ll find my wife and daughter, or wait for them wherever I end up.’

He laughed fully at that, his form shimmering and moving with the sound, ‘Maybe you will do it then, maybe determination is the key.’

‘Maybe we’ll see each other again?’ I asked, ‘Here or somewhere else’

‘Not likely I’m afraid, this is the first time I’ve met the same shroud twice. Maybe in the next world though. I wish you luck with finding your wife and child.’ It said

‘Thank you, good luck to you to.’ With that said I turned and strode away, leaving the other shroud behind.

This wasn’t an angry walk, or a despondent walk, this time I walked with purpose.

I gripped the photo in my hand tightly as I walked. I was dead. Admittedly that wasn't great. But there was hope that I could get out of here, either to meet Jean and Abbey in what would hopefully be a better world, or to wait for them.