

THE QUARRY

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Touched

When was the last time you dreamed in any colour other than gold? You wish there was a dial or perhaps a valve that you could use to drain the world of that particular metallic hue. Maybe then, the world would return to the way it was before.

You find the memories from the time before especially difficult to keep straight. Memories are strange. They are never straight forward. They are like quantum particles that when observed, change direction. One afternoon, after a bland and tasteless lunch, you sit your children down in the dining room and do your best to explain to them the beginning and the before. You fumble a lot, lose your place and ramble. Your voice is muffled through your mask and your hands are sweaty

beneath your gloves. You find there is no real place to start, no way to explain these things clearly to children who only know the after. Somehow, this seems important though. These are things they can only experience if you tell them.

You try and begin with a simpler time. You describe in vivid detail crowded concert halls where your head gets jammed in a rockers damp, un-pruned armpit. You tell them about hugging friends in greeting and kissing strangers, and travelling. Travelling! To them, it's a foreign concept. Communities are now so small. They are closed off, locked and barred. The only good stranger now is a familiar one. The children make faces at you. They are still young.

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Somewhere along the way, you tell them about a girl. You think her name was Amelia. Or maybe it was Emma. It is hard to know. You only met her once. You were a pharmacy assistant at the time. Young, fresh and roped into doing the job that no one wanted. You don't remember the house being anything special. The weeds were stretching tall in their stolen beds and the grass was high as a wheat field. So high it almost obscured the hastily erected sign out front. It read, 'Caution: Quarantine Zone. PPE must be worn at all times.' Already, even then, that sign was familiar.

You knocked on the door and when there was no response, you knocked again. You must not be knocking loud enough, you thought. You call out instead.

'I'm from the pharmacy,' you say, 'I'm delivering your medication.'

You don't forget what she looks like when she opens the door. You describe her to your children as hunched and small. Her pyjamas are old and filthy. Her hair is matted and oily, she is like an underfed lion hiding in the wheat field waiting to pounce. Her eye bags are like new moons, carving circles into her cheekbones. Your children ask what was wrong with her. 'This is what loneliness looks like,' you answer.

She slides the cash under the fly-screen and tells you to keep the change. You think you see her in your newsfeed, months later. Or maybe you didn't.

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Your children ask you 'What is cash?'. You take them to a dusty unused corner of the house and pull out an old box hidden among the shelves. Inside, carefully filed, named and catalogued, are notes and coins. You make them sanitise before and after touching them. After all, cash is now a dirty collectable.

You are glad they are showing interest. You are glad they are asking questions. Questions are good. Questions are better than blank stares and obvious fidgets. You decide to tell them how it started. That the first spark was a man in the media; a shaky video that most people discounted as fake. But a fake virus does not multiply the way this one did.

You are losing their interest. You can see it but you cannot stop. Some stories need to be told simply for the sanity of the speaker. This is what you tell them, you say: Imagine your senses being flooded every hour, every day with news of this new virus. Look at all the pictures of brightly coloured microorganisms spiked like maces. Listen to the ever-growing list of people posting videos about how they feel, what they've been through. Read what the government has to say. That it's contained. That it's non-threatening. That it's a naturally caused mutation of a pre-existing virus

strand. No one believes it, not even you. How could you? The statistics were bleak. You thought perhaps you were seeing the end. After all, what kind of virus could possibly exist that turned people into gold?

The different stages of the virus became predictable once you got used to it. And you did get used to it. Humanity adapts surprisingly quickly to world changing events. You have started sympathising with world war two survivors, you don't remember when. You picture yourself on par with them, sitting down in the rubble of a train station, listening to the bombs above and saying to one another, 'How was your day today? Anything exciting happen?'

Your children chime in. They say 'We know! We know!' in feigned boredom. Of course they know. There are signs everywhere. In every classroom, in the libraries, in the halls. There's even a magnet on your fridge written in large red letters 'Know the symptoms of the Midas Touch. Protect yourself and others.' Your children may know this but knowing is different to understanding.

You explain anyway. You have to now. You cannot stop. You are winding up the toy, racing towards the punch line. Why is this so hard? The first stage of the virus is the slight yellowy shimmer in the whites of the eyes. Next, the Touched person's veins change colour, from a deep blue to a rich gold. The worst symptoms, you say, are the invisible ones. The loss of taste, and the stiff limbs that feel like running through water. It's like the gold has been heated in a furnace than poured into your body shaped mould and left to cool.

You tell them about the great debates over where it came from, whether it was purely spread by touch, about how long it could survive on surfaces and whether the virus was small enough to become airborne. The last stage of course is the golden hue the skin takes. That's what people will remember, not that most died from their hearts giving in or their lungs collapsing. You were too

young to remember SARS or measles. You hope that your children will not remember the Touch but you know you are wrong.

You are afraid you have bored the children. They will no longer sit still. They see the sun glinting through the window and beg for the chance to play. It is already getting late. You are running out of time. You look into their eyes and you find yourself unable to say no. You haven't told it yet, the most important part. You convince yourself it can wait till tomorrow. You retreat into the half-light of your office. Your mind is full of the things not said.

There is one image that sticks most clearly in your head. This, you do not share with your children. This, you file away like a postcard and every now and then it comes knocking on your skull.

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You remember seeing an elderly couple on a park bench, their skin stiff and covered with a golden sheen. They were the first Touched you saw in person. Over the years, you have questioned and wondered and imagined how they died. Who were they? How did they get there? What was the last thoughts running through their gold-riddled minds? You remember it like this:

They are two statues; mannequins dressed in their nicest clothes. The woman is wearing a loose-fitting dress covered in sunflowers. The man is dressed in some stretchy slacks and a blue checkered shirt. In the small space between them their hands are clasped together. They are smiling into each other's eyes. Those facts never change.

You think maybe one night, the woman notices the dull distant look in her husband's eyes. Maybe she sees the golden veins creeping up his throat and says to him, 'let's go for a walk'. Then she helps him dress. She grabs his cane, his hat and his glasses. She leaves the masks and gloves at

home. When she opens the door, she helps him through the threshold. And when he stumbles on the way up the hill, she supports his arm in hers and tells him ‘Your cane! Use your cane!’. They make it to the park that’s little more than a grassy hill. She sits him down to wait for the sunrise. Or is it sunset? No, you are sure it must be sunrise. There is nothing more fitting. The mist coils around their shoes and the dew on the bench seeps through their clothes. She talks to him about anything and everything and always she holds his hand. You imagine the comfort that would have bought the old man. The comfort of physical touch that fades so quickly from memory. The comfort of knowing that someone was there with you, and they weren’t going to let go. You miss the feeling; it nags at you like an ache in your chest or a pressure behind your eyes.

The night then starts to lighten. The mist seems to raise from the ground, briefly bringing the world to life in a glow of pure white. Then the sun starts peeking through. You’ve always thought that sunrise is best; more special. You hope they were watching the sunrise. You hope they managed to see it. You can picture them, sitting on that little bench holding hands as they are bathed in the warmth of a new day.

Did she look into his eyes as he died? Did she cry tears speckled with golden flakes that glittered in the dawn? Did she simply decide not to let go? Did she decide to hold his hand as it stiffened, and wait? Would it have been a relief when her own skin hardened and took on that golden hue; when she lost the ability to move and her thoughts dulled and slowed. Whether it was her heart or her lungs that gave first doesn’t matter to you. Neither does it matter if it was the man or the woman who died first, or the sunrise or the sunset that they watched. The truth lives in their smiles as they stare into each other’s eyes and the clasp of their hands on the bench between them.

You secretly hope no one touched them, that they were given dignity. You hope no one took their clothes or broke their arms off. You wanted them to sit together on that bench overlooking the

little grassy park, a frozen moment in time. A tribute. They faced the Touch together and for that they are immortalised, if only in your mind.

The postcard image would come knocking often, especially in the first few months of the pandemic and always while you were at work. Even through the protective barriers, the gloves and the masks, you still saw something of the world. You remember a little girl, maybe around eight. She was wearing tiny pink gloves and a mask with flowers on it. They were a matching set. You saw her wandering the store, not touching a thing. Instead, she amused herself by jumping on the X's. Every two metres, a bright blue X has been ironed onto the floor. Later, a more permanent solution would replace them. The little girl in pink was too small to jump from one X to the next, so she jumped and shuffled, jumped and shuffled. It occurred to you as you watched her, that this was her normal. Jumping on the X's will be a part of childhood. Already children were making songs and games to play together using the X's, and their masks, and the sanitiser their parents drenched them with.

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Outside, you can hear your children playing, they pull your mind back to the present. You will not allow them to go further than the yard. The games they play are different to what you had grown up with. Their laughter settles like a heavy sadness in your bones.

You wonder at the changing world. You wonder when you last touched somebody, or saw a stranger's face, embracing them without paranoia or fear. You wonder when it started feeling wrong to have someone standing behind you in a queue. You wonder when money started feeling dirty and why you didn't notice it disappearing.

Your head drops to your desk. What is it you are trying to teach them? What is the point about chattering on about the past? You know the answer. But you are afraid. You do not want the past to be forgotten. The air in your office feels stuffy, your throat is tight and dry from talking and your shoulders are slumped. Tomorrow. You will tell them the rest tomorrow. You will say goodbye properly then. You will tell them how much you love them and how much you wish you could hold them.

You decide to go for a walk; a long one, even when you know you shouldn't. You are surprised at how normal everything looks. At how the wind rustles the trees and sends the grass shivering. At how dogs are unafraid to approach you. You see a man flying a kite that is harnessed to his waist. You watch him for a long while, see how the kite bends and twists, dancing in the air and how the man pulls and strains and desperately spins to keep it airborne. As you walk, the sun begins to set. The sky turns gold. You lie down on the highest hill, ignoring the quiet complaining of your joints. You are so tired. As you lie there, you forget for a moment whether it is sunrise or sunset; whether there is a tomorrow or a yesterday. You thought you would hate the colour gold. Detest it. Despise it. But in this moment with your limbs heavy with liquid gold, the grass vainly pricking your skin and the wind stroking your hair, all you can think is that it's warm.