

Purgatory

By J. Awad

[Excerpt from a recorded interview with Participant #2465]

(Please note that the research assistant has taken Participant #2465 into Room #4. The room is bare—no windows—with white painted walls. Only the Cranial Stimulation Machine (CSM) and its attached chair stand in the middle of the space. The research assistant hooks the participant to the device by attaching the CSM wires to the head before perching on a nearby stool.)

Research assistant: Do you believe you are a good person?

Participant #2465: What? What kind of question is that?

Research assistant: Yes or no, please.

Participant #2465: I mean, as good as anybody else is, I guess.

(A pause as the research assistant makes a note in Observation File #2465. The participant watches the action and looks unnerved.)

Participant #2465: Is this all part of the experiment? I just really need this money for my family.

#

I have no clue where I am. A forest surrounds me, the tall, dark trees blocking out most light. I turn in a full circle to get a sense of my environment, peek between the branches, and find a path that will get me out of here. My chest heaves as air becomes scarce; my feet itch to take off and *run*.

Taking a tentative step forward, I think, for some reason, the ground beneath me won't hold. A ridiculous notion. I can see the packed earth in front of me with slivers of grass poking their way through, the little bugs burrowing into their homes in the dirt. When I don't immediately fall through to some unknown dimension, I breathe out a relieved sigh.

I need to *get the hell out*. Maybe a path will appear, but it appears less and less likely as I wander around.

The lack of animals—even the flap of a bird's wings or the rustle of branches from a squirrel—makes my heart pound faster.

The endlessness of the forest threatens to swallow me whole.

Suddenly, I hear it. It's quiet at first—just an echo of a shout. Yet in the still-silent forest, it's loud enough to make out clearly.

"Tasha!"

I startle. Who could be wandering this forest, let alone know my name? The voice sounds young, which is even more disturbing.

My name is called out again, closer this time. So close, as if it's right behind me. Whirling around, before me stands an utterly still teenage girl. She looks unassuming, like any other person spotted on the street. The wicked smile on her face and the flash in her eyes warn me to proceed with caution.

The reeling thoughts in my head come to a standstill, before disintegrating as if they never existed in the first place.

"Hello," she whispers. She holds out her hand, the skin blistered and mottled red. "Let me help you leave this place."

I hesitate, staring at her outstretched fingers. Repulsion snakes its way through my veins at the thought of staying a second longer.

Except to take her hand—

Goosebumps dance an uneven path down my skin.

Her smile grows wider, more alarming. "Come on. You can trust me," she promises. Her flat, brown hair shifts as if ruffled by an imaginary breeze. She looks familiar, but recollection evades me.

I look around again, praying that something in my surroundings has changed.

Everything looks exactly the same. I glance at her, knowing there is no other choice. Not if I want to leave.

Nodding slightly, her keen eyes catch the movement. Her hand flexes, and I shake my head.

Her arm drops as she shrugs her shoulders. "Come," she orders, before turning her back on me and making her way through the forest. As she walks, the trees seem to slightly, their branches swaying out of the way to make room for our bodies to pass.

What was once tightly wound-together foliage becomes sparse, and my lungs heave in a much-needed breath of air.

An indeterminate amount of time passes, and we find ourselves at a fork in the road. The destination at the end of both paths is clear. One is a meadow: the grass strikingly green, flowers blooming wide, the sun shining brightly. The other is a barren wasteland, with no trace of life anywhere. A strong gust of wind blows across the earth, kicking up a spray of dirt and gravel.

The difference between their pull is remarkable. My body recoils against the path to the wasteland, visibly shrinking back. The meadow, however, has me leaning closer. I point towards it. I speak for the first time, and my voice comes out scratchy.

"I want to go there."

The girl smirks, and that sense of familiarity returns. "Are you sure?" My gaze narrows. "Of course, I'm sure. Why are we even stopping?"

She eyes me as she takes a beat to respond. "Do you think you deserve to go down that path?"

The blood in my veins begins to run hot. "What kind of question is that? It's obviously the better option."

“Do you deserve it?”

I can't listen to her ask that question anymore, so I choose to leave her behind. I take a step forward, yet something stops me from moving. My body smacks against the barrier so that my bones rattle.

“You can't go until you've answered the question.” She seems unperturbed by what has just happened, by the impossibility of some invisible force that has stopped me dead in my tracks. Her face has even now taken on a bored expression, gaze flat.

And spotting that look in her eyes is when the spark ignites.

I see myself in her. My thoughts, my emotions, my very existence.

My stomach threatens to turn itself inside out. “Who are you? What is this place?” I hide my trembling hands behind my back.

She shakes her head, lips dipping into a frown. “Just say yes or no.” I don't respond. I have no power, and this girl somehow has it all. So, I think. I flash to the moment I held my baby brother for the first time. I remember the barbed words flung at unsuspecting targets during countless arguments. But my mind has long decided.

“Yes,” comes out with such conviction and confidence.

As soon as the word slips from my mouth, it's as if I've ignited life in her again. The girl lets out a boisterous, disbelieving laugh. “You know that's not true. You know you're unworthy,” she retorts, and this time, when she smiles, it is genuine. And it is bloodcurdling.

She grabs my arm, those callused fingers scratching and gripping so hard they dig into the skin. The girl drags me towards the wasteland.

It comes back suddenly in bone-chilling form—that one memory buried so deep. The one that justifies what I deserve. It has jaggedly stitched itself into my very being.

I fight. I kick, I scream. I try to pry her fingers off me, wrench my arm out of her hold, and do just about anything to get away. She remains steadfast the entire time.

The path shrinks, and the destination gets closer. The last thing I see before the darkness takes over is the satisfied grin on the girl's face.

#

[Excerpt from the recorded experiment with Participant #2465]

(Participant #2465 awakes from the simulation and appears dazed. Her back straightens after spotting the research assistant.)

Participant #2465: Who the hell are you? What just happened? (The research assistant doesn't respond, busying himself with freeing Participant #2465 from the CSM cables connected to her skull. He is visibly harried, and Participant #2465 winces as he tugs a wire a little too forcefully.)

Participant #2465: Please.

Participant #2465: I have to know what that was. What does it mean?

Research assistant: I apologize, I can't reveal that to you. Please exit the room, as we are currently behind schedule. I need to get the next participant set up.

(Participant #2465 looks alarmed at the response. She grabs the research assistant's arm, but he shakes free from her grasp. A look of shock and regret flashes across her face before a scowl emerges.)

Participant #2465: You can't just do this. *You can't*. It's inhumane.

Research assistant: You've done exactly as expected, and we received the results of the simulation successfully. Compensation will be granted when you check out.

Participant #2465: Don't leave me like this.

(Participant #2465 hesitates, her hands clutched in fists so tight the skin develops a red flush. Please note that her response is mumbled so incoherently that the audio had to be enhanced and pieced together to discern.)

[Static]

Participant #2465: *Please. Am I a good person?*

[End of recorded experiment with Participant #24

