

The Final Question

Peter took his job seriously. He'd been doing it for so long that no one could replace him, but still he gave his best effort. Hand-picked for the position by his boss, his clients held him in high esteem. Some even showed surprise at seeing him in person after word spread of his reputation.

Most of humanity believed they knew what his job was like. The art world had done its best to imagine it. *Stand there, block the gate, read the sins, accept or deny. Repeat.* But it was more than that. And there was no gate, by the way. One second you were in front of Peter, the next you were basking in radiance.

Or the other thing. Peter chose not to dwell on that unless he had to. He preferred to focus on the best part of his job.

The question.

Every person made their first stop of the afterlife at his "kiosk". The word had only been invented a few decades ago, but he liked the way it rolled off his tongue instead of *altar* or *dais*. And it seemed to resonate more with the modern crowd that came through these days. The scripture on Earth said Peter had the "keys to heaven". He loved that it was a "key-osk" instead. Using the tangible ether of the heavens, he had fashioned a booth to sit behind, a massive screen floating behind him. Images of past, present, future, and more could be displayed, depending on each person's final request. They filled in the important part.

Peter even appreciated the classic questions that came up consistently. *How'd I die? Where's my wife? Is Elvis here? Did anyone attend my funeral? Did I make a mistake?* Et cetera, et cetera. Humanity's predictability was not its most endearing quality, to be sure, though Peter found it a little charming they shared so many of the same interests. But they also had a capacity to completely surprise him with their ingenuity, an ability to go outside the extremes of expectation and touch on something new.

It may not happen often, but it happened.

A recently departed soul approached Peter's kiosk, returning him to his task. An unkept young man with dirt on his clothes, Peter launched into the verses every human hears after death.

"Hello Craig, welcome to the Great Beyond. I'm Peter, and this is your first step toward eternity. I understand this is an overwhelming experience. Take a moment, and after you are ready, you may ask any question, any at all, before your final judgment. Questions about your life, about the world, about the Heavens, and it will not count against you. It can only help. Now, what may I find for you?"

The man looked around, almost paranoid. "I...just have to know...are they real?"

Peter was gifted the ability to view the entirety of each human's life that passed through the spectacle of his kiosk. The vagueness of Craig's question did not confuse him. Craig left

Earth after exploring it, spending days searching the New Mexican desert for extraterrestrials and their secrets. It was his greatest passion, and he gave his life to it.

“I’m happy to tell you, Craig, that is an affirmative.” An image of the closest alien beings to Earth flashed upon the screen above Peter, surprisingly close to pop culture’s favorite illustrations, but based more in evolutionary science.

“I knew it—!” Craig said, before vanishing to the snap of Peter’s fingers.

Peter tried not to let himself enjoy or ponder too much about the next phase each soul experienced, up or down. But he couldn’t help but appreciate how shocked Craig would be when he saw just how diverse the heavenly chambers were.

Noticing a tuft of hair bouncing by his kiosk, Peter leaned over to discover his next client was a six-year-old boy with scuffed clothes. Peter poofed the kiosk down to a more reasonable height and began his routine sermon.

“Hello Bobby, welcome to the Great Beyond. I’m Peter, and this is your first step toward eternity. I understand this is an overwhelming—.”

“Have you seen my dog? He ran across the street and I can’t find him.”

This was a conundrum. One he had encountered before, but repeated instances never made it easier. Like his great shift manager in the sky, Peter had a soft spot for children. The best of humanity did as well. Finding them in front of the booth hurt, no matter the rules against too much feeling and emotion. Bobby was a tragic case, all too common in an unforgiving world with danger at every turn. Even in the middle of your own street. Now, due to pure innocence, even his one final question was taken from him.

Luckily, Peter knew from eons of experience that Bobby wouldn’t dwell on this missed opportunity, and that as soon as he snapped his fingers, the boy would find just what he was looking for. A reunion for the ages.

“I have seen him Bobby! Let me show you,” Peter said, and slid middle finger into palm with angelic pitch. The boy had noticed the photo of his dog Chester on the big screen, and a smile lit up his face as he disappeared like the rest.

Peter could see the next soul, a scrunched up face with attitude, looming from afar. A middle-aged man of enviable success, Gregory lived a life of constant malcontent. Charles Dickens crossed through the booth long ago, yet Gregory had an unmistakable likeness to his famous literary curmudgeon. Unfortunately, Gregory had no ghosts to rescue him from the darkness. No repentance to society, no transformation. Some who visited the kiosk lived hard lives, lives where they were terrible to others in and out, but were really just broken souls. Events shaping them before they could shape themselves. Just so, they were given one last chance at liberation by proving there was still hope within their soul, finding introspection, remorse, or something selfless in death that they couldn’t find in life.

Gregory was not one of those people. He carried out his tireless life's work of exploiting, endangering, and harming others, not to mention the planet, and died consumed by his greed. Peter knew just where he was headed. Humoring these types of people was tedious, but part of the ancient job.

Just as on Earth the last sixty years, each word Peter said to Gregory had no effect on his demeanor, other than irritation. Once the presentation was over and the screen behind stood ready for request, Gregory let the silent moment linger, fixing a glare at Peter with practiced precision.

"I've got a question for ya. Who do you think you are to speak to me so 'high and mighty'? Like I should be trembling at your boots. I know just where I am, thank you, and you're wasting my precious time in paradise." Gregory peered at Peter proudly, as if waiting for a supervisor to appear and provide him with a coupon for his trouble. "Since you have decided to waste *my* time so effectively, riddle me this *Peter*. Just who do you think you are?!"

The screen popped with divine light, images of constellations being born and harps being played.

"I'm Peter. This is my kiosk. And that was a waste of your redemption."

Peter snapped his fingers, and instead of the gentle vanishing of spirit, Gregory plummeted out of view like a bowling ball dropped down a water slide. The calm vapor that normally replaced the enlightened did not rush in. Instead, one wisp of smoke rose in its place. It dissipated, and Peter gravely shook his head.

An elderly woman shuffled her way up to the kiosk next, a confident grin taking command over her unsure feet. She flaunted a dress she had worn on multiple occasions, though not for decades. A dress sewn by her mother when Audrey was young, she quickly grew out of it. Magically, through the sculpting miracle of aging, she had been gifted the chance to wear it once again. One more time.

"Hello, Audrey. Welcome to the Great Beyond. I'm Peter..."

He finished his speech and waited for the response. Her confidence beamed.

"No questions for you, Pete. Just go ahead and take me to the good part." Audrey was practically giddy with excitement. A demeanor never lost from her childhood.

"Are you sure?"

"More than sure," she said, and winked at him. "She's gonna lose it when she sees me in this dress again..."

Peter obliged with a snap, and she faded away, a smile transfixed through her transition.

Following Audrey was a woman, having passed in her sleep, stuck wearing her pajama set to the afterlife. Not to be discouraged, however, the kindness in her eyes never faltered. She placed a finger toward the bridge of her nose to better see Peter, and realized the glasses left

behind on Earth were no longer necessary. She let out a giggle at the circumstances of her arrival.

“Hello Jamie, Welcome to the Great Beyond...”

Mixing the realms of academia and science, Jamie served a life devoted to the core of humanity: learning, seeking, and craving knowledge. Anything to put some kind of order to the chaos in the world. Jamie entered school with a focus on the past, learning of the Greeks and the ways civilizations were born. She then turned her efforts to chemistry, picking apart the building blocks of the universe. The insight from her studies never faded, and only fueled her hunger to understand where humans had been, and where they were going. A life devoted to forming questions had prepared her for this moment. Peter grew ready for the challenge.

The woman took a second to think after Peter’s speech, tossing and shaking her head in debate over the right inquiry. Finally, she gave a self-assured nod, no longer second-guessing herself. She cleared her throat, and Peter listened intently.

“What’s the meaning of life?”

Immediately, images flipped across the screen frantically in a jumble. People, events, landscapes, artwork, emotions, memories, as if the spirit of the booth couldn’t pick which to choose because the question encompassed them all.

There was a script for this type of question, in case the inevitably curious capitalized on the power of the kiosk. But Peter believed the generic answer was too vague. The “Golden Rule” and all. He believed humans were looking for something deeper than that, and deserved it. Scanning Jamie’s life story, he decided she was ready to hear it.

“There isn’t one, really. There’s no purpose for any of this, or any of that,” he said, pointing down. “Is that haunting? I don’t mean it to be. The point is...,” Peter paused, not even sure what he set out to say in the first place. He may have made a mistake ad-libbing. *The big guy is gonna be so upset.* About to backtrack to the memorized line, a realization emerged, and he continued, “...to live. Just to be. Most let the distractions and roadblocks get in the way of that. Or the intimidation of the unknown. You want to know the honest truth? The undeniable fact? Everybody’s looking for *something*. But the point isn’t about what you do when you get it. The point is to enjoy the search. Because every day is a gift, and the ride might be over before you find what you’re looking for.”

Jaime nodded again, somewhat serious before a coy grin sprouted. “Do you tell everyone that answer?”

“Ah-ah-ah, only one secret of the universe per visitor. I’m afraid it’s time to go.”

Jamie raised her hands in mock surrender as Peter snapped. Like every soul before her, and every soul to come, she traveled toward eternity with Peter’s answer guiding her along.