

RETURN

1st Place

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How quiet is Silence? In the darkness I can hear Silence as I've never imagined it. The sounds are powerful and thunderous, a constant ringing. As Silence becomes quieter, it grows ever louder. It is an oddity to me how intense no noise can torture the ears. It has never brought me to the point of insanity before this moment, a moment of Silent loneliness.

In the void of blackness in which I now stand, alone and thoughtful; my mind quakes as the mud of the earth trembles in times of chaos. In the Silence a stampede has overtaken my thoughts, forming whispers of unvoiced questions. My consciousness can supply no answers to their unknown entity.

Where am I? What is this darkness? What is this Silence? Why am I alone?

At last, I hear my footsteps crunching on the ground, and I feel my body move forward. If it is not that I stir to discover my whereabouts, then it is that I walk to end the lunacy of Silence. Though, I do not wish to answer the whispers that ask, "What is it underneath me?" I do not want to know what my feet are crushing. The very feel of the uneven ground makes my empty stomach churn and my numb fingers quiver. All I know is that I know nothing.

I am lost, I fear. Escape is unattainable. A path does not exist. Searching for a way out is likely impossible, for how can I find a road out of a place that I do not understand? How was I swallowed into such an abyss? Why am I here, where no mortal eye can distinguish the sky?

Peace has escaped my soul. In this netherworld such a word has no definition. Peace exists on a plain where all evil has faded into the past, into the darkness. Light embodies the wonders of such a fantasy; shadow is its opposite, its malice and

confinement. One essence cannot exist without its mirror form. But why have I become a part of light's cruel counterpart? Is evil embodied within my heart? The only evil I do possess is greed, but it is that which lusts only for some sprinkle of smiling brightness.

I walk on. My footsteps echo. With my mind having been congested of thoughts, it is now I realize that I have scared Silence away. But if I stop ... it will consume me once more.

And so I walk on.

Ah, still I cannot deduce how I came to be in such a state of weariness, in such a foreboding place that seems to consume my energy. My life had been pure once; I was a glowing star amid savages of treachery. I spoke out when no other had voice. I listened when all else in the world seemed deaf to the cries of help.

But suddenly my pace dies. I feel weak. Fall do I to the ground. Silence deafens me, strangles me. I cannot breathe. Oh, how now did I come to this? What sickness is it that ails me here?

It is the darkness, the abyss that suffocates me. Within it I cannot speak. Yet what does that even matter? There is no soul with whom I may hold conversation. It is only I. Alone. Frightened.

I buckle in pain. The darkness distorts all thought, but above me shines a light, the grinning brightness for which I've waited so long. It is my escort, a ray to spread knowing of my condition into my now blinded sockets. So powerful an entity is the light that I must close my eyes, but in this moment, warmth courses throughout my body, breathing hope into my lifeless veins once more.

It is in this restoring moment that I pull myself back up, and my eyes peek from behind their membranes. The light is a constant throb, and as I walk toward it, I no longer hear footsteps. The echoes of my feet are heard as heartbeats. I had not realized the absence of breathing before now, how the rise and fall of my chest had not existed until now.

Life flows through my body once more, attacking the darkness as the light spread to eliminate the shadows. A rushing waterfall of warmth engulfs my bones, and movement becomes as simple as a pinning waterwheel. The prickling numbness that once harassed my extremities now recedes within the clutches of the darkness.

I walk on, and my ears are once again vessels that detect every slightest sound. A murmur calls out from the orb of light, its hands as if reaching out to me. A familiar voice within the whisper beckons to me, makes my heart swirl with new hope.

“James, come back.”

I run on.

“Don’t leave me, James.”

That voice. Oh, without knowing how, I know that voice. It comforts me, veils me in a mantle of security, envelops me in a shroud of bliss.

From out of the shadows behind me, my memories return in a flood of pulsing liberation, freedom from this nonexistence. I leap into the light and it swallows me up. For an instant I am an arctic wind, chilled yet howling to be alive.

When I next open my eyes, blurred faces and alien objects crowd me. A distracting beep thuds in my ear at a consistent rate. The haze soon fades and the countenances that I encounter all wear smiles across their lips and joyous tears streaking down their cheeks.

I feel a hand clasping my fingers. I look through a jungle of monitors and tubes to see a woman’s face. She laughs despite the numerous droplets smearing her visage. Tears shed in sorrow and fear.

“Oh, James.”

At last the doctors leave us, but the maddening Silence returns.

“Roxanne,” my voice crackles. “Please, it’s too loud in here. Say something.”

Her lips coil anew, and she begins to speak.

Peace.

I had gone to the Netherworld ... and returned.