

## **Is This Heaven...?**

A free short story by

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Right, I think that's about it. Enjoy.

## **Is This Heaven?**

One minute I was stepping off the kerb, the next...

Bang!

Ouch!

Oblivion.

Just like that. I guess I should have looked twice but I was late. I did feel a bit of an arse, though, if the truth were told... not that I realised I was dead then, of course. That took a day or two to sink in... or was it a couple of millennia? You know, I've no idea, time does weird stuff over here and once you've dumped the body people whizz around like insects over there. I sort of noticed that things were moving very quickly but even so... it didn't sink in until the light turned up.

Yeh, yeh. A little cheesy no? But it was exactly the way I'd heard it described. Brilliant, white, soothing. I followed it in a pleasant daze. I think part of me expected something to drag me back to earth like all those near death experience stories but there was no garden, no smiley bloke giving me a push. Instead, at the end of the tunnel, I stepped out into a plain white room, floor ceiling, walls, all white. No doors or windows nothing but an old guy sitting at a desk. He got up and came over. He was wearing a long robe and carrying a clip board.

"Hello." he said and stuck out a gnarled hand. "Peter. What can I do for you?"

"I'm not sure," I said – I was nervous and tried a joke to crack the ice. "This is the first time I've died."

"Ah, not an old soul then..."

Hmm... 'No sense of irony this Peter bloke.

"Um... not as far as I know..."

"Quite, quite... Well... if you have had any other lives they may come back. If you've only just snuffed it you may take a bit of time to remember of course....." 'snuffed it'? Cheeky old get!

"Name?"

A long pause, my train of thought having been comprehensively derailed by this time. The idea that I might have had other lives which I was, shortly, going to remember was a bit of a bombshell! Blimey! Was he serious? He answered my thoughts.

“Absolutely, don’t worry, once you’re dead, it’s quite normal. You’ll get used to it right away.”

I wished he wouldn’t do that.

“What?” he asked me.

“Ok, look, don’t answer anything unless the question actually comes out of my mouth as speech, ok?”

“How can it? You don’t have a mouth. You’re dead. You’re essence... anything you feel is nothing more than a memory of what you were... speech and thoughts, here, are more of a convention than a reality. I must apologise, I don’t mean to offend, but I’ve been here a couple of thousand years, now and do you know, I find it difficult, these days, to differentiate between the two?”

Okay... this was going to take some getting used to. So, I told him who I was and watched him leafing through the pages on his clipboard. Finally, when we were both beginning to get a little anxious, he found me.

“Michaela. Michaela Stevens.”

“Yep. That’s me.”

“Ah yes. If you step through the door to wardrobe, they’ll sort you out.”

Wardrobe? Was this a film or worse was it... Was I in... Had I gone... I couldn’t frame the word. Ok so I’m no saint but I don’t think I’m any more evil than the next guy. I don’t covet my neighbour’s wife... well, ok I do, I mean, did; I’d bet my life she was gayer than I am – if stuck fast in the closet – but I didn’t do anything about it.

“Before I go in may I ask you...? I mean, isn’t this the point where you...?” Peter gave me a questioning look. “Am you going to send me to... Have I ended up downstairs?”

“Of course not...” He laughed. “I’m Peter, plain old Peter, not saint Peter, look,” he pulled a pair of pockets inside out. “See?”

I didn’t.

“No keys.”

Ah. Right.

“I’m not authorised to send you anywhere, other than through that door there,” he said. It appeared as he pointed. I hesitated. “Go on...” he made shooing motions with his hands. I looked back at him nervously. “I promise you, you’ll get what you deserve.”

Yes, that was what was worrying me. I’m gay, for heaven’s sake! What if the ‘Christian’ right were... well... right? What if I had it coming?

I moved closer. Over the top of the lintel was a crest with a... hmm what was that? A ruminant, for sure but which one? Was I headed for paradise, with the sheep or hell, with the goats? No chance of finding out from this thing. It was a monumentally rubbish likeness.

That’s the trouble with good people, I thought bitterly, they’re almost dishonest, in a way. You could see what they’d done, they’d let somebody who loved carving make that crest. Sadly that person also happened to possess the sculptural abilities of a garden snail. It would have been a lot more helpful to me if they’d given the job to somebody who could actually achieve a passable likeness but no, no.

Ha! Good people. No integrity.

I looked at it again. It could have been a sheep or a goat... Hell (if you’ll pardon my French) on closer inspection it could have been a cow, a dog or even a malformed man it was that bad.

“Thanks a bunch.” I muttered to the ham fisted artist, wherever he - or she - might be and reached for the handle.

I'm not afraid to tell you I was dead scared. You know what the body does when it's frightened right? Preparing for flight and all of that. Yeh, and which bits it empties. Mmm. Well, let's just say, I was glad to be essence and not a physical entity as I went through that door. Turned out I needn't have worried.

Another room, just like the last one, except with a clothes rail full of white robes. The door disappeared as I closed it and a similar old boy to the last one sauntered up to me, smiling benignly. "Good day to you young lady, my name's Peter."

Another one. The doppelganger of the original except that he showed no signs of recognition when we shook hands.

"Hello. I was told this is wardrobe... Dressing up am I?"

"We do like us all to be in uniform. Cuts down on the confusion and makes sure we're all equal. I can't stop people putting studs on their wings and dyeing their feathers purple but at least everyone's robes are the same nice white."

Well, there we go. Same grasp of the ironic as the other old gimmer – ie, none – but no mention of toasting forks or red tights which, presumably, was a good sign. Right then. Onwards and upwards.

He held up a white gown, definitely more Klu-Klux-Klan than heavenly host but who was I to argue?

"These are your togs from now on..." he said and gestured to screen I hadn't noticed. I went behind it and put the robe on. When I'd finished I stood in front of the mirror.

"Do I have to wear this?" I asked him, as I knotted the rope around my waist. "Your average Belsen victim's bum would look big in it."

Again he took my pathetic attempts at humour absolutely literally.

"It's all relative, we all wear the same thing so there's nothing else to compare it to. You'll get used to it," a pause. "Do you play an instrument?"

"Yeh, trombone." I was proud of the fact I played the trombone, it wasn't exactly a girlie instrument where I came from.

"Capital!" He handed me a harp. How naff was that? "Here you are." He must have noticed my quizzical look, what with me having just told him I played the trombone and all. "You'll get the hang of it, I'm sure."

Right. Because it was only one of the world's most difficult instruments to play... it could have been worse, I supposed, he could have given me an accordion or a set of bagpipes.

"Does it have to be a harp? After all, I already know how to play the trombone, wouldn't that be more suitable?"

"Part of the challenge! You know what they say, 'learning something new is good for the soul.'"

"Yes but I don't think 'they' meant it literally?"

"On the contrary, young lady, they certainly did."

"I see."

Oh well. Maybe that explained the rubbish sculpture over the door - it was probably done by the angelic version of Sir Stanley Matthews while Michelangelo was up there playing for Heaven United as they were thumped one hundred million nil by the Satanic Eleven from Hell. I shuddered and Peter noticed.

"Are you warm enough?" he asked. "I do have a few sets of Standard Issue Thermals left."

"No." I crossed my hands backwards and forwards in front of me to accentuate the strength of my feeling. "Absolutely not."

"It'd stop people seeing up your skirt."

"I don't care." If this was heaven, who would be naughty enough to look? And if I was

destined for hell then some dodgy thermals weren't going to stop them.

"So it's still no."

"Yes, it's still no."

"Suit yourself. Last thing. Shoes." He held up a pair of sandals. Absolutely what you'd expect, only far, far worse. A strap with a buckle across the toes, a second strap which went round the heel and over the front. That description makes them sound almost cool, like gladiator boots or something but trust me, these were the worst of the worst. All I needed was a pair of black nylon socks to go under them, a thermos flask of tea, a tank top, an anorak and a book of train numbers to complete the ensemble.

"Damascas DM's?"

For the first time, he laughed.

"I've never heard them called that."

"Common parlance where I'm from... Look... Do I have to?" I looked down at my pointy suede boots.

"Don't worry, you'll find them very comfortable..." he began.

Yes. Clearly I had to. He watched as I put them on and walked up and down a few times. "See? Much better aren't they?" he said as he conjured a rubbish shoot out of thin air and flung my boots into it with a theatrical flourish.

No. I didn't.

"Right o then. You'll be starting with your shift as the heavenly angelic choir, when you've done an hour or so, you stop for lunch and let some other people have a go."

"Do we eat lunch?" I asked. "I thought we were essence..."

"You are but we have a splendid thing going in illusory food here. D'you like baked beans?"

Please no.

"I haven't eaten them for twenty years." Fine evasive answer. How many years did I spend eating school and university dinners? Not sure but I'd probably been offered baked beans with almost every one of them... usually without an alternative. I am probably the only person who has ever existed who doesn't – sorry didn't – like baked beans...

"Ah well, you're in for a treat."

"Mmm."

"Oh! I almost forgot," he handed me a set of wings. "You'll want these. Sorry they don't work, they're just for show but they're pretty, don't you think?"

I raised a quizzical eyebrow at him. Yeh and just like playing the trombone – as a girl – I'm pretty proud to be able to do that.

"For show? How do I get about, I mean, aren't we in the sky?"

"You jump."

"I jump." I said flatly.

"Yes, like this." He leapt up and down on the spot in a manner that was decidedly un-athletic.

"But..."

"Off you go."

Another door appeared in the wall and harp in hand, I did as I was told.

This time, when the standard bearded septuagenarian approached me, I was ready. Once again, he was identical to the last two.

"Hello," I said. "Peter?"

He seemed surprised and at the same time offended. Oh dear.

"No. Paul."

"Wow! Not the Paul?"

"Don't be an arse. I've never been to Damascas. And I'm not to be confused with Peter

either.”

“My mistake, you all look the same to me.” said my mouth before my brain – or whatever it was I had instead – could tell it to shut up.

“I’ll thank you not to make that type of remark, young miss.”

It felt as if I was blushing. Yes. Definitely.

“Look,” I said. “I’ve only just arrived, I’m probably still in shock... I’m sorry.”

“So you should be. Never mind chop, chop! Top row, second from the end.”

That was when I noticed that he was holding a baton and – as my eyes followed where he pointed – a tiered set of staging full of people, each wearing a baggy white robe like my own, the ubiquitous wings and train – no bus – spotter sandals. I climbed up and took my place next to a disgruntled looking gentleman with a trombone.

“Hey!” I said. “Want to swap?”

“Not for that I play the violin.”

“But I play the trombone...”

“Unlucky...”

Git.

Our conversation was interrupted by the sound of a baton rapping on a lectern. Ah yes, that would be the old fellow, Paul, who was our conductor. I turned my attention to the music stand which had materialised in front of me.

“Page fifty three.” said Paul. “Jesus Wants Me For a Sunbeam.” Hmm... I paid more attention to the music book, Pop Favourites, it was called. I flicked through some of the other pages as I searched for number fifty three; The Birdy Song, Agadoo, Mistletoe and Wine, Je t’aime... Je t’aime? Yes... it was a cornucopia of what I held to be the grimmest popular music of all time... and I was going to have to play this stuff every day... for eternity... which was a sod of a long time.

He counted us in.

“One, two, three...”

I did my best with the stupid harp but the music I had in front of me was, naturally, the trombone part and therefore in a different key. Three things became obvious pretty fast as we played. One; Paul didn’t know how to conduct, two; nobody else had an instrument they were able to play either and three; I couldn’t stand an eternity of this, whether or not I was meant to have to.

Only one word can describe our attempt at music, cacophonous...

No. Thinking about it, it doesn’t. There are no words capable of describing the sheer ear-melting aural torture we produced.

We all finished at more or less the same time and there was a short silence at the end of which, Paul asked.

“How did that sound?”

“You’re the conductor, you’re supposed to tell us.” shouted someone.

“How would I do that? I’m tone deaf.”

“For the love of God...” I muttered. “Crap!” I shouted.

“There’s no need for that sort of language!” bellowed Paul, glaring back and forth along the rows to try and discover who had dared to be so rude... or maybe so unsportingly at variance with the if-you-can’t-learn-to-do-a-thing-well-learn-to-enjoy-doing-it-badly spirit of what our endeavours were about.

“Excuse me, “ a woman on the row above leaned down towards me. “I’ll swap you the harp if you like.” I turned round and smiled up at her. She had been issued with a violin. Hmm... And now, I had a plan. A blindingly obvious one. Why hadn’t the others cottoned on?

“Can you play this?” I asked her... trying not to look up her dress – even though I could see everything – or at least, I would have been able to, if she hadn’t had a pair of knee length woollen

drawers on. Bugger, maybe I should have gone for the thermals after all.

“Of course.”

Without more ado we exchanged instruments.

“Swap?” I asked the Trombonist Violinist.

“How did you get her to do that?”

“I didn’t, she asked.”

“Huh. She wouldn’t swap with me.”

“That’s because she doesn’t want your trombone any more than you do, you pillock. At least the violin is lighter to carry...”

“I wouldn’t want to swap it for a harp then.”

“Neither would I but she does because she actually plays the harp. You play the violin, I play the trombone, so why don’t I swap with you then we’re set?”

Paul banged the baton on his music stand.

“Ready?” he shouted.

“No.” said somebody.

“Good. From the top.”

It was just as bad, except in our small corner of harmony where Mister Violin, myself and Mrs Harp made divine music. He stopped us before the end... at least I think that’s what he was doing, either that or he got so out of time he lost us all completely, whatever the true reason, the heavenly choir... and orchestra... ground to a wheezy halt.

“I do believe somebody’s playing in tune.” he said sharply.

“Yes,” I said proudly. “We are up here. Do you like it?”

“Not especially.”

Oh. Not the reaction I expected. How to make this appeal to him then... ah yes.

“Well... it’s different isn’t it?” I said.

He brightened up.

“Yes. That’s true.” He paused for thought and I grabbed my chance.

“Hands up everyone here who has a violin,” across the tiered ranks several people put their hands and their instruments in the air. “Ok. Hands up who wants one.” The violins disappeared fast – except for the one on my right – as the hands holding them went down and a bevy of other hands, clutching a random variety of instruments, went up.

Oooh. That was a good start.

“Okaaaay... people who play the violin keep your hands up, people who have a violin, pass your instruments along to them...” This done we went though the instruments I could think of until everyone had an instrument they were happy with... Except a young woman who won a TV talent singing show while alive and who was incensed at having to play the triangle and a guy who though capable was not confident that he could get to the grips with the complexities of the twenty five manual Celestial Organ.

“Well...” said Paul huffily. “I see you’re taking over.”

“No I’m not,” I said. “But why don’t you try it now... oh and... have you any Bach?”

“We have Beatles.”

Better than what we were playing.

“Great! That’ll do.”

We tried again and this time it was different, it wasn’t only the buzz of being able to play the instruments it was a new sensation. Fun. Yep, we were enjoying ourselves. Maybe an eternity of this wouldn’t be so bad after all... and then I remembered the steady supply of baked beans I’d been promised. Ah yes. Every silver lining has a cloud.

And that was when it happened. I realised that heaven – or was this hell – would never be so

straightforward that I could sort it out and make it bearable in... I consulted the ghost of my watch... a few short minutes? This wasn't right and any moment now, because I'd rumbled what was happening, everything was going to go horribly wrong. Maybe I wasn't dead yet? As that thought crossed my mind I began to fall – which was a trifle scary – until I landed on a large white crash mat in a giant gym. It was empty except for a bloke in flowing robes with a beard, long hair and who gave me the kind of beatific smile which could almost turn me, as he helped me to my feet.

“Are you..?” I began, my voice echoing in the vast empty space.

The smile broadened.

“Not who you're thinking.”

Ah yes, he had angel wings. And his appeared to be fully functional.

“Where am I?”

A shrug. Another smile.

“You might call it Purgatory...” Hmm... if I remembered my smattering of religious education correctly Purgatory is the place where you wait if you're not quite 'good' enough to make it to heaven. I'm not one hundred percent sure how it works, presumably, you sit there until you are.

“What happens next?” I asked, like a complete idiot.

“I'm sending you back.”

“But I've been dead for years...” my voice trailed off. “Haven't I?”

“Time is fluid here. It's not a problem.”

Hmm. A worrying thought struck me.

“If this is Purgatory, where was I a moment ago?”

A gentle laugh.

“It wasn't hell was it?” I gave him my best squinty I'm-extremely-intelligent-and-I-want-the-truth look.

“Not exactly...”

“Was it a test?”

“Ah now there's a question.”

Enigmatic, intriguing even but all-in-all, unhelpful.

“Which you're not going to answer.”

Another smile as he shook his head.

“It's no big deal. You'll know in time.”

Yes but I wanted to know straight away.

“Well... I reckon it certainly wasn't heaven...”

“That's true...” he smiled. “But you never know, you've done ok so far, if you keep your nose clean, next time, it might be,” he winked. “And now you have to go. I'll see you around.”

And I was alive.

I wasn't sure where I was for a moment. The dream had been incredibly vivid and my bed felt... well... firmer than I remembered it and there was none of that pleasant sensation of warmth you get when you come to in the morning, snug and cosy under the covers, revelling in the sensation of not having to get up for those few precious seconds before the desperate urge to have a wee kicks in and you are forced out into the cold. I didn't notice much else at first. I was too busy thinking about my dream.

Yep it had been highly entertaining although only because it hadn't been real. That's when I noticed I was moving. Hmm... very strange... unless this was another dream, of course, which was entirely possible. My ears woke up properly and I started to notice the background noise. Not the sounds of my bedroom at home. This was a conversation and there was a trundling – like rumbling wheels on lino rather than the usual distant traffic... Hmm, was the car crash bit true? Was I in hospital?

A bright spot passed across my field of vision from top to bottom... like a light but hazy as if... yeh, as if I was covered with a sheet... and my big toe felt... odd. I took a deep breath in. Yes. I did have a sheet over my face. Strange...

The gurney – if that’s what I was on – stopped. Good. Because I was going to have to do something about my toe, right now. It felt uncomfortably tight and my instep was itching something chronic - as if someone was tickling it with a feather. I flipped back the sheet and – suddenly, aware that I was dressed in a hospital gown and that any abrupt movement would result in my showing the world behind me a grandstand view of my bottom – I sat up, very slowly.

“Hello...” I said.

I was face to face with a hospital porter. The guy was clearly ill and judging by the colour of him, about to throw up. He leaned round to avoid splattering me – gracious of him in the circumstances, I thought – and proceeded to do just that.

“You ok?” I asked him realising I had a monster headache. The one behind me was laughing.

“It’s not bloody funny, I’ll have to clear this lot up now.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to frighten you...” I leaned forward, carefully so as not to move my head too much, and found my itching foot. My instep was being tickled, by a label, which was tied tightly around my big toe.

“You’re children, the pair of you.” said the sick one huffily.

“Nothing to do with me.” I said quietly, oooh my poor head. Speaking hurt.

“Me neither,” said the one who was laughing. “Funny, though, isn’t it?”

“Not for me! I’m bloody freezing and my head’s going like a gong.” I told them, still not getting what had happened, I curled my foot in so I could read the label more clearly.

Name: Stephens, Michaela. DOB, yes about right – you didn’t think I’d actually tell did you? Surgeon’s name... Mmm Hmm... Time of Death... No... that wasn’t right. My head thrummed and the letters swam in and out of focus. Cause of Death... fractured skull. I blinked and looked around me.

“WHAT?” Jeez no, I shouldn’t have shouted like that. Still, at least the crack in my head explained the way it ached.

I did my quizzical eyebrow thing at the porter who’d thrown up.

“Listen, I’m really sorry, but I think there’s been a mistake. I’m not dead, as you can see.”

“You were, mate, for three hours.” said the one behind me, finally coming round to have a good look. “They’ve been giving us all that,” he held one hand up and made the universal sign for chat with his thumb and fingers. “For not collecting you quick enough. They wanted the bed, see?”

“Well,” I said carefully. “I’m here now and I’ve a fractured skull and I’m feeling a bit rough... so if you want to get your revenge for the ‘all that’ by taking me back to... wherever it is you collected me from, I promise to give them my best ghoulish smile.”

They wheeled me back up the corridor to a security door and through into a ward where they parked me in front of the sister, at which point I managed a rictus grin and, job done, lay back down on the gurney and fell into a blissful sleep. Apparently, all hell let loose after that and a lot of questions were asked until somebody pointed out that a) I had been dead, b) I wasn’t now but that c) I would be if they didn’t sort out my head because alive or not I was a very sick lady.

It was some days before I was finally able to sit up in bed with the plethora of tubes feeding in and out of me finally removed and feel human. I was looking forward to my first meal. It would be a light supper, I was told. At this point, even the thought of drinking that amorphous could-be-tea-but-could-equally-be-coffee they serve up in hospitals, with a meal made that morning in Wales – and carefully shipped to London, over the course of the day, in a lukewarm lorry – couldn’t dampen my enthusiasm.

I had been dead. I wasn’t now. And boy was I going to live! But first, I was about to vindicate

my existence by eating something. I listened to the trolley rumble up and down the corridor with a growing sense of anticipation but nothing came my way. I was so excited that even the smell of eight hour old kept-hot cabbage seemed appealing. Finally, the trolley went away but supper never came. Disappointed, I called the nurse.

“Ah yes. We needed to have ordered your meal yesterday to be able to offer you something today and I’m afraid I wasn’t very,” she stumpled. “Organised,” she blushed. “But it’s not so bad, I thought you’d like something fresh.”

Too right. God bless her.

“Marvellous! What is it?”

She smiled kindly.

“Beans on toast.”

Ah well, I thought, you can’t win ‘em all.

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Regards

M T McGuire