

*A Short Story*

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ANDREW VAN WYK



*A Short Story*

# PURGATORY

Andrew Van Wyk



TINY WINDOWS

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I awoke as if from a dream, cobwebs of slumber still draped between my slowly firing thoughts. Each thought like the singular step of a spider striking its web, confident and firm, yet tender. I yearned to fall back to sleep, to let the peaceful embrace of night hold me in its arms once again, but a voice in the back of my mind seemed to recognize that such a desire would go unfulfilled.

Reluctantly accepting my fate, the fate of morning, the destiny of the day, I opened my eyes. It was only then that I knew - or feared - that I must still be unconscious; I must still be controlled by my subconscious mind and was either in the midst of an abstract dream brought about by the day's events or was trapped in the middle of a nightmare. I stood with my back against the wall, staring at unfamiliar surroundings. How did I get here?

Silence was shattered by a distant sound, an echo rebounded, simultaneously around me and inside the cavern of my mind. It was both sickening and sensual. I was drawn to the noise and repulsed by it.

“Welcome!”

The voice rang out with melodious rhythm, syllables seemingly stretched to their breaking point but protected in what seemed to be a familiar yet unrecognizable accented dialect. The source of this voice was as of yet still hidden but the echo of its initial note resounded as if a record were stuck, fated to repeat its cyclical pattern for eternity.

“I can't believe you're here.”

And suddenly, there he was. He or maybe she, as his androgynous voice and indiscernible face carried both masculine and feminine features in the most attractive combination of symmetry. Shadows seemed to flee from the caverns created by the prominent ridges of his eyes and cheekbones as if a fire deep within naturally illuminated his face. And yet, somewhere buried within those fiery, flickering eyes there was a darkness - or was it sadness?

“Where am I?” I stammered, more concerned with my whereabouts than of who this mysterious stranger was in my presence.

Laughter was my response. Laughter like a gang of children cackling with ominous and foreboding intent. I felt the storm clouds of apprehension appear on the horizon of my future. But almost immediately - nay, immediately - this cackling transcended into a glorious cacophony of deep bass and reverberating treble as if a symphony and all those independent elements were momentarily granted the power of laughter, with their music transitioning into innocent wonder and lighthearted giggling.

A smile creased the visage of my new companion, searing lines, nearly ear to ear, across his face. I couldn't help but smile, his attitude like a contagious disease borne upon the air and wafting, void of intention, only controlled by unconscious will to me: the next unsuspecting host and only available vessel.

"You're exactly where you're meant to be," said my companion.

This statement, uttered with the confidence of a thousand lifetimes, held up and supported by what one could only describe as the pillars of complete and total enlightenment, gripped my heart with icy fingers and traced a pathway to my soul with the grace of a wrecking ball. I felt at home in a foreign land with a familiarity brought on by the lightning like flash of a *deja vu* only recognized from a life previously lived.

It was only then that I felt it: not dread, but awareness followed by what might be the beginning of acceptance. I was dead. And as if he sensed what I was feeling or could read my thoughts, my companion nodded, his smile deepened, crafting craters in the porcelain like valleys of his ivory inflected cheeks.

"Yes," he said.

"I'm dead?" I whispered, more rhetorically than inquisitively.

His eyebrows raised in affirmation: Yes.

"And this is...?" I couldn't finish the sentence because I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer, uncertain even of what I was asking, not being a religious person or one ascribing to a belief in the afterlife.

Yes. I felt, more than heard, his non-answer.

I looked at my surroundings with new eyes, conceived only a fraction of a second prior and birthed into my being through nothing more than the action of acceptance. I stood, more floated, upon a floor that was simultaneously solid and porously liquid. The walls of the space, if they could be described as walls, seemed to continuously expand, but with every gaze flexed back into close proximity while always staying just out of reach. It was as if I were standing in the exact center of the big bang, the epicenter of the universe, perceiving both the rapid expansion, and the immediate collapse, of existence. This state of being, this perception, washed over and through me in a fraction of a second or less: a fraction of a fraction.

“Are you ready?”

No. Yes. I don’t know. For what, I thought. Words escaped me. The breath was squeezed out of my lungs, and it was only then that I questioned whether or not I was even breathing. Did I need to breathe here?

“Just breathe.”

Ok. I guess so.

“That’s better, isn’t it?”

And it was. For the first time in my life, or rather, in my death, I tasted the air I breathed. It was sweet. It was musty. It smelled of the birth of spring, the death of fall, the cold, crispness of winter, and the dryness of summer. With every breath I saw my life, in its entirety, stretched out before me like a movie playing on fast forward. With every exhalation, the lives of others unspooled, albeit with less clarity, like the film projector had been nudged out of focus, but only slightly.

“So what’s next?” I asked.

He laughed. “You never change, do you? You’ve only just arrived, and already you’re itching for what’s next. Never content to just be.”

It was my turn to laugh. That description could’ve been used to articulate every day of my life. And now, it seemed appropriate even in death.

“I’m not sure what to ask,” I mumbled.

“The questions will come once you know the answers you’re seeking,” he stated with sage like providence.

“Who are you?”

Again, his eyebrows raised. His expression encouraging me to arrive at the answer I already felt deep inside.

“You’re not...?”

He simply shook his head, barely moving, which made me question whether or not I even saw movement or whether it was shadows playing tricks on my eyes.

“So you’re...?”

“Let’s play a game, shall we?” He suggested, ignoring my queries. “Let’s say for the moment that I am who you think I am. Would it make any difference? Now? Would it make any difference for you, now?”

I hadn’t thought of that. Whether he was God or the Devil, I was already in his presence, and thus it would seem that the question of eternity had already been decided. And yet...

“Yes,” I said, “It would, I think.” I sighed, not out of exasperation but, out of a growing acceptance. “Maybe now, more than ever. Maybe.”

“Maybe,” he said, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with me. “Shall we?” And his arm beckoned onward.

I followed silently for a time as we stepped past planets and moons, covering the length of galaxies in the width of a stride, with the entire universe bending and stretching around and beyond us. We existed in the space of a bubble, a void that was outside of space and outside of time. Looking back, our footprints created ripples that expanded to eternity, pushing and bending reality around their gravitational-like influence. Whenever we paused, existence paused with us, seemingly snapping into reality for that second, and that second alone, with time momentarily existing as a tangible entity for only the observable minute before reuniting with the space from whence it came.

“I’ve been here before,” I realized.

As I looked around him, desperate for the affirmation that his nod or smile would provide, I noticed that I was, quite suddenly, alone. He had disappeared without a sound. The only evidence of his presence, was the echo left behind, rushing to the very borders of the universe, and bouncing back with frightening velocity - bringing with it the collapse of everything I saw, everything I knew to be real. The only accompanying sound in the vacuum that was created by the crumpling of reality was a crescendo of clapping.

As the world buckled around me I felt peace, thinking, feeling, knowing that this was the end. My time was, in fact, over, and I would find myself in a void of nothingness that I always thought the afterlife was made of - a perfect absence of everything, a return to oblivion. It wasn’t the best theory, after what I’d just witnessed, after what I’d just remembered, but it was the extent of what my mind could perceive as I was sent head first back into existence.

The accumulated knowledge of countless lifetimes slipped away as I slithered out of the womb and screamed my way back into existence and into painful ignorance, grasping with futile effort to hold on to anything I’d seen or heard in the eternal and timeless place I’d just been.

And with the finality that only our limited temporal perspective can provide I was born anew and with my last fleeting glimpse at eternity I saw him, smile etched across a face that stretched to the boundaries of an ever-expanding and collapsing universe, the echo of his hands applauding my latest beginning.

THE END



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**ANDREW VAN WYK** is a film executive and award-winning multimedia writer and producer with over a decade of entertainment experience. He's a medium agnostic creative developing IP from concept creation and adaptation for screens big and small. His strong story skills are seeped in a background of literary and film history supported by an academic foundation from UCLA and USC and practical, hands-on experience from co-founding multiple production companies.

Van Wyk is the recipient of the inaugural Dan O'Bannon Screenwriting award and a multiple Telly and Addy Award winning commercial writer. He has led research into VR/AR/360/AI at a variety of companies and has been a keynote speaker at major international conferences specifically discussing how artists and the industry at large can and should adapt to technological change. As a producer his projects have screened at festivals worldwide, including Venice, Cannes, Zurich, Telluride, Toronto, SXSW, and Santa Barbara Film Festival.

Currently, Van Wyk is the Vice President of Development for the multi-award winning River Road Entertainment, overseeing a slate of feature and television narrative and documentaries projects. Prior to that, he worked in the Story and Development Department at Steven Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment. More recently, he launched Tiny Windows, a publication platform highlighting classic stories from history alongside contemporary short fiction.



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