

The Fugitive Theory

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The aliens liked octagons. That much Derrick knew. He stood a little taller for the first time in decades while studying the eight-sided tunnel opening. Its depth and blackness poured into the rock face, and only a few vines had dared to encrust the edges. The tunnellers may have predicted man's development of octagonal stop signs, or so the wilder theories suggested. If true, Earth's visitors had clearly shaped their hiding place to keep people out.

As if intimidated, Derrick's backpack slid further down his back. This time, he let it. He'd die in the tunnel anyway like every other depressed explorer who had gone in too deep. The aliens existed, all right. Whether they came here to hide something or hide themselves, they'd keep any life from ever getting out. Most people don't even believe the fugitive theory or any other alien-based explanations. But radiometric dating doesn't lie. Researchers worldwide had dated the tunnel at over 4000 years old. No Earth technology could clear so much rock so neatly.

Derrick didn't turn to say farewell to the sunlight or let it say farewell to him. He simply walked in. Only wilderness and warning signs sprawled back there. It all backed up like shit to the very end of his life's journey. And beyond the woods? Assholes. Assholes in a chain that led back to Derrick's parents. The world spat people out onto the shores of this tunnel, and they walked in to death like a shelter.

The detritus and guano on the tunnel floor had only invaded a few dozen meters. But the smooth walls still looked clammy farther in. Or they didn't. Who cares? The world had seen this part filmed with every kind of camera. The aliens nested much deeper, where no one could escape for some reason. Anyone who ventured in about ten kilometers never got out, nor did their findings. Derrick aimed his flashlight beam around the walls for a few impetuous looks. Then he gave up. He'd see God in here one way or another to lift the veil of misery. With this evidence for extraterrestrial life discovered eight years ago, and with atheism conquering belief across Earth, aliens had become the new God. They offered hope for people to suckle on, a new paternal protection. Maybe they'd have meds that fucking worked.

All the world's anthropocentrism fell apart further as news spread of the mysterious tunnel. Knowledge and near proof had stripped the soul out of things. The gray walls intimidated, but lacked any majesty. But at least they lacked all the stench of mankind Derrick endured his whole life. The dry air did nothing in here. The rock pores excreted nothing, not even sound.

Derrick proceeded down the samey octagonal tunnel for two hours. On both sides of him, the wall sloped up from the floor at 135 degrees. It bent perfectly vertical, sloped toward him at 135 degrees like an overhead arch, then bent perfectly horizontal to form the ceiling. Each of the tunnel's sides—the floor, the ceiling, and the three sides forming each wall—looked a little over a meter wide. The ongoing boredom and quiet of it all felt almost satisfying. The birds on the way here just never shut up.

His feet and shoulders ached from the backpack, but the futility of everything hurt the most. He could have walked straight the whole time with the flashlight off. But why save batteries? Why bring food and water if the aliens kept whatever entered?

According to the leading notion, the fugitive theory, the aliens sought total seclusion, an extortionate cave in a remote forest. This first stretch of tunnel kept simple moss and insects from getting too far. No one had found the tonnes of rock removed or signs that anyone *had* removed anything so voluminous. The builders, apparently, could dematerialize cubic kilometers of stone for redundancy. They just wanted some extra quiet from the generations of crickets living in the first twenty meters.

They probably own a magic wand, Derrick mused. They teleport dungeons and stool to the core of a star. Probably our star.

Derrick still brooded over problems outside, like man's failure to find machines or ancient roads to the tunnel entrance. Distracted, he nearly walked into the wall of the first sharp bend. The tunnel turned left, then right, right again, and left, all with perfected 90 degree angles. Many paces separated each bend, too many to count and care about at the same time. The turns added a block C shape in the otherwise straight passage. The scientists said this kept radio and light signals from escaping. And people.

If so, Derrick agreed with the aliens. Whether fugitives, invaders, or explorers, they didn't deserve the flow of humanity's horseshit. Maybe if he went deep enough, they'd all have a quiet alien tea for a few thousand years.

But most scientists proposed that the aliens simply killed anyone depressed or desperate enough to intrude. Over two hundred people had entered the tunnel, passed the Rubicon C-bend as Derrick just had, and never came back. They left notes and spray painted perfunctory messages on the walls. But none of it added much to what mankind already knew. Dinky cellphones and glorious walkie-talkies could not pass signals through the rock. A robot sending the same wavelengths wouldn't help either.

Derrick recalled how the colder scientists wanted an expedition, a chain of explorers to yell messages back to the safe stretch or use semaphore. But that era of toughness had passed. Entering the tunnel became illegal two years ago unless you had certified major depression. Only the clinically suicidal could enter legally and explore.

Of course the bubble-wrapped hero types, controversialists, and holy crusaders all protested. They would practically shove eggs up their asses to protect something—anything to validate one's morals in a world of fading spirituality. But lawmakers knew that exploring a one-way tunnel beat jumping off a bridge or shooting at a cop for sweet mercy. The policy of letting suicidal patients disappear in the tunnel became known colloquially as the "better than nothing" argument.

Derrick didn't care what either side thought. He'd end his pain one way or another. And if

mankind's knowledge of alien life improved by him dying, then all the better.

He had consumed enough caffeine pills and energy drinks everyday to shrivel his brain to a wrinkled red dwarf. It radiated irritability. Every millisecond, Derrick's entire nervous system screamed for silence. Ten years could pass, and he'd keep whining without control. The doctors had doped him to heaven and the static beyond. But that didn't help. Only death will work for sure, if one did it right and avoided rescue.

And the aliens don't fuck around. They don't care about moral crusades.

Derrick kept the moping up and his head down. Walking through the forbidden darkness beyond the famous C-bend meant nothing. Man could drop him on Mars in a billion-dollar spacesuit, and he'd still tell Earth to go fuck itself. Both worlds could fuck themselves, and the afterlife too. The tunnel stayed the same in the stretch after the C, as if it too didn't care. The walls almost dripped with dried graffiti, and a few discarded spray-paint cans littered the floor. But it all looked like bullshit. The balloon letters from women fuck-ups, the block letters from man fuck-ups, the exclamation marks and big neon arrows—all bullshit from bullshitters. They all needed dreams and decent parents.

Derrick crouched and dug out a bullshit bottle from his bullshit backpack. He drank the bullshit water. After throwing the empty a ways back, the journey continued.

He wondered if the the fugitives had scanned the Earth. Maybe they found no other stretch of rock that could contain a hall with this much rectitude. Maybe a tunnel anywhere else would cause a crack or hit a vein of ore. What wondrous technology and brilliance the aliens achieved. And Derrick now reflected on his great contribution to human lore: an empty water bottle to tell the next asshole he'd gotten this far.

Derrick also wondered if the aliens already trapped him with their minds. Maybe the tunnel would go forever, even if its victims turned around. But he brought cyanide pills for that.

Derrick saw, with arduous effort to glance up, a boulder on the floor ahead. He aimed his light at a shallow hole in the ceiling from where the chunk fell out. Just raising the flashlight annoyed him. It felt like having to aim his dick at the toilet bowl every miserable goddamn morning. Thinking about this made Derrick's bladder sting a bit—punishment for drinking plain water.

The dislodged boulder looked about a meter wide. Some asshole had probably swung a pickaxe at the ceiling, like he'd earn points for originality. Everyone else had simply braved the journey and pressed on. They counted as assholes too, but at least not everyone wanted to leave their pathetic mark in the aliens' hallway.

As Derrick approached the boulder, someone ahead, some asshole, shined a flashlight in his face. "Stop!" a woman's voice shouted. "Don't pass the rock!"