

A stylized illustration of a person's face in profile, facing right. The face is rendered with thick, dark purple outlines. A large, solid red apple is positioned over the right side of the face, partially obscuring the eye and cheek. The apple has several small, yellow, teardrop-shaped seeds scattered across its surface. The background is a solid, light pinkish-red color.

# The Quest

G A Price

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Agatha Newell looked around herself as she left her electric car and began the journey she made every month.

For the past four years, she had been determined, no, obsessed, to find something which had become incredibly rare.

A little old lady with greying hair and plenty of wrinkles, Agi (as her friends called her) shuffled towards the battered old shop with the word of the store barely legible - Antiques.

It was a rough neighbourhood. There were hardly any inhabited houses left, most were boarded up - in fact the whole road looked more like a ghost town. It was hard to imagine that ten years earlier the place had been bustling and alive.

Still, Agi would come to the battered old antiques store regardless of the state of the neighbourhood. She was focused on her quest, and no broken down road was going to stop her from visiting that tiny store.

The chimes sounded as Agi pushed open the door. It was hard to open and needed oiling because it made a terrible squeaking noise. Still, Agi soldiered through and shuffled to the front of the store.

Mason was sitting at his computer, as usual. The balding middle-aged owner of the antiques store was generously built, shifty eyed, bored. No-one bothered to come to this store now, and he was barely hanging onto it. The overheads alone were driving him out of business.

No doubt he was surfing the Heaven network, a virus free world wide web that had eradicated the need for movies on a disk. Blu Ray, Agi remembered. It took a while to get a foothold, but eventually replaced DVD's completely. Then it was replaced by the ultimate home entertainment system. Heaven was an apt name.

Mason stared at Agi, his mouth curling into a smile. "Agi, nice to see you."

Agi smiled back. "I'm here. Same time. Every month. Please say you've got it."

Mason shook his head, his smile faltering. "You know how hard it is to get one of those damned things. I can't even remember owning one, either as a kid or an adult. It's not going to happen, Agi."

Agi sighed and smiled sadly. Mason couldn't remember owning one, that was very sad. Agi remembered sitting with her legs curled into an armchair, her face brightening as the pages turned. Emotions flowing - sadness, happiness. The smell of the pages, the feel of one in her hands. It was magical.

Long forgotten now. Now all people had were those government issued Tome's. They looked like a book, but when the lid opened, it was connected to Heaven's vast collection of fiction and non fiction works - spanning centuries. Most of Heaven's Library was free -

except for the modern bestsellers of course. They were available at a cost to download onto a Tome.

The government had recalled all books in 2021. Tree's were being cut down at an alarming rate. Resources were needed. To replace the books, Tome's had been given - one per person in the UK. It had been a trying time, but people had relinquished their precious books. No doubt some remained hidden, a precious first edition hardback here and there - but they were almost eradicated.

Most people had been glad to get rid of their beefy book collections and receive a Tome instead. It housed all their books and millions more - all at the mere touch of a screen.

People had become very minimalist over the past five years. Houses had no collections of films, or albums, or books anymore. There was no need. Heaven substituted all of this, and left more space and less clutter.

Agi waved goodbye to Mason, and left the store feeling deflated. As she got into her electric car she remembered the way books had felt in her hand.

They all had this heavy quality to them, a vast collection of words that became a story - that spoke to the soul. Agi had never been happier than when she had been curled on her chair reading her favourite books.

She drove for twelve miles to reach the next beaten up old store. Joan was waiting for her with a cup of tea, and waved as Agi parked and shuffled over to her.

"I made this for you, darling Agi." Joan smiled. "I knew you'd come. You always come."

Agi hugged Joan, and then they both entered 'Joan's Emporium' by way of another equally difficult door.

Both women sat at a small table, and Agi lifted her cup thankfully and took a sip of the hot liquid.

"How's your day going?" Joan asked.

"Not good. One down already. No joy." Agi sipped at her tea. "I don't care what book it is, by any author. I just want to feel one again. Hold it in my hands. Breathe it in. Curl up with it on the sofa." Agi stopped talking, tears building in her eyes. "People don't know what they're missing."

Joan nodded, her eyes misty. "I remember I owned my first book when I was six. It was a collection of short stories, fairy tales. Oh, they are all available on Heaven, but it was magical back then. I read and reread that book many times. It became dogeared and torn, and was stained by soft drinks and sweets. It had a power to it, that book. It was mine - my world, written by someone that understood me."

Agi nodded. "I understand, Joan. It's not about reliving that experience for me. Its about holding the evidence that they did exist. My memories were real. That pleasure was real."

"I haven't found one, Agi. I'm sorry." Joan smiled sadly into her cup. "I've looked everywhere. They do exist - but they are owned by private sellers or museums. I've tracked down a few, but the prices are astronomical. I don't think you'll get one, hun."

Agi nodded thoughtfully. "Thanks for trying, Joan. It means a lot."

Joan shrugged and took the two empty cups to a small wash basin in the corner of the store. As she rinsed them out, she glanced over at Agi. "Maybe you should approach a private seller yourself. If they heard your story, they might lend you a book for a day."

Agi shook her head, smiling brightly. "It wouldn't be the same, Joan. Knowing the book is yours - really, truly yours - is magical. I'll keep looking. I'll keep searching."

Joan waved goodbye to Agi. As the door closed, Joan whispered softly, "See you in a month."

The last store on Agi's list was another run-down antiques store on another bruised and beaten neighbourhood. Agi's legs were starting to hurt, and she hobbled to the doorway of the store, pushed open the door and looked inside.

This store was the last antique store in the county. Agi's last chance to find her prize.

"You should just email me first, Agi." Mr Mendes smiled from behind the till. "It would save you time and energy."

"It wouldn't be the same. I love doing this every month. Too much is done from people's own sofa's, these days. Getting out there, experiencing the world first-hand. Its amazing." Agi shuffled over to Mr Mendes, and shook his hand.

"Tell me you've got good news. You're the last one." Agi smiled hopefully at Mr Mendes. "I'll only be back in a month if you haven't found one."

Mr Mendez winked at Agi, and rooted below his desk for something. "Its not much, Agi. But I found something. Its by James Herbert, the horror author. Its a paperback, not a hardback. Its well worn and almost falling apart."

Agi's eyes widened as the scruffy paperback was placed carefully on the table. "I've read some of his work. Quite thrilling. I've read this one - The Fog - very good. How much do you want for it?"

Mr Mendez shook his head. "Agi. Read the back and tell me."

Agi turned over the novel to read the price as it was originally, the price of the original pristine paperback.

"I can't, Mr Mendez. This is worth so much more." Agi looked at her saviour, tears forming in her eyes. "I've been saving a long time for this. I have over 500 pounds ready."

"The price on the cover says £6.95. That's how much you'll pay, Agi. No more, no less."

"Oh, Mr Mendez!" Agi handed over a ten pound note, and received the change gratefully. "I don't know what to say."

"Just enjoy it, Agi. Curl up with it and read it again and again. I'd keep searching for a better quality find, but for now, this should keep you going."

Agi lifted the paperback carefully and clasped it to her chest. "Thank you."

As Agi left the store, Mr Mendes smiled. With his store closing for good, he had wanted to do one last thing - a good thing, for his most regular customer. Old antique stores just weren't wanted anymore.

He walked over to the door, and closed up shop for the final time.

As he put the 'Closed' sign in place, he smiled to himself. His last customer had left happy, and it was over.

At home that night, Agi was curled up on her sofa, reading the paperback with a careful hand. She was happy.

She was content.

