

THE QUARRY

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Day Dreaming

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The world had been reduced to filth and sickness; the streets contaminated by debris and smog. A putrid odour lingered in the air as if the sewer lines had burst out onto the streets. The cities had become too immense to handle. There was a disease called Rasnac that plagued human existence, which had significantly condensed the population due to malignant tumor growths that formed inside the body—driving the remaining population of North America to a colony in Utah. People were sanctioned into housing estates, providing the survivors with an improved quality of life.

Unit 489-W housed an elderly couple near the outskirts of town. Rodney had worked in the coal mines for twenty years while his wife Daphne raised their son

Jack. They had eaten through their life savings, with only enough left to survive for a few more months.

Rodney was very sick; every breath he took sounded like he was sucking air through a whistle. Such a significant amount of physical exertion would go into each breath that it triggered a deep bubbling cough emanating from the bowels of his chest. As a result of the fierce cough, thick hunks of dark phlegm spattered against his red checkered handkerchief—a handkerchief that he received as a gift from his wife Daphne many years ago. It was made of silk and was once used as a pocket square when Rodney and his wife would host dinner parties.

Now, the greater part of Rodney’s dinner would end up regurgitated in the bucket by the side of his bed. Rodney folded his handkerchief in half, concealing the substance he had just expelled. He observed the handkerchief, fixated on the navy checks, remembering how they used to stand out against the red silk. Now it was nothing more than a filthy rag that he held onto for sentimentality.

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June 28th 2050

→Rodney wiped away the sweat dripping from his brow and placed the handkerchief in his back pocket. As he reached for his pickaxe a searing pain tore through his lower back, bringing him to his knees.

‘Forty-Seven. Get back to work, you lazy fuck!’ his supervising officer bellowed.

Rodney was almost at the end of a fourteen-hour shift; he just needed to push through the next half hour. He placed his hand firmly on top of his axe and pushed down in the hope of being able to continue.

‘Ah, shit!’ Rodney screeched. ‘I can’t do it!’

‘Take your things and go home, Forty-Seven. You’re slowing down the rest of the crew,’ the officer commanded.

Rodney stood there shaking. He couldn't afford to go home early today. The supervising officer walked closer toward Rodney and stared him straight in the eyes.

'Could I please receive pay for the hours I worked, sir?' Rodney asked timidly.

'If you don't finish your shift, you don't get paid.'

'But please, it's my son's birthday,' Rodney begged.

'I couldn't give a shit about you or your son's birthday. No work, no pay!' the officer shouted. →

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'Rodney!' called Daphne.

Rodney snapped out of his daydream and was jolted back into reality. He realized the memories his handkerchief rediscovered and quickly stuffed it back into his pocket.

'Do you want tea?' Daphne asked.

'Oh, um... yeah, sure,' replied Rodney.

Daphne walked back into the kitchen, leant against the counter and waited for the kettle to boil. The kettle was an antique from 2015, a simplistic design from the golden age of technology. *How things have turned to shit*, she thought. Before she could begin to brood over her current situation, she was startled by a gurgling sound that arose from Rodney's lungs.

'Oh sh- shit. Blood. Again.' The gunk still stuck in Rodney's throat made it hard for him to speak.

He looked at the blood, dark against the brighter red silk of the handkerchief. It reminded him of the horror.

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June 29th 2050

→The cavern jolted with malicious force. The wooden pillars shuddered, causing the roof to crack, forming boulders that thundered to the ground. Shards of rock began showering Rodney; he could feel them slicing into his flesh. The blood began to seep through his clothes. His white undershirt looked as if it had been smothered with ketchup for a Halloween costume. The cheap wash of the fluorescent lights beat down upon Rodney—the glare was making it hard to think.

A haunting roar echoed throughout the caverns, like a lion asserting its dominance over its competitors. As the tunnels crumbled, debris sprinkled from the ceiling. Rodney could not distinguish where the blast had emanated from—he only hoped that it was from one of the lower tunnels, otherwise there would be no way for him to escape. He began to sprint toward the east end of the tunnel. As he began to exert himself, his breathing deepened. As his diaphragm shovelled oxygen into his lungs he began to taste a burning chemical in the back of his throat. Hydrogen Sulfide. Rodney knew exactly what it was, and he knew it would choke him to death if he didn't act fast.

Pools of blood were spattered against the dirt floor, forming a wet paste. It reminded him of his grandmother dispensing a hot mug of rosy rooibos tea on a cold winter's night. Unfortunately for Rodney the sensation was not the same; instead of ingesting a calm and relaxing liquid, it felt like twenty sheets of sandpaper were scraping away at his insides. →

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'Hungry?' Daphne asked.

Rodney quickly tried to conceal the handkerchief once more, but it was too late. Daphne had seen the colour of the cloth.

'Damn it Rodney! You've gone and gotten it all filthy again,' she exclaimed.

Daphne took the handkerchief into the laundry and began rinsing it under the warm flow of the tap. She had done this countless times before; she was surprised the tattered piece of silk still existed after everything it had been through.

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→Back in the time when television still existed, Daphne's eyes were glued to the television set. Journalist Jeff Daniels had called the disaster 'The Coal Mining Blunder'. The broadcaster was more concerned with ratings than the lives of the miners and families affected by the disaster. Five of the lower tunnels had been obliterated thus far, and it was slowly causing a chain reaction of higher tunnels to cave in.

'I can't sit idly by and watch this shit!' Jack shouted, as he paced furiously up and down the lounge room.

'Please Jack, sit down,' Daphne pleaded.

'No. I'm going, and that's final!' Jack said as he stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him. →

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The water became too hot for Daphne and it slightly scalded her hand, snapping her back to reality. The handkerchief was quick to dry due to the nature of its fabric. She waddled into the lounge room and slipped the handkerchief back into Rodney's breast pocket.

'Try not to get it dirty this time,' she said.

Rodney waited until she had left the room and gone back into the kitchen before he removed the handkerchief.

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→Rodney had his handkerchief wrapped around his nose and mouth. It was definitely slowing down the flow of chemicals into his lungs, but not enough. The

other miners were not as fortunate as him, trying to cover their nostrils with their bare hands. They were unsuccessful in their efforts at preventing the lethal gas from intoxicating their bodies. It was only a matter of time before Rodney collapsed like the rest of them. He heard the thundering force of rubble seal the path behind him.

‘Help me Forty-Seven!’ a voice screamed.

It was the supervising officer. He was trapped on the other side of the debris that had now sealed his tomb.

‘No pay, no work!’ he shouted back. ‘And my name is Rodney!’

He knew nothing could be done to save the man, especially if Rodney wanted to make it out of the tunnels alive himself. He ran as fast as he could. He saw a rope ladder hanging from the roof ahead. He was going to make it. He could feel the coarse texture of the rope against his hands, what a wonderful feeling...

The tunnel lurched. More violently this time—Rodney heard the sound of bone cracking in two. A staggering pain arose throughout his whole body. He couldn’t bear to look down. He could feel his bone protruding through the skin, just like a chicken drumstick. A fragment of the ceiling had broken off and collided with his leg. *There’s no way I can hoist myself up now*, he thought. →

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‘It was my fault,’ Rodney sobbed.

He used the handkerchief to wipe the tears from his cheeks. The explosion was caused by coal dust being present in the air. Before Rodney finished his shift each day he was in charge of replenishing the limestone rock dust, ensuring it mixed with the coal dust to act as a heat sink. However, on the day prior to the explosion, Rodney was distressed about being sent home with no pay and completely forgot.

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→Rodney was stranded with a compound fracture. He tried to clamber up the ladder, but he could not get a solid grip. Not without a functional leg. Just as he was about to let go of the rope and give up, two hands gripped his forearm and yanked him through the manhole.

‘Gotcha!’ a manly voice shouted.

His face was coated with a veneer of dust making him indistinguishable—the only unique feature this man possessed was the number *213* on his helmet.

‘We’ve got a compound break over here!’ *213* shouted at another miner.

They lifted Rodney into one of the mine carts; Rodney could feel the flaking rust from the cart scrape against his skin as he descended into the containment area. The cart trembled as *213* flicked the switch that sent them flying down the track at full speed. The wind was gushing past his face, his head throbbing in pain. The bright lights only intensified the ache as his stomach churned over and over again.

Another explosion resonated, this time much louder. →

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‘*Uhh,*’ Rodney grunted as he threw the handkerchief to the floor.

Daphne picked up the handkerchief and sat down on the lounge next to Rodney.

‘I remember that day too, you know,’ she said as she stared at the cloth.

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→Daphne saw her son on the television as he arrived at the scene. The television crew had a barricade in place to allow prime real estate for filming their reports. Jack was pressed up against the front of the barricade in amongst a swarm of people, shouting towards the camera. →

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‘Stop,’ Rodney insisted.

Rodney snatched the handkerchief from Daphne and stuffed it back into his pocket. Daphne swooped in and recovered it. They both held the piece of fabric together in their hands.

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→While Daphne was sitting safely on the lounge at home in front of the television, Rodney was being evacuated from the mine. As he was brought outside and into the light, he could hear the voice of his son in the distance. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the harsh light of the sun. He heard Jack’s voice again, but couldn’t tell where was it coming from. He could see a swarm of people in the distance. He saw the silhouette of a man jump over the barricade and run towards him. Rodney tried to clamber out of the mine cart but he was unsuccessful.

The signal went black on the television set. Minutes passed. Daphne was pacing around the room in the same fashion her son had been doing less than an hour before. Nothing. The hum of the television crackled dissonantly in the corner of the room, and Daphne felt an impending sense of doom as the screen started to flicker. She quickly rushed back to her seat, with the remote control clenched in her hand.

This time, there was no sign of Jeff Daniels, which was very odd for the narcissistic journalist. Instead, the footage was being shot from an emergency broadcast drone. The remote Daphne was holding fractured against the wooden floorboards as she dropped to her knees. She saw the figure of a man sprinting across the barren ground. Running for his life. The flock of people had disappeared; in their place was a void that appeared to travel miles down into the earth.

Jack was the only one who seemed to notice. It was hard to tell at first over the squawking voices of the crowd, but he heard a muffled rumble echo beneath his feet as the earth began to shake. He quickly leapt over the barricade and managed to swindle one of the security guards with some fancy footwork his father had taught him playing football in the front yard. The ground collapsed behind him. There was

no need to look back—he knew what had happened. He could hear the screams of people plummeting to their deaths.

The ground began to dissolve behind Jack.

‘*Run!*’ Daphne screamed at the television.

The gaping hole in the earth made him look like an ant running away from a gardener shovelling holes in the soil.

Jack could see his father in the distance, concealed inside a mine cart; he looked like a steak slumped inside a frying pan. He waved his arms frantically to attract his father’s attention.

Rodney was not hallucinating. A silhouette was racing straight towards him. His stomach stopped churning. He felt nothing. The earth was disappearing behind the figure, and it was vanishing fast. Before he could process the series of events that lay before him, he was seized by two men and placed on a stretcher. 213 had attached him to a helicopter for emergency evacuation. As Rodney’s stretcher swayed from side to side beneath the helicopter he bore witness to the sight of the cartoon-like figure being swallowed by the earth.

‘Dad!’ Jack screamed as his limbs flailed in the air, a useless attempt at keeping him airborne.

‘*Son?*’ Rodney yelled.

He could see the distraught look on his son’s face as he slowly disappeared into the devastation—the devastation that Rodney had created. →

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If only Rodney stayed at work that day, maybe the lives lost could have been spared. Maybe he could have seen his son flourish into a man. It was a burden he could no longer bear. He placed the handkerchief into Daphne’s pocket, closed his eyes and slowly slipped away.