

Eclectic Moments

A

collection

of

short stories

By

Vanessa J. Horn



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What's in a Name?

It was very sudden, I'll grant you that; one moment I was staring out of the office window, calculating how many more minutes until I could nip out for my ciggie break and the next... well, to put it bluntly, I was dying.

Initially, when the mist had begun to swirl around me, I'd thought – as would be perfectly natural on a Friday morning – I was just daydreaming. Albeit very realistically. After all, I wasn't expecting death; I wasn't ill, involved in an accident or even that old. However, a small clue quickly emerged when the pastel-type haze was quickly followed by short cinematic-type excerpts. Of my life. The good bits, the bad bits, even the mediocre bits.

By then, of course, I knew I was in trouble – I mean, we've all heard about those moments just before death, when your life is projected before you. In order for you to take stock, I suppose. So now it was just a question of waiting for the bright light and guardian angel to appear and that was me. Done.

Not that I wasn't annoyed about this occurrence – don't get me wrong, I'm no saint. If I'd had time to gather my thoughts rationally, I'd definitely have been peeved that I was dying way before I was ready (although, admittedly, I suppose most people *would* say that). Equally, I'd have berated myself at my lack of achievement in life; the things I hadn't done, hadn't said, hadn't realised. As I said, though, it was all happening so fast. Too fast.

Anyhow, before I could even blink, there he was: my guardian angel! Or so I assumed - he being the only person travelling towards me on a strong beam of radiance with his arms outstretched. Wide smile on his face. Although he was rather shabbily clothed, to be truthful - not quite what you'd expect. Man at Oxfam I'd have described him, if pushed to do so. Still, it didn't do to be too picky about these things; I myself was not the sharpest dresser, at work or in my social circle. Good clothes didn't necessarily maketh the man, after all.

Before I could so much as pose a question, or even comment on this turn of events, the slightly dishevelled – angel? - grabbed my hand and quickly led me into the beam of light. Whereupon we were whizzed upwards, and innerwards too, if that makes sense. Next thing I knew, we were standing outside an impressive pair of golden gates surrounded by whirling clouds and mists of sorbet-delicious colours. In front of this entrance was an elderly man, sporting a long beard and carrying a bejewelled clipboard. All rather clichéd, I felt at this point, and still incredibly dream-like. I wouldn't have been surprised if I'd blinked and suddenly found myself back at the office, still staring out of the window. But I didn't. Couldn't.

The older man peered at me curiously, from head to toe. Then slowly shook his head. Frowning deeply, he turned to address my scruffy companion, his voice low and resonating. "He's not expected."

Now I was the one to frown (though probably not so impressively). I too turned to my scruffy companion – now to be referred to as SC. My voice came out shakily and at least a semitone higher than normal. "What does he mean, *not expected?*"

At this point, SC was shifting nervously from foot to foot, turning an unfetching shade of cerise. Ignoring me, he spoke to the other man first. "But I went to the correct

place, sir, followed all the rules like you're supposed to – he *is* the right one: Drake Barton!”

The older man let out an elongated groan, slapping the side of his head noisily with his palm. “No! You fool, you were supposed to fetch Blake Downton! *Blake Downton!*”

SC blinked and then shuddered, seeming to grow smaller by the second while we stared at him accusingly. Muttering something that sounded a little like “Bloody dyslexia!” he turned away from us, giving one of the golden gates a hefty kick. I’m assuming it was solid gold, for all the impact he made on it. After yelling and hopping around in pain for a few moments, he finally collapsed onto the ground in an untidy heap.

Shaking my head in bewilderment, I addressed the elderly man. “So it’s a mistake, then? I wasn’t supposed to die today? I can go back?”

He looked downwards. Sighed, rather protractedly, it seemed. His voice was considerably softer now. “Yes, yes and, regrettably... *no.*”

I processed this information relatively quickly (for me) “No I can’t go back? Why not, if I shouldn’t have been brought here in the first place?”

Now he looked up, his eyes meeting mine. Eyes of deep brown, tinged with rings of black. I thought I could detect some sympathy in his expression. Or empathy, at least. “I’m afraid once you’ve travelled through, the way back is sealed. For ever. You will just have to wait now until it’s your time to enter.”

Could this really be correct? “But when *is* my time to enter?” I was feeling more than a little anxious now, to be perfectly truthful. I’ve never been renowned for my patience, and there didn’t seem to be a lot of action going on here. If I had to stay around for too long, I was in danger of becoming incredibly bored.

The elderly man (EM) consulted his clipboard list. Turned over a page. And another. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of rustling sheets, he sighed then mumbled his reply: “September 2nd 2035.”

“What? *What?* I’m not hanging around for” – I made a rapid calculation – “over twenty years!” I threw another accusing scowl at SC who was now resting against the gates, carefully inspecting his injured toes.

Reddening once again, he muttered, “Sorry,” and then, seemingly devoid of any verbal expansion, returned his gaze to his foot.

I rolled my eyes heavenwards – obviously now closer than it had been this time yesterday, albeit still inaccessible – and addressed EM again. “What do you suggest I do while I wait?” I was trying to stay polite; nevertheless, I could hear a querulousness in my voice – but then that was surely understandable in the circumstances.

EM was considering. Scratching his beard thoughtfully. “Legislation states - not that this type of misfortune occurs very often, of course – that you are not permitted to ‘hang around’, as you put it. Not by yourself, anyway. Therefore, you will need supervising until such time as you can legally enter Heaven. Given that it was one individual – and one individual only - that put you in this unfortunate position, it would seem reasonable that he should be your appointed custodian during this time.”

SC and I exchanged dubious glances; neither of us looked exactly thrilled at the idea.

Disregarding the hostile vibes, EM walked over to SC. Tugged him ungently to his feet and spoke firmly. “If you carry out this mission successfully then you *may* be considered eligible to continue in your position of Retriever. Eventually. Providing you also undertake some additional training for your reading problems, of course.”

SC sighed, seemingly unimpressed. Exhaled deeply. Ultimately, possibly having weighed up his options and finding them limited, he shrugged and turned to me. Placed a hand on my shoulder and led me away from EM and the golden gates. “Come on then.”

As we strolled away, through the mists of colours and haze, I glanced at my newly-appointed guardian. He hadn’t uttered a word since our departure from the golden gates, and was seemingly deep in thought. I cleared my throat noisily. “So, what now? Where are we supposed to go for two decades?”

Suddenly grinning, SC drew me closer. “Right. Now, don’t get too excited, but I think I know of someone who can help get you into Heaven before your time.”

I looked at him dubiously. Far from being excited, I couldn’t help wondering if this was going to be yet another mess-up.

My reserve must have been obvious, for SC puffed out his cheeks indignantly, frowning. “Look, it’s got nothing to do with reading, ok?”

I considered. Nodded slowly – what did I have to lose? “Alright, let’s do it.”

There was something about this place that made it impossible to identify how much time had passed; it could’ve been minutes or even hours since we set off, but at some point we reached a clearing in the vapours. SC brought us to a halt. “Here.”

I looked around curiously, but before I had time to comment, I spotted a dark shape looming out of the mist. “The Accelerator,” SC whispered.

A large male figure stood before us. Of indeterminate age, dark-complexioned features and sporting an impressively well-developed body, he was the kind of man you didn’t want to get on the wrong side of. Ever. He raised a bushy eyebrow. “Yes?” His voice was unsurprisingly deep, matching his physique and demeanour perfectly.

Nervously, SC explained our predicament, glossing over his own failings in the erroneous scenario. He wittered on for some time before concluding breathlessly, “So we need to get Blake – um, Drake - into Heaven as soon as possible.”

The Accelerator was silent for a few moments whilst studying us both. Then he replied. “And if I were to... *help* you with this dilemma, what would you be able to offer me in return?”

SC shrugged, holding out his hands. Empty. Without a lot of optimism, I delved into my trouser pockets: a packet of chewing gum, 97p and – unexpectedly - a small ball bearing. Being whisked away without time to throw my jacket on was obviously not to my advantage.

I blurted out, “Maybe there’s something I can *do* for you instead – a favour of some sort?”

His voice was gruff now. “A *favour*?”

“Yes – anything,” I cringed, not usually one to beg, but equally not often found in this bizarre type of situation. Desperate measures and all that...

The Accelerator considered my appeal, looking me up and down as if to determine what use I could possibly be to him. Eventually, an idea seemed to occur to him. He pursed his lips in – I hoped – an approximation of a smile. “Well... I suppose as you are relatively fresh, it *would* mean you have an advantage; you’d be able to access certain areas that I cannot. Areas such as the Edge...”

There was a sudden gasp from SC, indicating that this errand was evidently not going to be an agreeable one. But I remained silent, waiting for the Accelerator to continue. Wanted to find out more before I made my decision.

Possibly encouraged by a lack of immediate refusal, the Accelerator moved closer, now even taking one of my hands in his. “The Edge is the hairline precipice between life and death. Although you can’t step back to Earth, from there you gain a view of the goings-on – can observe friends, relatives back on Earth. I need to find out how my family are coping without me, two years on... If you could just get close enough to see that they are in good form, it would bring me considerable peace of mind.”

I thought about his request. “If I travel to this *Edge* - is it dangerous?” As I said the words, I couldn’t help feeling a bit foolish; after all, I was *dead* – what worse fate could befall me, after all?

The Accelerator bit his lip. Heaved a sigh. “There is a *slight* risk of being lost between the two civilisations, but that’s only if you go too close to Earth; if you’re vigilant, you’ll have no problem. At all. However, if you’re careless, well...”

Beside me, SC shuddered, whispering, “You don’t want to know.”

And actually I didn’t. I already knew that I was going to undertake this mission, dangerous or not. For, basically, there was no way I was going to wander around in the mists for twenty years, waiting for my legal entrance to Heaven. I nodded at the Accelerator. “I’ll do it!”

Surprisingly, as I followed the swirling path that I’d been directed to, I felt no nerves, no fears. Rather, I was gratified that, finally, I had something purposeful to do. Something constructive. I increased my pace, ignoring SC dragging his heels in my wake. Eventually, I was aware of him sitting down behind me with a noisy grunt. “This is as far as I can go,” he said, with obvious relief. “I’ll wait for you here.”

Nodding my assent, I continued on my way, observing that the coloured haze around me was now thickening and making it difficult to see very far ahead. For the first time since leaving the Accelerator, I experienced a slight unease; how would I know when I reached the Edge – would it be obvious where to stop or would I accidentally blunder on and fall over the precipice? And even if I didn’t, would I be able to recognise the Accelerator’s family in order to report back to him successfully? So many doubts. But, despite my anxieties, I kept walking. What else could I do?

Eventually, I spotted a thin contour of land in front. Was that it? Had I reached the Edge? My heart fluttered; could I really be so close to Earth; to my former life, my former self? I hurried towards the solid-seeming strip, all the while keeping aware of my footfalls, anxious not to cross the invisible but lethal line which would render me misplaced. As I grew closer, I slowed down - took even more care. And yes, I could now see how thin the Edge actually was; one step too far and you *would* be lost. I stopped still and peered down at the void which separated the two civilisations; I could see nothing but blackness down there, although - when I listened carefully - I was aware of a faint howling sound. Lost souls? Demons? I didn't care to find out - I needed to get on with my mission and achieve my goal.

Averting my eyes from the deep chasm, I gazed instead across at Earth. Although it was recognisable *as* Earth, I didn't perceive it in the same way as when I'd existed there. For a start, as my eyes travelled across the land, it seemed, initially, just as a whirling juxtaposition of freeze-frame scenarios. Then, when I concentrated on any particular region, the people and objects in that zone would immediately become animated, seemingly going about their daily lives. I could even make out features, expressions. Hear their comments, observations. Incredible! After zooming in and out for a while, I comprehended that what I would need to do was to scan along systematically until I located the Accelerator's family - whoever and wherever they might be - then focus in to obtain details and specifics of what they were doing. Right...

As I've mentioned before, time travels differently here. Certainly not in minutes and hours, as far as I can tell. So all I know is that after a specific period, my eyes began to feel tired with straining, my soul dispirited with disappointment. After all, I didn't really know who I was looking for so how could I possibly know when I found them?

Suddenly, my fevered concentration was startled by a noise behind. Quickly turning round, I was surprised to see SC nervously approaching me. Unexpectedly pleased to see him, I was nevertheless uneasy that he had come this far. "I thought you couldn't -"

He nodded quickly, his eyes flicking nervously towards the Edge. "I know - it's highly irregular, not to mention dangerous - but I felt guilty about letting you go alone; it's my fault you're in this predicament, after all. My conscience told me I had to come and help."

I glanced at his face; he was sweating profusely but seemed to have a previously unseen determination. I was quite impressed, despite my previous lack of faith in him. "Thanks... but just be careful you don't get too close. Have you any idea what I'm looking for here?"

He nodded again, his eyes peering anxiously over the edge of the precipice. "Yes, that's why I came; I'm one of the team who collected the Accelerator - not that he was called that then - and I've seen his family, have an idea where they can be located." He saw me glance at him knowingly. He blushed a little. "And before you say anything, no I didn't get that one wrong!"

I raised my eyebrows resignedly. Just me then. Anyway, I suppose it didn't matter that much now - it was too late to change things *and* we had a job to accomplish. "Ok, let's get this done."

SC proved invaluable, obviously. I don't know how long I'd have had to stay at the Edge, scanning frantically until I got some kind of clue as to who I was looking for, but with him there, at least I had some kind of an advantage. And, as if to prove my point, pretty soon he gave a small exclamation. Pointed downwards. "There – that's them!"

I stared curiously in the direction of his finger. Yes, I couldn't mistake the dark swarthinness that marked this family out as belonging to the Accelerator. A middle-aged woman, two adult sons... ok, well, they looked happy enough. Healthy. Going about their daily lives. But... who was this with them - this tall blond man? They seemed quite fond of him. I frowned, wondering if he was another member of the family. A distant cousin, maybe? SC and I exchanged glances. He shrugged but indicated that we should tune in – gain more information. As we listened and watched, it became apparent that the Accelerator's wife had done more than just survive since her husband had died; she'd obviously set up a new life for herself with a new man. Okaay...

Simultaneously, SC and I averted our eyes away from the family. Moved back from the Edge and sat a safe distance away. We contemplated silently then, finally, spoke at the same time:

"Do you think I should –?"

"What will you –?"

Our combined laughter broke the uneasy atmosphere. Echoed all around the dispiriting place which was the Edge, and drifted way up high into the surrounding coloured mist.

SC shot me a quick glance. "I'd heard the Accelerator was quite a villain in his time, you know. A good family man, yes, but underhand in his business dealings. Apparently."

I didn't find that hard to believe. "I suppose the very fact that, even here, he's running an underhand service doesn't commend him highly. Still..." Being a good family man *was* a strong redeeming feature. But was it enough? And, of course, the truth was that I needed him, flaws or not. So I needed to make a decision.

SC was watching me anxiously. "I think we need to go back." He was obviously keen to return to the comparative safety of the mists.

I chewed my lip thoughtfully. "Yeah, we've seen all we need to. Now."

As we strolled back through the haze, my mind was whirling as much as the mists around us. I thought about what we'd witnessed. Muller over my predicament. Considered lies, truths, white-lies and compromises. I still had no idea exactly what I would tell the Accelerator; I could only hope that the right thing would come to me. Eventually.

The density lessening the further we walked, I became more aware of my surroundings. Either I was becoming used to being here, or the whole experience was sharpening my senses. Now I could see the vapours not just as a swirling mass but rather as separate patterns, meanderings, configurations. I wondered if each one had a symbolism of a sort. Or perhaps they were forms of landmarks, directing individuals like

a 3D map. It was possible, I supposed. Not that we had seen anyone, of course, either journeying to or from the Edge. Although that was probably because of the risky nature of the area. After all, who knew what type of calamity could transpire out here?

Soon, from a distance up high, and seemingly deceptively small because of this, I could see the Accelerator watching our return. He came swiftly towards us, his expression anxious. Apprehensive. *A good family man*. Gradually, my doubts floated up to the surface of my consciousness and then dispersed. Taking a deep breath, I began to speak. Decisively. Assuredly. “I saw them. All is well – you have nothing to worry about.” Slowly, the Accelerator’s expression relaxed until his cheeks were smooth and his lips formed a broad smile.

He clasped both of my hands in his. Surprisingly, his grip was warm. Reassuring, even. “Thank you so much; this means a great deal to me.”

I nodded; I’d done the right thing. There would have been no point in telling him of the interloper who had taken his place - what good could it possibly have done? No, he was definitely best not knowing. I looked up into his eyes. “I’ve kept my side of the bargain – now I’d like you to help me to get into Heaven. Please?”

The Accelerator bowed, a formal gesture which seemed appropriate somehow, in the circumstances. He pointed towards a ray of light behind him. I did a double-take; I’m sure that shaft of light hadn’t been there previously – we’d have definitely seen something like that amidst all the swirls and mists; it would have stood out like the proverbial sore thumb. I looked again. If I squinted, I could just about make out a small silver gate at the end of the beam. The Accelerator cleared his throat. “It’s the back gate to Heaven.”

I continued to scrutinise the access. Frowned. “It looks to be guarded – I can see someone sitting beside it?”

The Accelerator nodded. “The caretaker, yes. That’s the only problem to overcome.”

SC snorted suddenly. “Quite a big problem, I’d say. I thought you were going to get Drake straight into Heaven – no more obstacles?” He folded his arms and stared defiantly at the other man.

I, in turn, stared at him; this scruffy companion of mine seemed ever-surprising; I didn’t know he had it in him to speak to someone like the Accelerator like that. I shook my head disbelievingly.

Unexpectedly, the Accelerator laughed, the deep noise cutting through the vapours around us, seeming to clear a pathway directly to the back gate. Now this option seemed more manageable – apart from the guard, of course. Without the mists, I could see... *her* more clearly. “It’s a woman,” I whispered to SC.

He peered over at her and then whispered back to me. “Seems to be, yes.”

Having fulfilled his promise – in *his* view - The Accelerator seemed ready to leave. “It’s up to you now – I’ve shown you the way in; all you have to do is take it.” With a sonorous chuckle, he strode away, back into the haze.

I stared after his retreating back. Muttered, “Thanks for nothing.” Then turned to SC. “That’s it then – we’re scuppered.”

SC frowned. “Hey, my friend; no reason to give up at this stage.” He placed a conciliatory arm around my shoulders. “Look at it this way, we just have one more obstacle to face. Just one, that’s all. A woman.”

I shook myself free from his rather suffocating embrace. “Yes – a woman. One of those creatures that I’ve had absolutely no success with in the whole of my life. What makes you think things are going to be so different in my death, hmm?”

“Aha – you might not have been a lady’s man but I,” - and here SC puffed out his chest with some self-satisfaction – “I was quite the player of my time. Yes, with my beguiling ways and charm, I’ll have you into Heaven in no time. In fact, in less than no time. Just you see.”

I frowned. A *lady’s man* – SC? It seemed unlikely. However, in the grand scheme of things, it may not have been the most unlikely manifestation since I came here. I sighed. Once again, I was putting myself in his hands, but, once again, there was no option. “Come on then, Lothario.”

As we strolled along the ray, towards the bright silver gate, I couldn’t help but feel the smallest tinge of excitement. Was I finally going to gain entry to Heaven, with all its glory and goodness? Was this it? However, as we drew closer to the silver gate, the expression on the elderly woman’s face became clear. She didn’t look happy. She didn’t look happy at all. My spirits dropped as quickly as they had risen. Another setback?

She addressed SC harshly. “What is it? What do you want?”

SC paled a little and then rallied round. “Now then, that’s no way to treat a couple of travellers. We’ve come from far and wide just to visit you, you know.”

I frowned. That was a bit over the top, surely?

The woman obviously thought so too. “Far and wide my serpent! What you want is easy access to Heaven, am I right?”

SC hesitated, then changed his tone to one he probably imagined was alluring. Charming, even. “Well, that would be very pleasant, naturally, but for the while, we are quite happy to stand here and converse with you.”

The woman wasn’t convinced. She grunted loudly. “As if.”

Defeated, I turned to SC. “Let’s go – we’re just wasting our time here. We’ll have to look for some other way.”

Unpredictably, the caretaker reached out and took my arm. “Not so quick, sunshine. I didn’t refuse *you* entry. Only your haphazard friend here. *You*, on the other hand, are quite welcome to enter.” The caretaker shrugged. “In actual fact, I had every intention of letting you in. With those baby blues, who could resist?” She smiled a toothless grin at me and I realised that my luck had probably not changed.

I blinked rapidly, and then levelled a quick glance at SC. He grinned back at me, seemingly unperturbed. Giving me the thumbs up, he then turned round to leave, clicking his heels in the air in celebratory manner. After watching him retreat for a few moments, I took a deep breath and began to walk slowly through the opened silver gate.