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Highway to Heaven
by Laura Resnick
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She was a pretty little thing, no denying it. Slim, blonde, young -- maybe a little overdressed for the job, but, hey, who am I to tell a dame what to wear? Still, I gotta say, that skirt was so short that no daughter of mine would've been allowed out of the house in it. And now this girl would be wearing that skimpy orange thing through all Eternity. Just goes to show you: parents can never be too careful. But then, according to the Boss, this girl's parents had been a couple of real polenta-eaters, anyhow.

"Excuse me," the girl said to some guy riding by on an elephant. He ignored her. "Excuse me," she repeated. "You're going to have to stop and wait your turn. As you can see, this lady got here before you." She pointed to an old broad in a wheelchair.

"Out of my way, woman!" the guy snapped, urging his elephant to keep going.

"Aren't we done here yet?" The old woman sounded kind of pissed off.

"Oh, pardon me for doing my job." The girl sounded pretty pissed off, too. "Hull-o-o-o! I've already explained to you how this works. Now, are you going to hand over -- "

"Onward! Onward, Maia, onward!" cried the guy on the elephant.

The girl, whose name (according to the Boss -- who's never wrong, after all) was Mimi, waved her clipboard at the elephant. It shied away from her -- and backed straight into a buggy. No, not a baby thing; I mean one of those horse-drawn things. The horse squealed and made a mess all over the highway. The man in the buggy started shouting. So did the old lady and the pansy on the elephant.

I rolled my eyes and decided it was time to step in and take charge. No wonder the Boss had sent me here to straighten things out!

I pulled out my piece and fired into the air. That got everyone to shut up real fast. Then I pointed it straight at the guy on the elephant. "Yo! Hey, you! Yeah, you... Get this elephant under control right now, buddy, or you're going straight back to Purgatory. In a box. You know what I'm saying, pal?"

He sort of foamed at the mouth, then demanded, "Do you know who I am? Do you have any idea whom you're speaking to, peasant?"

"Yeah," I said, "a guy wearing his girlfriend's silk pajamas and riding a gold-trimmed elephant."

"My girlfriend's pa-pa -- " He sputtered. "How dare you!"

"Take it easy," I warned. "You'd be one of them marijuanas, wouldn't you? I seen one before."

"Mirages," Mimi corrected me.

"Maharajahs!" the guy screamed.

"Whatever," Mimi said. Her voice was kind of nasal. I could see where it might get on your nerves if you'd just spent a few hundred years in Purgatory. "But now you're just another pilgrim on the Road to Salvation, mister, and you're going to have to wait your t -- "

"The road to where?" he bleated.

"Sal-va-tion," I said, real slow and clear to help him understand. He sounded kind of foreign, and Mimi talked faster than a welsher promising he'd cough up the dough next week.

The maharajah frowned and looked confused. "No, no, that can't be right. I was... on my honeymoon."

"You honeymooned on an elephant?" I asked.

Mimi made a face. "How romantic -- NOT!"

"I was hunting," he snapped.

"You went hunting on your honeymoon?" Mimi scowled.

"I was trying to bag a tiger. As a gift for my bride."

Mimi went a little pale. "Gross!"

"My father told me that sort of thing impresses women," the maharajah insisted.

"Haven't you ever heard of Green Peace?" Mimi demanded. "Don't you know that wearing animal skins is retro, as in very?"

"So you died hunting on an elephant," I said. "Personally, I'd rather be blown away by a .45 in the middle of a good meal on Mott Street, but, hey, who am I to judge?"

"Blown away by forty-five whats?" he asked, looking really confused now.

"Maybe that's a little after your time," I suggested. "When did you buy the farm?"

"What farm?"

"He means," Mimi said, shoving past me, "when did you die?"

The maharajah clutched a hand to his throat and went all pale and sick looking. "Am I... I'm... Are you saying this is... I'm dead?"

"Oh, give the maharajah a low-tar cigarette," Mimi said. "Hull-o-o-o! This is the highway to Heaven."

"No one talked to you about this in Purgatory?" I asked.

"Didn't you read the instruction manual?" Mimi asked.

"Ah, half the people coming through Purgatory can't read, kid," I pointed out.

"Well, they've certainly got plenty of time to learn," she said, kinda snotty-like.

"Just ignore her, Mirage," I said. "Kids, today -- whaddya gonna do?"

"That's Maharajah," he said through gritted teeth.

"Kind of a mouthful, dontcha think?"

"Excuse me." Mimi poked me. "Who are you?"

"I'm Vito the Knuckles Giacalone," I told her, "and I been sent by the Boss to get your operation running more smoothly."

"The Boss?" she repeated.

"Yeah. You know: the Big Guy, the Head Hauncho, the Big Kahuna, the capo di tutti capi."

The old broad in the wheelchair rolled forward. "Wait a minute! Are you saying you've been sent by... God?"

"Hey, that's Mister God to you, sister!" The Boss don't like no disrespect.

"Are you trying to tell me that the Supreme Deity sent you to tell me how run my station?" Mimi sneered. "As if!"

"I say there!" The guy in the buggy that was stuck behind the elephant hopped down and came running up. Yeah, everybody had to get into the act now. "See here, my good man! What's the delay? What's the hold up, eh?" He sounded a little foreign, too, and kind of girly.

"Get back in your buggy, buddy. This don't concern you."

He got all uppity. People are pretty impatient to get on with their journey after cooling their heels in the Purg for a couple of centuries. "I'll have you know that's a barouche, not a-a -- Never mind. And this does concern me, damn your eyes! Do you know how long I've been trying to get to -- "

"That ain't my problem, buster!" I pointed the business end of my rod at him.

"_Excuse_ me," Mimi nasaed at me. "I do not like guns at my station. The operations manual -- which Saint Peter himself gave to me, I might add -- specifically states that no -- "

"Yeah, well, I'm writing a new rule book, kid," I told her.

"I can't be dead!" cried the maharajah. "I just finished adding a new wing onto the palace that will hold three hundred concubines!"

"Can I go now?" asked the old broad in the wheelchair. "I wouldn't have bothered going to Church every single Sunday for ninety-three years if I'd know it was still going to take this long to get to Heaven."

"Park it, sister!" I said.

Mimi was flipping through the charts on her clipboard. "I don't have a maharajah listed," she said. "There must be some mistake."

"That much is obvious," said the buggy guy.

Mimi blinked at him. "Are you on staff, too?"

"No, of course not."

"Then what do you know about it?" I said, shoving him aside to read the schedule over Mimi's shoulder. She was right: no maharajahs. "He don't belong here," I agreed.

"My point precisely," said the buggy guy.

"Who are you?" Mimi asked.

"It's not his turn till you're done with me!" the old broad snapped.

"Until you're willing to hand over your Impatience and Hostility," Mimi said, "you're not going anywhere. How many more times do I have to explain this to you?"

"I," said the buggy guy, "am Sir Leslie Collingsworth-Pickett."

I took a quick peek at the schedule. "Okay, pal, you're on the list. But the old broad is right; she was here first."

Sir Leslie cleared his throat and took me aside while Mimi and the old lady went back to bickering. "Now, see here, my good man... There's obviously been some mistake."

"Didn't Mimi and me just finish saying so?"

"I mean..." He looked over his shoulder at the others. "A foreign chap? And a woman who is obviously, if I may so, a member of the lower orders." He made a tsk-tsk sound and shook his head. "I was under the impression that I was headed for an entirely different sort of place."

"That can still be arranged," I warned him. "Mister Lucifer gives me a cut of every pilgrim I send him, and the Boss looks the other way as long as he gets his -- "

"No! I meant... That is to say..." He looked over his shoulder again, like he thought anyone else on the highway actually gave a shit what he thought of them, and then whispered, "I was under the impression that there were... you know... two Heavens. One for... their sort. And then a more exclusive Heaven; one for only the best sort of people."

I stared at him. "You're kidding, right?"

He scowled. "You must know what I'm talking about. I mean... surely you don't imagine that I'm going to the same place as they are, do you?"

"Ahhhh," I said at last. "I see what you're saying."

"I thought you would! There's a good chap."

"Yeah. And don't worry about nothing. You come to the right place."

"I don't see how -- "

"See, this here is sort of a way station on the road to your Eternal Destiny."

"A way station?"

"Uh-huh."

"But I don't see how -- "

"You will. Now get back in your buggy and wait your turn."

"But -- "

"_Do_ it, Leslie."

He eyed my gun. "May I remind you, I'm already dead."

"Getting shot will hurt plenty, even so."

He sighed. "Oh, very well, I'll get back in my barouche. But do let's try to pick up the pace, shall we? I don't want to miss the start of the Season in Heaven. Understood?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." I watched him mince back to his buggy.

"What's wrong with him?" Mimi asked.

"I dunno, kid. Maybe that's just what happens when you name a boy Leslie."

The old broad in the wheelchair rolled away and continued on down the highway, having finally given Mimi all her Impatience and Hostility. It was an important job Mimi had out here; the Boss don't like no one showing up at the Pearly Gates loaded down with extra baggage. Heaven just wouldn't be Heaven if everyone was allowed to bring in all their vices, sins, and faults. So, at all the way stations along the Road to Salvation, the Big Guy's soldiers gotta make sure they take away everyone's bad habits and character defects before letting them continue their journeys.

Now, I could see Mimi was dedicated to the job. The kid just lacked experience, refinement, training. She just needed an old pro like me to help her get things under control. Some pilgrims was getting through here without giving up their most coveted sins and most cherished flaws; others was complaining real loud about the long wait at Mimi's station. The traffic jam we had here today was bad for business. The Boss had sent me here to clean up the operation, and I wasn't going nowhere until the job was done.

"Now about this guy on the elephant," I said.

"Is the Supreme Deity upset with me?" Mimi asked. "Am I, like... going to lose my job?"

She had dropped the tough act and was looking kinda scared. Yeah, she seemed like a good kid. We'd work this out. "Don't worry, kid. Mister Yaweh is very big on giving people a second chance," I said.

"So what do I -- "

"Enough dawdling, woman!" shouted the maharajah. "I am not accustomed to waiting!"

"Let me handle this," I told Mimi. "Mister Mirage, look at me. Look right at me. Good. Now tell me: where have you been for the past few centuries?"

"I, uh..." He screwed up his face and thought about it. "It's all very vague... I think it started with an 'L.'"

"Oh, boy," I said. "Talk about your mix-ups."

"L?" Mimi repeated blankly. "That means something to you?"

"You're too young to remember," I said. "Hey, buddy, was the place called Limbo, by any chance?"

His face brightened. "Limbo! Yes! That was it!"

"Good grief," I said. "We're gonna have a ton of paperwork on this one."

"Limbo?" Mimi repeated.

"Yeah. Before your time," I said. "The Boss closed it down a while back." The recession hit us, too; we're down-sizing like everyone else these days.

She looked at the maharajah. "But where have you been since then?"

He was rubbing his chin, trying to remember. "Lost, I think... I remember a road. It was paved with good intentions."

"Ah, I know the one," Mimi said. "Look, I'm afraid you're going to have to double back and go to Purgatory."

"But -- "

"I'm sorry, but those are the rules."

"I refuse -- "

"The lady said you're going back to Purgatory, pal, so that's where you're going." I waved my piece at him. "One way or another. Understand?"

He harumphed and folded his arms. "I just want you to know that when I finally meet the Supreme Deity, I fully intend to complain about the service here."

"That's your prerogative, pal. Meanwhile..."

"Here," Mimi said, thrusting a handout at him. "That's got a list of 1-800 numbers on it, in case you get lost again. On the other side, there's a map which should help you find Purgatory without further delay."

"Back in the Purg," I added, "they'll assign you a final destination and plot your route for you."

"Any questions?" Mimi asked.

"Don't ask him that," I said. "Now beat it, buster!"

"He might have had questions," she argued as the elephant trotted away, the maharajah cursing all the while.

"You got too much of a traffic problem here to go around answering everyone's questions for all Eternity," I told her. "You're gonna have to start doing things different around here, kid. No more Miss Nice Guy. No more letting people talk you into letting them keep some of their faults and vices. No more debating with the pilgrims."

"But how am I -- "

"From now on, you gotta relieve 'em of those sins and defects fast. Chop-chop. No frills, no spills."

"People aren't exactly eager to hand them over, you know," she said defensively.

"And that's why the Boss sent me. To show you how to take 'em away, whether people want to give them up or not."

Sir Leslie pulled up in his buggy. "I say! Are we finally ready?"

"Don't bother looking up this one," I said as Mimi starting thumbing through the schedule.

"Yes, I know he's on the list," she said, "but I need to find out what's in -- "

"I can tell you what's in his baggage: Vanity and Snobbery."

She gasped and pointed to Leslie's manifest. "That's right! How did you know?"

I shrugged. "Experience."

"That's amazing!"

I could tell she was gaining a little respect for me now. "Okay, go to work, kid. I'll give you a few pointers as you go along."

"All right." She licked her lips and looked a little nervous. "Sir Leslie, at this way station on the Road to Salvation, you're going to have to surrender your negative baggage if you want to continue down the highway to Heaven. Now, as they may have explained to you in Purgatory -- "

"Never mind the speech, kid," I said. "Just get the goods!"

She looked uncertain. "But surely -- "

"I say, I'm not handing over anything to you, young woman!" Leslie snapped. "What the devil d'you take me for? Some lowly -- "

"Look how many people are lined up behind Lord Mimsey here," I said to Mimi. "We can't waste all day convincing him that this is the right thing to do. Especially not when you consider that more than half these sojourners is gonna be bringing Stubbornness here with them!"

"Oh, I hadn't really thought of that." Mimi bit her lip. "But what should I do?"

"I certainly don't intend to begin the Season in Heaven without all my baggage!" said Leslie, starting to get a little pink with rage. "The very idea of -- "

"Hand it over, Leslie!" I pointed my rod at him.

"What?" he blinked.

"You heard me," I said.

"Mr. Giacalone," Mimi said. "Are you sure -- "

"Trust me, kid. I been at this for years. Who do you think cleaned up the Road of Good Intentions for the Boss, huh?"

"That was..." She breathed real deep and her eyes got wide with awe.

"That was you?"

"None other."

"Now see here, my good man!"

"Hand over your Snobbery and your Vanity, Leslie, or I'm gonna blow your brains all over the highway. And with things being so busy in Purgatory, it could be centuries before anyone gets out here to clean up the mess and take you back to square one. Am I making myself clear?"

His pink mouth worked furiously for a few seconds, like he tasted something real bad. Finally he said, "As crystal."

"Then hand 'em over, Leslie," I advised.

"Oh, very well, damn you!"

"Smart decision," I said as he fumbled through his soul for his most cherished defects. A minute later, he handed them over to Mimi, who put a big green check mark next to his name on the schedule.

"Okay, Leslie," Mimi said. "You're, like, totally cleared to proceed on to your final destination."

"Splendid!" he cried, driving off.

"So that's how it's done?" Mimi asked me.

"That's how it's done."

"It seems a little... harsh."

"Hey, salvation's no picnic," I told her.

She mulled this over for a minute, then I suggested we get back to relieving pilgrims of their worldly baggage. She watched me hold up a few more sojourners, then said she thought she was ready to try one on her own.

"Whoops! Not this one," I said, seeing the next pilgrim coming round the bend.

"Why not?"

"This one's a friend of mine."

"But surely -- "

"Don't argue, kid."

"Who is he?" she whispered as he approached.

"This guy was my boss before the Boss became my boss."

"Oh..." She frowned and watched him approach.

"Vito!" he exclaimed.

"Mr. Corvino!"

"How the hell have you been?"

"Real good, sir. And you?"

"Oh, fine. Can't complain."

"Got outta the Purg real fast, I see, sir."

"Yeah. Word is, the Big Guy wants to talk to me about a job."

"That's good news, sir."

"Thanks, Vito. Well, guess I'll be seeing you around?"

"I guess so."

As we watched him continue down the highway, Mimi asked, "Do you think he'll be after my job?"

"Never can tell. But, hey, competition is what keeps us sharp, am I right?"

"I suppose..." She looked a little nervous again.

"Don't worry," I said. "By the time I'm done with you, you're gonna be one of the best soldiers the Boss has got working the highway. Trust me, kid."

"Here comes another one!" She glanced at my rod. "Could I... Do you think I could use that? I really want to do a good job here, Mr. Giacalone."

"Sure," I said. "No point in trying to do the job without the right equipment." I handed her the gun and took a look at the schedule. What I saw made my blood run cold. "Hey, we got a real tough case coming up next, kid."

We're gonna make quite a haul here."

"What's the baggage?" she asked, hefting the gun in one hand.

"Greed, Narcissism, Sloth..." I flipped the page and kept reading while a white Cadillac came round the bend. "... Gluttony, Lust, Dishonesty..."

"Wow," Mimi said, taking aim, "that looks just like..."

"... Ignorance, Vanity, Hostility..."

"_Excuse_me," said a strangely familiar voice as the car's electric window rolled down. "Is this the -- Oh, my God!"

"No," I said, "just his faithful servants. Now stick 'em up, sister!"

The dame inside the car ignored me. "Mimi?"

Mimi's eyes went wide and she dropped the gun. "Mom!"

I could see it was gonna be a long day in Eternity.

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