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Burning Bridges As We Go  
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## Vegas Purgatory

“How much longer?” Lily asked her husband.

“Not long,” Roger mumbled pulling the slot lever down, watching the slots roll till they stopped at apple, grape, banana. He looked hypnotized. Ignoring her like she was barely in the room.

“Roger? Roger! Can we please go to dinner? We have reservations.”

“You go. I’ll catch up later. Go to the buffet. It’s complimentary you know.”

“So you bloody well mentioned.”

Lily stared at her husband of thirty-seven years and wondered, “Who the hell *ARE* you?!?”

She saw him match another apple, grape, banana, but showed no reaction to the ringing bells or flashing lights. Even a stoic man would have grunted. Harrumphed maybe. Raised an eyebrow. Something. But he just stared at the machine, pulling on the red ball lever, watching the fruits tumble down, down, down till they stopped. Apple, grape, banana again. Still no reaction.

“Did you just win?”

“Hmm? Busy. Catch up later.”

No reaction. No care. Just mesmerized by the spin, the ringing bells, and the red light flashing on top, all washing out his complexion. Lily never knew him to be so oblivious. So mindlessly inattentive. To be fair, she had never seen him gamble before either. Was this the ill-advised “Vegas purgatory” her best friend, Gayle, warned her about before they left the UK?

“You have to watch yourself out there, honey,” Gayle gossiped, “They don’t allow windows in the casinos nor clocks on the wall so you can never tell what time it is day or night. And they keep all the lights set at the gloaming so you aren’t sure whether you’re coming or going. And they pump oxygen into the room to get you high. So you stay dazed and gambling, but not tired, you know.”

“They do not!” Lily gasped, “You made that last part up.”

“They most certainly do! I saw it on Oprah. It’s all designed to put you into a living stupor and keep you gambling till you lose your life savings. That happened to a cousin of mine who moved to the States years ago. Lost his life savings and now he works as a janitor at some *cheap casino* out there. Bloody sad beggar he turned out to be. You need to be careful. Las Vegas swallows people up!”

Las Vegas was to be Lily’s first trip to the United States of America. Or anywhere outside of England really. She was a *Scouser* from Liverpool who never traveled more than a few kilometers from home. Unlike Roger who had grown up in southern California before joining the Merchant Marines at eighteen and travelling the world - till he met Lily and settled down with her in Liverpool. He did often talk about returning home to the States, but marriage, career, home, children, and grandchildren had occupied most of their life “across the pond.” It had taken some years into retirement - making sure all of their children and grandchildren launched well - before they saved enough pounds for a return trip.

“Maybe we can take a cruise first,” Lily mentioned to Roger after discovering how much their plane tickets to America and the hotel expenses for two weeks would be. “One of those Silver Seas senior cruises to the Riviera. They’re supposed to be wonderful and they cater to older folk like us with all our health, joint, and dietary issues. And we can board right here at Bootle on Pierhead. Wouldn’t a cruise be lovely, dear?”

“I would enjoy a cruise,” Roger responded, “I really would, but we only have enough for one big vacation. And Las Vegas is essentially the same thing, just on land. Not to mention we could rent a car, maybe a pink Cadillac like Elvis had, and drive through the desert to Los Angeles where all the movie studios are. We can go to Universal Studios like you always wanted. See all the movie stars. What do you say to that, dear?”

“Are they that close together?” After thirty-seven years, he knew her too well. He knew she adored Elvis along with all the movie stars from their youth. Warren Beatty and Julie Christy. Elizabeth Taylor, Robert Redford, Audrey Hepburn. Not to mention Sean Connery and Tipi Hedron. It was how she made it through her difficult youth and how she entertained herself between diapers and PTA meetings and the coupon clippings of adult life as a stay at home mom. The idea of watching movie stars making movies right in front of her eyes gave her the kind of excitement she used to feel at Roger’s touch. Maybe more so. She might even meet Harrison Ford. Have a conversation and take a few photos. Oh, that would be exciting! And boy would that make Gayle green with envy.

“Okay, dear, let’s go to America. Let’s go to Las Vegas.”

Lily went online and was about to book a nice room for her and Roger at the Bellagio when a side offer popped up. A special deal offering a fully funded vacation package to Caesar’s Palace along with a second week anywhere of her choice, at significantly reduced prices, if Lily agreed to participate in a time share pitch on their first day right there at the casino.

Lily brought the deal to Roger to look over. “It’s real,” he said. “But I don’t know if I want to sit through some boring condo pitch just for the deal. Still we would save an awful lot of money if we did. It’s a huge discount. Almost too good to pass up. They must be really hard up for customers.”

“So, it’s real then?” Lily confirmed.

“Oh, yeah. They do this kinda thing all the time in America. Get you in the door, sit you down, pitch a time share condo or some such thing, and make it hard for you not to buy into a contract. They promise you happiness and a guarantee you can back out anytime. Then you sign, make a huge down payment, and subsidize a loan for the rest. To a place you end up never visiting again. Or maybe once more, but not more than that really after you realize you don’t have the time, or the money to go that often. So you try to get out of the payments only they make it near impossible to back out and keep after you for each payment. Threats of lawsuits and collection agencies and the sort. Most people just pay off the balance rather than have their credit ruined. It’s more of a railroad job than an out and out scam.”

“So why do people do it?”

“The free vacation mostly. People tell themselves they can sit through whatever pitch given and just not buy anything. That they’ll be able to say no to the pitch and go off to enjoy the rest of their discounted vacation.”

“And that works?”

“No, most people aren’t strong enough to resist. And the sales people really know what they’re doing and how to pile on the pressure. How to tap into each person’s desire till they can’t resist signing on the dotted line convinced they will be happier than ever. They never are though.”

“So why would we consider doing it?”

“Because what those salespeople don’t tell you is you can walk out after two hours – by law. They can’t make you stay more than two. Oh, they’ll coerce, beg, and even threaten. But you don’t have to stay for the whole pitch. You can leave after two hours and they still have to honor their deal for the rest of your vacation. We used to do it all the time when I was a Merchant Marine. It’s how we made the best of our shore leave. Caracas, Istanbul, Romania, and a couple of times in Florida. Some of those salesmen were pretty good. Almost like magicians showing you one thing, then the minute you give them your money, poof, they pull a rabbit out of their hat and disappear leaving you with jack. The boys and I got pretty good at resisting and ended up having more than a dozen no cost vacations. I’m pretty sure I can resist one more rabbit when we go to Vegas and keep those boys and their sales pitch to a minimum. Won’t be nothing they can do about it either.”

“Are you sure we should do it then.”

“Absolutely! Now that I’ve thought about it, I think we should. The discount is unreal. More than 90 percent off? Not only could we take a vacation to the States, but we’d have enough pounds left over to return home and take that cruise you wanted. Best of both worlds. All we have to do is be determined for a few hours, tell them ‘no’ and hold to our reasons why not. Then, after two hours, enjoy the rest of our vacation. I say we accept and do it.”

Lily trusted Roger. And she knew the extent of his stubbornness. Still, she felt a little hesitant, but Roger knew America. So she filled out the online forms for the discount vacation with the time share pitch addendum and auto signed the forms. She then booked a

nice room at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas for the first week and a room at the Hollywood Hotel in Los Angeles for the second.

"Watch yourself out there, darling," Gayle cajoled. "America may be the land of opportunity, but they don't call Las Vegas 'sin city' for nothing. All that pish posh about what happens in Vegas staying in Vegas indeed. Americans are so ridiculous."

"Maybe, but you know, Gayle, this will be my first official vacation without children. I'm starting to get a little excited about it. I want to take as much advantage as possible and use the trip as a second honeymoon of sorts. Really a first honeymoon since Roger and I never took one."

In the early days, when they first married, Lily had been *very* pregnant with their first child, Emily. And Roger's enlistment with the Merchant Marines had ended so they had almost no money to start a family with, let alone go on a honeymoon. Roger did the right thing by taking a job with the local constabulary and moving them into a little cottage on the south side to be near her family. She was disappointed but learned to see the happiness in his decision. Still here was an opportunity.

"We've never been posh before," Lily told Gayle. "It would be nice to shop for a few nice dresses in those fancy boutiques, have a few candlelit dinners at nice restaurants, and catch some of those famous stage shows everyone is always raving on about."

"I heard about The Blue Man Group and Circus Soleil," Gayle said, "You should get tickets to them. But go to the concierge cause they'll get the tickets for free. It's all an inside job to bilk the tourists if you buy at the box office."

Lily wasn't suspicious of people like Gayle. But the concierge angle was something she hadn't thought about which sounded smart. She would like to see The Blue Man Group. And maybe "Menopause the Musical" which she laughed over for a long while when she spotted the title on the Las Vegas website for available shows.

But none of that had worked out when they flew into Vegas - and Lily was flustered as to why. Things had started out well enough. They landed at Harry Reid International airport an hour ahead of schedule, with just a touch of jet lag, and were in the first group to de-plane. They shuttled to their rental car service where a very polite young lady apologized for renting their original vehicle, but Avis would be happy to upgrade them to a very posh

Cadillac Escalade at no extra cost. Roger was in good spirits and his hip causing him no trouble. He even loaded their bags before hustling around to hold the door open for her like a lady and give her hand a kiss as she climbed up inside. Then, without warning and for no reason she knew, on the drive to the hotel, she fell asleep. And that was the last thing she remembered till she woke up.

Lily sat up in bed rubbing sleep from her eyes and, for the life of her, couldn't remember the drive from the airport, arriving at the hotel, or checking in. Nor could she recall heading up to the room or lying down on the big heart shaped bed. But here they were.

“Roger? Roger wake up? How did we get here? Did you upgrade the room?”

He must have because she woke up in the honeymoon suite with heart shaped novelties everywhere. Heart shaped bed, heart shaped candies, even heart shaped couch and bathtub. And there was a flute of champagne and strawberries resting on the nightstand next to her.

“*Why would Roger order champagne and strawberries?*” she thought. “*He only drinks Guinness and is allergic to strawberries. Why would he order that?*” She couldn't remember. She just found herself awake, sitting on a heart shaped bed in a posh suite with Roger sleeping next to her while she stared at art fresco pictures of chubby baby angels shooting heart arrows at each other on the wall. Maybe her memory was playing tricks. Or age was finally catching up with her. Or maybe it was the jet lag. Whatever it was, it was unnerving.

Still she was in Las Vegas and ready to enjoy their time. And they had plenty. The sales pitch wasn't till later so they had time to dine early and shop and possibly catch a show. After waking Roger and sending him into the bathroom to spruce up, she made reservations at *Montre San*. Then she and Roger took a very nice elevator ride downstairs to explore the casino on their way to the restaurant.

Downstairs, they passed the hotel seafood buffet at *Bacchanal* when Lily noticed the crab legs. “Roger, would you look at the size of those *things!* They're nearly as big as you and me!” She exclaimed practically falling over in shock.

Despite the tackiness of it all, she wanted Roger to take a picture on her cellphone so she could text Gayle with the caption, “*Can you believe the size of the crabs in America?*” Only

she couldn't find her cellphone. It wasn't in her purse or pocketbook. And not in any of her dress pockets. Maybe she left it upstairs on the nightstand charging? Another trick of her memory? She couldn't ask Roger for his because he was anti-technology and refused to carry a cellphone. Even the basic ones their children got for him over the years in an effort to modernize him and "make life easier."

"Life isn't supposed to be easy," he would grump, "And mine is plenty blessed, thank you very much."

Lily wasn't so antiquated about cellphones. She loved her own marveling at all the apps she could download and the games at her fingertips. She practically lost herself updating her Facebook page every evening and playing *Words with Friends*.

Lily was about to suggest they take the nice elevator ride back upstairs when Roger noticed the slot machines, all ringing and rolling in a row nearby. Discovered? Practically twisted his head clean off spinning around to see what those contraptions with fancy lights and fruit images in vivid color were.

"I think I'll try one of those slot machines," Roger mentioned. "We used to win big in the old days with those. It's all in the timing and beating the odds."

Lily felt him change right in front of her eyes. Without looking anywhere else, he walked over to the machine like a Mummy from those old Saturday matinee monster movies, dragging his feet and practically mumbling, "Sloooottttss" as he approached them. Which was the last time she recalled him looking directly at her.

Lily started to protest, but since he was on vacation too, and had been such a good man and husband, she decided to let it go and give him a little leeway. *Let him gamble*, she thought, *I might even try a little myself*. But the casino was very crowded, which made her uncomfortable, not to mention all the machines loud and off putting, so Lily decided to take the elevator ride back upstairs to their room to retrieve her cellphone.

After an hour searching the room and luggage and not finding her phone, Lily remembered she could talk to the concierge. "*Maybe I dropped it in that bloody big car we came in,*" she thought. The concierge would check for her but first she needed to get the keys from Roger.

Downstairs, she found Roger sitting in the same spot fixated by the same slot machine with that same vacant look on his face.

*He must be winning big to sit there so long, she thought. Or, and here she paused, what if he's losing all the money we brought for the trip? What if he has one of those undiagnosed gambling addictions Gayle was always reading about in the Star and was gambling their life fortune away?*

"Are you winning a lot, dear?" Lily asked.

"Huh? Sure. Playing."

Very monosyllabic. Staring at the machine. Not at all the Roger she knew. She tried again.

"Would you like to take a break now and call the children? Let them know we arrived safe? By the way, do you have my cellphone? I can't find it. Maybe I left it in that big car we rented?"

"Huh? Yeah. Sure. Whatever you want, dear."

"Roger. Are you listening? Can you stop playing for a moment and talk to me. Do you want to go back to the room? Maybe call the girls?"

"No. Playing the slots."

Strangely monotone. Eyes staring at the machine.

"How much longer then? Shouldn't we take a break and go to dinner? We have reservations."

"Okay, dear. I'll see you later. Have fun."

Lily felt aggravated. She never liked being ignored. Something Roger rarely did at home. And it bothered her a great deal now that he was choosing a slot machine over her. He hadn't looked at her once during their exchange and had not deviated from tone or action the whole time she spoke with him. Just pull the lever, watch the fruit spin, listen to that bloody siren go off, lights flash, and pull the lever again.

She couldn't say why, but Lily began having the oddest sensation. A very uncomfortable, Twilight Zone sort of awkwardness at being too much in the moment. Too hyper aware. Like things weren't right. Close, but not correct. Nothing was what it appeared to be. Roger wasn't Roger any longer.



Lily looked around in panic. The casino was crowded, but no one was leaving. In fact, she noticed everyone kept repeating their actions like they were stuck on replay. Look, there was that pretty blond girl in the tight red dress hanging on the arm of that really big fellow. Applying her lipstick. Back and forth. Over and over. And there was the same short-skirted waitress setting a beer down in front of that fellow with the cowboy hat. Only she kept picking it up and setting it down over and over in front of him. And the old lady with all the jewelry who looked like Elizabeth Taylor from those “white diamond” commercials sitting at the hundred dollar slots. Pulling the lever over and over. Dazed and staring. If that was possible. Everywhere Lily looked, everyone appeared to be standing where they had been, absorbed in their games, just like her husband was now. No one was coming or going. Everyone repetitively robotic.

*Now isn't this a fine clockwork orange if ever I saw one? Was this even possible?* Lily thought. *So strange. More tricks of the memory? Or am I going nutters? Maybe Gayle was right after all and I'm falling into that Vegas purgatory trap as well.*

Lily noticed a blackjack table next to her and turned to watch the dealer not sure what else to do. A portly gentleman with green visor and arm band, just like in *The Cincinnati Kid*, dealt cards out to the players standing around the high table. All six received cards, studied them a moment, and bet. Then the dealer flipped their cards one by one revealing the tall man in tuxedo in the middle had the winning hand. An ace-jack combo for twenty-one. He didn't smile and no one cheered. No one reacted at all. Then the dealer collected the cards, the players bet, and the dealer repeated the action. Lily's blood ran cold.

*“I AM in the Twilight Zone,”* she thought. *This must be some sort of joke?* But if it was, it was pretty elaborate and seemingly impossible to pull off on this scale. Lily felt ill. The room spun and she tried to focus on something to ground her senses. *What on earth is happening here?*

“It depends on your point of view actually,” replied the tall man in tuxedo who had been winning at the blackjack table. He turned around and stepped over to Lily. The rest of the game continued as before, just without him. “We're technically not on earth so 'here' is relative to which planet is nearby. Let's see if we can't figure out the rest together.”

Lily passed out. Well she felt like she could, but she didn't. She also nearly lost control of her bladder when the tall man in the tuxedo turned around and spoke to her. He looked bloody sinister. And when he walked over and looked down directly into her eyes, she did lose control and let her bladder go.

"Oh, look at that," he commiserated. "You've gone and soiled your britches. I wish I could say that didn't happen, but it does. I've accepted I have that effect on people at first meet. Oh well, C'est La Vie. *Quel dommage.*"

"Who are you? What is going on? Why am I so afraid?" Lily stammered. Her hands shook. Nothing felt real. She wanted to go home.

"Mrs. Allen, you haven't played a game yet. It's required as part of the contract between us."

"A game? A game? Who cares about a bloody game!? Wait, how do you know my name?"

"I know all our guest's names, Mrs. Allen. Once you sign up, we perform our due diligence," he giggled. Giggled. Actually giggled! "Background, history, family, psychological profile, that sort of thing. You understand. It's all so we can present the best packet of information to you so you may invest responsibly with our time share membership when the time comes."

"Membership? I didn't sign up for any membership. This is my first time here. I'm from the UK."

"I assure you Mrs. Allen that you did. You agreed to hear us out when you booked your trip. It's all part of the package deal you agreed to and signed online with your reservation to come here. You and your husband Roger. I wouldn't suggest otherwise. It's far too critical to the legal circumstances of our contract together. Nor would you be here if you had not, even by proxy."

"Please, I have children. I have grandchildren." She wasn't exactly sure what she was begging for, but it was the only thing she could think of at the moment.

"Yes, Mrs. Allen. I am aware. As I said, I make it my business to know everything I can about my guests before they play. Though we did miss that little detail about your

husband and his strawberry allergy. Someone dropped the ball on that one. But C'est La Vie. Nobody's perfect. I think it's time to start your game."

"I shan't be doing anything of the sort!"

*Shan't? Where had that come from? Was she an Elizabethan schoolmarm? Shan't indeed!*

"I will NOT be playing any of your games," Lily articulated clearly.

He stared down at her with a detached expression that turned sour in intensity at being rebuffed. "Oh, but I assure you you will. It is part of our agreed upon contract. You agreed to sit through our time share proposal in exchange for two weeks discounted vacation. The games are the beginning of our, err, shall we say, discussion.

*Oh, Lord. Oh, Lord. Oh my sweet Lord.* Somehow Lily knew. If she hadn't just released her bladder, she would have pissed herself again.

"Mrs. Allen, these games are for your benefit. They are not dangerous. Or a punishment. The opposite in fact. They are your reward for a life well lived. They benefit us as well with the time you spend playing them. But I assure you, you are free to leave any time you want after the initial presentation. Though very few people do. We have become very good at what we do. And most people come to enjoy the games so much, they stay for a very long time. A very long time indeed."

Again he giggled in his Machiavellian way. Like a stereotypical trope of a classic movie bad guy twirling his mustache.

"Bloody hell! What IS this?! What kind of place is this?! You're talking nonsense!"

The tall man giggled mirthlessly once more, "No, impossible. I assure you it is all very proper and legal. You will just have to trust me on that. You consented to this when you agreed to the terms of our time share contract presentation online. I am sorry, but the contract is valid. Still, I am not without sympathy. I know it is quite difficult for humans to understand the implications of their future once they have entered into the presentation period. Which will only officially begin once you start playing a game."

"I won't be playing any games! So you can just bloody well piss off!"

"Now, now, Mrs. Allen. I have been assured by our legal team it doesn't negate any of your human rights nor the contract we have mutually entered into. You will be well

cared for. I don't want you to think we are unsympathetic or being unfair, but you must play a game. Your husband Roger has already begun and see how well he has transitioned."

"What!? Why? None of this makes sense. You don't make any sense."

"Mrs. Allen, it's time to play. Really it's for the best. You will understand better after you play."

"I'm not playing a bloody damn thing."

The tall man stopped smiling and nodded. Lily felt two strong hands grab her arms from behind and drag her to the black seated slot machine next to Roger. She started to scream, cry, and swear hoping someone would hear her. That someone would help her. She didn't know who, but still she tried.

"I'll pay you anything, *give* you anything, please, please, just let me go," Lily whined making eye contact with the tall, heartless man. Who was no longer a man, but more a shiny human-like praying mantis standing upright on hind legs.

The shiny praying mantis smiled at her. And she felt like dying.

"Enjoy your game Mrs. Allen."

She was forced to look at the slot machine till her eyes focused on the game. And then all her worries faded. Nothing else mattered. Nothing else to do but sit and *do* this one thing. Lily reached and pulled the lever watching the spinning wheels turn till they stopped on apple, grape, banana. Sirens whistled and flashing lights flashed. She reached again and pulled the lever. And pulled again. And again. And again.

All was as it should be.

The End.

*Author postscript: I like this story, but I wasn't sure how to end it. At first, I thought I would write a story about growing old and have Roger leave Lily at the casino to go his own way. Roger was going to take the rental car and drive home to Los Angeles. Lily was going to fly home to Liverpool. But I thought it would take too much exposition to get to that point. And a very long dialogue between the*

*two about why. I was afraid it would be boring. Instead, I decided to try a Twilight Zone-style surprise reveal story. But I couldn't think of an original way to end it. Twilight Zone has taken nearly every trope and left us none. From alien invasion to future dystopia, to purgatory, to the consequences of hell, etc. etc. Still, I like my take on time share pitches- which coincidentally my parents did fall for in their senior years and bought a time share in Vegas which they never went to more than two times and had to pay off later. Maybe I'll write something now about those evil docents that hover around the state parks when you're hiking with your family.*