

Purgatory

*(chapter from a novel in progress)*

She should have expected this, but she probably hadn't been thinking clearly, particularly not at the very end. Which was why it had become the very end.

Melanie sighed deeply. Overburdened. Underappreciated. Of course she wouldn't get directly into Heaven. Stuck in Purgatory, Heaven's waiting room.

At least Ichiro was here. Of course he was. The little dog was always snapping at people, particularly children. She'd had him put down, in one of her "I've had enough, I'm taking charge of life" moments. After all, you couldn't risk having your dog bite someone. Even if he was just a chihuahua, whose bark was almost guaranteed to be worse than the pathetic little bite his weak jaw and worn little teeth could deliver. And she was putting her money where her mouth was, she had always resented her mother for defending her precious yappy, snappy poodle, brushing aside his snaps and growls at the grandkids. True, neither Ichiro nor Buster had ever actually bitten anyone, but Melanie had had enough of both dogs. At least Ichiro, she could do something about.

And now here he was again.

Well, she hadn't assessed him incorrectly; even God wasn't ready to admit him to Heaven. Proving that, no, in fact, all dogs do not go to Heaven.

Itchy was happy to see her. He had, after all, always been her dog. Which was part of the problem, part of his dysfunction.

"Hey, Itchy," she said.

He wagged his little tail so energetically that his whole body wiggled convulsively.

She picked him up, and he licked her face with gusto.

“Yeah, I’m glad to see you too.”

She wondered who — or what else — she would find in Purgatory.

Purgatory seemed to take its designation as Heaven’s waiting room seriously. Because that’s what it looked like, a waiting room. And, frankly, it was a little rundown and dated looking. Although, Melanie supposed, dated by Earth 2016 standards. Who knew what was fashionable, à la mode, up-to-date, in the afterworld.

But rundown? What was up with that?

Presumably, the powers that be put all their money into Heaven.

She walked up to the front desk.

“Excuse me?” Melanie queried.

“I’m new, and I don’t know the process. Also, can you confirm where I am?”

The gaunt young man at the desk swiveled in his chair and surveyed Melanie.

“Hanging?” He gave a very visible shudder.

“How did you know?”

“It takes a while for atoms to reconfigure back to a — um — more pleasant, less obvious configuration. One of the many reasons we can’t release you into Heaven right away. It would make Heaven — well, a bit unheavenly for the current residents.

“I don’t mean to be rude, Mrs. Garvey, but you are a fright.”

“Really? Let me see.” Melanie turned her head side to side, scanning the room. “Is there a mirror around here?”

“Absolutely not,” the desk attendant replied. “You don’t need to see that. We don’t have mirrors here. We get a lot of suicides in Purgatory, and a lot of them don’t look great, so it’s our

policy not to have mirrors. And frankly, dead people generally, well it's not usually pretty. No mirrors. It's one of the few kindnesses we provide here in Purgatory."

"So, I'm in Purgatory?"

"Yes, ma'am." The desk attendant nodded his head.

"Why is it just me and the dog?" Melanie hugged the now contented and calm chihuahua closer to her chest. "It's an awful large waiting room; why aren't there any other people here? I can't be the only one in Purgatory."

"No, you're not. We have an essentially infinite number of waiting rooms in Purgatory. We only put beings who know each other in the same Purgatory waiting rooms."

Melanie looked down at the dog. "This is the only being I know in Purgatory? My dog?"

"Currently, yes. The dog that you yourself killed. Which, given the circumstances, is going to add time to your stay here in Purgatory."

"How long is my stay going to be in Purgatory? You know, I'm a suicide, I suffered, I should not have to put up with this."

"Honey, I don't have the printout from headquarters yet, so I can't comment on how long your stay will be, or what actions you did in life are going to require compensation.

"I can tell you that, yes, the suicide part really doesn't add a lot. Part of the report will tell me if there are mitigating factors related to your immediate cause of death — that is, the suicide — and then give the required time frame for that component. And killing the dog, that's also going to be a variable length component."

The desk clerk eyed the dog. "Although, given that the dog is not one of those good dogs who went directly to Heaven, maybe your time added would not be particularly significant for that transgression."

“So, if it’s a forgivable suicide and killing an arguably rotten little dog, what do you estimate I have?”

The clerk pursed his lips in a tight smile and shook his head. “No, no, no, you’re not trapping me like that. I have no idea what your other transgressions are, I will not be pushed into a corner. The last time I gave someone an estimate based on their, naturally, stretch-the-truth assurances of what they had and had not done in life, not only was I completely off base, I was completely out of line. The powers that be assigned me to Hell Intake for three months after that, and believe me, sister, that is not an assignment I want to have again in this eternity.

“I have to head over to Waiting Room A-4569 now; there’s a new arrival. Here’s a welcome pamphlet you might like to review. The TV on the wall is also at your disposal. The control is on the corner end table. You might be interested in some of the available channels. Someone will be back later to check on you.”

“What about food? Coffee maybe? A restroom?”

“Honey, you’re dead. You won’t be needing those anymore.”

“A more comfortable chair?” Melanie eyed the hideous orange, and likely ungodly uncomfortable, molded plastic chairs.

“This is not Heaven. These are the chairs we have here.”

With that, the clerk closed the window.

“Well, at least I’ve got company,” she said to Ichiro. “Such as you are.”

She put the dog on the floor and took a seat.

It was as uncomfortable as she imagined. Seated, she noticed her legs. Hospital scrubs. She looked down at her chest. Also hospital scrubs. That wasn’t what she had died in. She didn’t

even own hospital scrubs. She stretched out her legs and looked at her feet. Crocs. Well, she supposed that made sense with the scrubs.

This is not what she had died in, that she knew. She had dressed very nicely for her death, even brushed her hair and put on makeup. She had, after all, wanted to be a pretty corpse. Although the desk clerk had implied that she did not, in fact, look pretty in death. And this outfit was kind of an outrage. Well, perhaps it was standard Purgatory issue. She imagined she would get much nicer clothing once she made it to Heaven.

She was going to make it to Heaven, wasn't she? Damn it, she had been a lapsed Catholic for so long, she could no longer remember the rules related to Purgatory. Of course, she had probably never bothered to learn the rules. When she was very, very Catholic, back in her very, very Catholic days, she had assumed she would be taking the express lane to Heaven. In which case, why bother with the details of Purgatory? She would never need to know that.

And then, when she became a lapsed Catholic, well, she wasn't a bit concerned about Catholic doctrine anymore.

This was Catholic Purgatory, wasn't it? I mean, other religions didn't have Purgatory. Well, this meant the Catholics were right. They were the one true religion. How about that. All those Muslims and Jews and Buddhists and Hindus and Atheists and what not were going to be quite surprised. Melanie smugly imagined them all in Hell. Then she wondered if that was the type of thought that could get her time in Purgatory extended.

Could you do things in Purgatory that extended your stay? Alternatively, could you do things that shortened it? Melanie despaired that she couldn't remember the rules, if she had ever known them. Nevertheless, she decided to think more pleasant, honorable thoughts. Until she established the ground rules, she figured she had better be careful.

The brochure. She remembered the brochure the clerk had handed her. Still in her hand. Melanie, you are losing it, she thought. Well, her poor little brain had been without oxygen for quite a while. That was how you died by hanging wasn't it? Oxygen deprivation?

Was she breathing now? Maybe not. Her chest wasn't expanding. She didn't feel the subtle flow of air past her nostrils. She put her right hand on her left wrist. No pulse. Up to her neck. No pulse. Well, she was dead. What did she expect?

She had expected, she guessed, to be just dead. After she had lost faith in faith, she presumed death would be blessed nothingness.

Not a sterile waiting room with worn-out molded orange chairs.

And why was she hungry? If her lungs weren't pumping, if her heart wasn't beating, why was her stomach crying for food?

Ah, that she remembered. Suffering. It wasn't the suffering of Hell, but there was, at a minimum, low grade, annoying, non-fatal suffering. Like hunger. And thirst. Oh, damn it, why did she think of thirst? Now she was thirsty. And presumably without working kidneys or a working bladder.

"Are you hungry, too, Itchy?" she asked the little dog curled by her chair on the hard and scratched linoleum tile floor.

Not that she cared about his problems. She cared about her problems. Which the suicide was supposed to have fixed, but clearly did not.

Well, since she didn't remember the necessary details about Purgatory, she had better read the brochure the desk clerk had handed her.

The brochure was cleverly titled *All About Purgatory*. Well, that's what she needed to know, so good job on the title.

She opened the brochure. It was personalized. Nice touch, she thought.

*Dear Melanie Jane Garvey,*

*Welcome to Purgatory.*

*We are sure you have questions. This pamphlet has been produced to give you general information about the Purgatory Operation. Specific details about your particular expected stay within our Operation will be provided after your case analysis is complete. Cases are analyzed in the order received. We are currently experiencing significant processing delays due to ongoing civil wars in certain Earth Sectors, as well as high levels of suicide by Ungrateful Residents of Very Nice Places. Your patience in receiving your details is appreciated.*

*We take everyone's case seriously, and will do the utmost to get your case to completion as soon as possible. Meanwhile, do not enjoy your time here in Purgatory Operations. It is, after all, Purgatory. It is not meant to be pleasant.*

*We hope that this brochure will answer your most pressing questions — and perhaps generate some well-deserved angst — while you wait for additional information on your case analysis.*

*Sincerely,*

*St. Nicholas of Tolentino*

*Head of Purgatory Operations*

*Earth Afterworld — Catholic Division*

Wednesday Matinee

*(short story first published in Oakwood)*

“I’d like a ticket for the 2:50 showing of *Bohemian Rhapsody*,” Lucy said.

“That will be eight dollars. Where would you like to sit?”

The ticket seller rotated his monitor towards Lucy so she could see the available seats.

Lucy shifted her stance and craned her neck to get a good look at the screen. As she did, her pink sweater, which had been loosely slung over her right shoulder, slid onto the floor.

“Oops,” she said. “Excuse me.” Lucy, embarrassed, bent down to retrieve the sweater, almost spilling the contents of her open purse in the process. Why had she brought this silly sweater anyway? Did she really think it would be that cold in the theater? Yes, yes, she did. Always be prepared. She popped up and returned to staring at the seating chart.

Who went to a Wednesday matinee anyway? No one, it appeared, almost no one went to a Wednesday matinee. Only two seats showed as unavailable. Don’t pick a seat near those people. In an almost empty theater, that would be weird. Not too close to the screen, not too far to the back. An aisle for easy escape.

“E5,” she finally said, after what to her seemed an interminable decision-making process. Indecisive, she berated herself. The ticket seller must think she was ridiculous, so long for such an easy decision. Don’t you know where you want to sit? She collected her ticket and her change.

“Theater one, behind me and to the left,” the ticket seller directed.

She stepped back from the ticket booth, fumbling to put her change in her wallet and juggle the ticket and her receipt. A man approached the ticket booth. She didn’t quite take him in,



more sensed than saw him, as she struggled with her purse and her ticket and the sweater that was again trying to slip away.

“One ticket for *Bohemian Rhapsody*,” the man said.

The ticket seller asked him to select a seat.

“E6,” he replied.

That got her attention. E6 had to be next to E5 — her seat! — didn’t it? Why would he pick an adjacent seat in a virtually empty theater? Had he been watching her? Was he stalking her? Was it her specifically? Or was he the type of man who waited for a lone woman, any lone woman, and then made his move?

Lucy was early, there was no need to enter the theater yet. The man took his ticket and headed into the theater. She didn’t enter. Her heart was racing. It was a matinee, only eight dollars, sunk cost. There were other, less dangerous ways to pass the afternoon than in a nearly vacant theater with a suspicious man. Maybe she should get a manicure instead. A nail salon would be a safe, woman-centric cocoon. Her nails did look atrocious; she had to stop biting them. Or maybe gun shopping; would she feel safer in the world if she had a firearm and a nice, reassuring concealed carry permit? Many things, it seemed, would be better for her mental health than stepping into that theater.

She still had fifteen minutes until the movie started. She didn’t have to decide right now. She could consider her options. She walked over to the food court. She found a table and collapsed into a seat.

Was it just a coincidence, that man picking the seat next to hers? Who picks a seat right next to another person in an empty theater, stadium, bus, food court? No one safe, no one without evil intent or mental health issues would invade another’s space like that. She looked around the

sparsely peopled food court. The food court people were all appropriately distanced from each other, reflecting the societal norm. The man in the theater was intending to violate that norm. This could not be good.

Realistically, though, she wouldn't be alone with the man, right? When she bought her ticket, there were two unavailable seats, seats she carefully avoided when selecting her own location, doing her part to keep the social contract. With those two others in the theater, she would be safe. The man wouldn't try anything — whatever anything might be. And — maybe she just wouldn't sit in her reserved seat. Lots of other seats in the theater — who would know, who would care? She did already pay for her ticket. She could find a different seat, away from the man. She could leave if anything got weird. She could sit near a good escape route. She would just be really, really cautious. It would be okay, wouldn't it?

She finally entered the dimly lit — not yet darkened — theater with about five minutes to go before the start of the film. Where was her assigned seat? She really would prefer to take her assigned seat. It would be a good seat, midway back from the screen, on the aisle. She did not like to be a rulebreaker, she would be uncomfortable changing seats without permission. Maybe she should get permission? No, the ticket seller would find her silly, probably just tell her to take any vacant seat. Maybe. One couldn't know for sure. Some people and places could be quite strict about rules.

The assigned seat. That was where she needed to start, and then take future actions based on how the situation evolved. E5. Where was it? A ... B ... C ... D ... now E. The aisle at rows E and F was double wide — oh, the wheelchair section. 1 ... 2 ... 3 ... 4 ... 5. Well of course, 5 was on the aisle ... and the wheelchair gap meant E6 — the strange man's seat — was across a wide void, a fair distance from her. Not really adjacent, probably too far away even for an errant

arm to reach across and “accidentally” touch her. Still, she thought, a person better adhering to the social contract — don’t get too close to me — might have moved up a row or two to C or D.

The man was already occupying his seat. She could not see his face; it was masked by the dimness of the theater and the hoodie pulled up over his head. His manner and clothing suggested a much younger man than she had originally assumed, perhaps not much more than a boy, an overgrown adolescent. The hoodie, the long legs in ripped jeans propped up on the seat in front of him, and the slightness of his frame screamed young, young, oh so very young.

Was it merely a clueless man-child she was dealing with, no real danger at all? She weighed it all, took her assigned seat. She held her purse tightly on her lap and placed her pink sweater over the arm of her seat. She stared straight ahead at the repeating ads on the movie screen, forcing herself not to look over at the (possibly, likely?) pre-adult male across the jumbo width aisle. With another glance she could assure herself of his harmlessness, but no, don’t look, don’t attract attention, she told herself.

The other two ticket holders entered the theater, took the two seats — their assigned seats, no doubt — nicely distanced from her, a different row, the other side of the aisle. This positioned them directly behind the man-child. Man-child truly had been oblivious, hadn’t he? Selecting the aisle seat directly opposite her was unnecessary and a bit creepy. But how downright rude to select the seat right in front of one of the few already sold seats. Quiet mumbling from the couple behind man-child, then the two got up and resituated themselves a few rows further back. Not a danger, she reassured herself, that wasn’t why they moved. Just a blocked view.

A creaking sound from across the aisle. What was man-child doing? Rhythmically creaking. She so wanted to look. The lights dimmed further; the previews started. Man-child’s

figure grew fainter in the diminished light. Was he doing something obscene, lewd, perverted over there on his side of the theater? Did she dare sneak a peek? Did she even want to know?

Suddenly man-child was striding across the theater, his slight figure quickly crossing in front of the screen, then heading towards the back of the room and out the door. Was he leaving? She glanced at his seat. A water bottle remained in the cup holder. He wouldn't just leave that, would he? She rocked nervously in her seat — and the rhythmic, creaky sound returned. She smiled in surprise — oh, the seats creaked. And man-child's feet had been up — how inconsiderate! — on the seat in front of him. Innocuous but rude rocking perhaps?

She was kidding herself. Maybe. Just as the seats could creak from innocent rocking, they could creak from indecent acts. Just because she knew how to make the seats creak didn't give her any useful data.

Man-child returned. Reseated himself, propped up his feet. Rip. Opened candy. Creakily rocking and munching.

She relaxed. Everything was okay. Occam's Razor, she should remember Occam's Razor: the simplest explanation is the most likely. He was just a harmless, oblivious young man trying to enjoy both a candy bar and a Wednesday matinee. Just like any normal theater goer.

But was she sure? Could she ever really be sure about the potential dangers around her?

No, she could not be sure. Tell yourself he's not an axe-murderer or a rapist stalking lone women. Tell yourself that even if he is, he wants a younger, smaller, blonder victim. Occam's Razor yourself into the bottom of a canal or the trunk of a car, that's what you end up doing if you try to rationalize away every gut feeling and weird vibe.

Lucy bolted upright and scurried out of the theater as the opening music for *Bohemian Rhapsody* filled the theater.

Well, she had made it longer than last month, when she had entered this very same theater, located her seat, and then raced back out before the previews even started showing.

Maybe she should just go get a manicure. Her nails did look atrocious.

Why, oh why, did she find it so hard to live in the world?

Maybe she did need a concealed carry permit.

Or perhaps she needed to head back to her therapist, yet again. How would that go? She imagined a scene in her head as she strode through the mall, towards the exit, across the vast parking lot and to the relative safety of her car.

“That’s quite a vivid imagination you have, Lucy,” her therapist would say. “No one can worst-case-scenario a situation like you can.”

“Yes, someone else can. My mother. Well, and my father also. It always comes back to the parents, doesn’t it?”

“Parents keep me in business. They mostly do the best they can.”

“But their best isn’t very good.”

“Anyway, I’m sorry you left the movie just because Lewis was so ... distracting.”

“Lewis?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, didn’t you know? That was my son Lewis in the theater. He doesn’t have classes on Wednesday, you told me you were going to the movie, I sent him to keep an eye on you.”

Lucy stood up in anger. “You sent someone to spy on me?”

“Sit back down. Relax. I only want what’s best for you, Lucy. By the way, your nails look absolutely lovely.”

Lucy sat back down and smiled. “Thanks. They match my Victoria Pink Smith & Wesson. Would you like to see?”

Lucy thought the therapist looked alarmed by her offer; well, as alarmed as her oh-so-smooth and professional therapist ever looked.

“No, and I don’t think you should have a gun in the office.”

“It’s okay, I finally got my concealed carry permit.”

“A gun is not going to solve your problem. We’ve been over this before.”

“And yet, you haven’t solved my problem either. And you now have your son stalking me. So maybe I do need a gun.”

Lucy took the pink Smith & Wesson out of her purse and caressed it.

“I’ve been carrying Betsy since that day at the movies. Between you and me, I’m not even a very good shot. But the bad guys won’t know that.”

She did have a vivid imagination. Really vivid and quite unrealistic, imagining herself so confident and self-assured in a therapy session. No, the reality was often, sadly, that she was more of an anxiety-ridden neurotic overthinker.

She reached her little Kia Soul, slipped in quickly while making sure there were no suspicious characters lurking nearby. She locked the door behind her. Her hands gripped the steering wheel, and she held back tears, heartbroken over the timidity she couldn’t shake. She would stay home alone with a Netflix subscription and a gun, living a dystopian variant of the American Dream. That was her fate. Of course she had to get a gun first, preferably a Victoria Pink Smith & Wesson.

There was a pounding on her car window and a muffled voice, and a lanky young man in a hoodie and ripped jeans stood holding a pink sweater in his left hand. Her pink sweater.

That was weird. This had to be the man-child from the theater.

Damn, why had she even taken a sweater with her to the movie?

Why would he leave the theater, follow her out here to presumably deliver it?

Of course he didn't care about the movie, if his only mission was to stalk her. Either because he was merely Lewis, the imaginary (or real?) son of her therapist ... or some demented young man stalking helpless lone women. Hell. How was she going to get her sweater back? But she wasn't going to take the bait; if she opened the door, and he had ill intent...

She started the car, slammed it into gear, and sped out of the parking lot. She never liked that sweater much anyway.