

A Short Stay In Purgatory

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About the Book

In these twelve stories, enter teenage purgatory at its most honest, and meet a whole host of characters you'll quickly recognise: a secret admirer, burning up with jealousy and desire; Karen, confronting her anxiety about pregnancy; Alex, contemplating life after school; or maybe Suze, looking forward to her first sexual experience with mixed feelings.

Ranging in mood from high comedy to deep pathos, Alan Durant's intense short stories capture the sweet delight and bitter misery of hormone-charged youth . . .

A Short Stay in
PURGATORY

ALAN DURANT

RHCP DIGITAL

For Richard, Max, Madeleine, Jane, Sue, Sarah, Alison, all
my friends then; and for Jinny, my best friend since.

Getting Away

SHE'D BEEN STANDING on the hard shoulder for nearly half an hour when it started to rain. A hard, cold, heavy rain – the kind of rain, she thought bitterly, that always seemed to fall on Sunday afternoons in autumn, like this. It wasn't yet five o'clock but the daylight was almost gone and she found herself staring into a haze of headlights as cars approached and sped by her, showering her with dirty water.

At any moment, Dad will pull up and find me here by the roadside – soaked to the skin, pissed-off, beaten – and she almost hoped he would. But some small voice of defiance inside told her not to give in, to hold up her sign a little more boldly and give it another shot.

When the red pick-up pulled up, she thought it was all over. The great adventure. Dad had come on his red charger to rescue her. But when the door opened she saw, not dad's familiar, weather-beaten face, but the ginger hair and spectacles of a stranger.

'Going to see the Queen?' he asked, jauntily.

'What?' she said.

'London,' he said.

'London, yes,' she said.

'Hop in then,' he said.

She hesitated. She'd told herself she'd only accept a lift if there was a woman in the car or, preferably a family – never a man on his own. She wasn't that stupid. But this *was* a man on his own. So what now? If she let this lift go, who knows when she'd get another? The longer she stood

by the roadside, the greater the chance that Dad or the police would come by and pick her up.

'I won't eat you,' said the man, smiling.

She stood motionless, peering into the pick-up's invitingly dry interior. *He looks harmless enough. But then don't they all?*

A great glob of rain landed on her neck and ran down her back under her clothes and in the end it was this bodily discomfort that decided her. She got into the pick-up and closed the door.

'Seal weather,' said the man, as the truck cruised along in the slow lane. 'That's what my sister Margy calls it. Flippin' seal weather. Too cold and wet even for the ducks.'

'Seal weather,' he repeated and glanced across at the girl, grinning broadly, as if seeking appreciation for the aptness of the phrase.

She duly obliged with a quick, on-off smile, from the mouth only. For her eyes were filled with disquiet. *I shouldn't have got in, I'm a fool. I might end up murdered in a lay-by somewhere.*

He seemed too attentive, too friendly. She wouldn't take off her wet coat as he suggested, but pulled it around her more tightly as if it were a piece of armour. She said 'no' to his offer of wine gums. She kept her hand tensed on the door handle and tried to stay as far from him as possible. She responded in monosyllables only.

'Sorry about the smell,' he said suddenly and nodded towards a screwed up bundle of paper on the floor by her feet. 'I had chicken and chips for my Sunday lunch.' He pursed his lips and shook his head a little. 'Don't like chicken much. Not like that. A nice roast sometimes - Margy does a nice roast. But that stuff's all grease, isn't it? Slimy. What I like's a nice piece of cod.' He looked across at her as if he expected some sort of reply.

So she said: 'Yeah.' *This is stupid. I'll ask him to let me out at the next service station. I should never have got in.*

All about them, cars went hurtling past in the wet – everywhere people were on the move, on their way home from weekends away. Families . . .

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘Give me a nice big piece of cod any day. Or haddock. Or plaice. Or rock. Rock’s nice. Margy doesn’t like rock, though. It’s the one fish she won’t touch, rock.’

He pulled out to overtake a lorry and for a few moments the windscreen was opaque with spray.

‘You had your lunch?’ he asked, but didn’t wait for an answer. ‘You don’t want to go to London on an empty stomach. Big place, London. Biggest city in the world as the crow flies. Not like Stanborough. Do you know what my sister calls Stanborough?’

A polite, pinched smile. *Keep him talking. Show some interest. As long as he goes on happily talking you’ll be all right. You’ll get out of this pick-up unharmed.*

‘She calls it the biggest place in the world as the dodo flies.’

He laughed. It was more of a boyish snigger than a real laugh.

Like the sound of boys in school, at the back of the class. Boys laughing at things that weren’t really funny, just to draw attention to themselves.

A picture came into her head of Denzil and Paul and Gofa with his stupid cap, the peak turned round the wrong way. And thinking of these familiar, everyday things filled her suddenly with a rush of relief. *Relax, girl. Calm down.* He was just a grownup Gofa, this man. A small man from a small town. Boring. He wasn’t going to harm her. She’d be OK. *Don’t panic. You’re starting a new life, girl. You’re getting away. In an hour or so you’ll be in the big city, away from all these little people. Piccadilly Circus, Leicester Square, Oxford Street . . . Life!*

‘As the dodo flies,’ he repeated, enjoying this idea hugely. He glanced across at her once more. ‘Dodos are extinct, you see, so they don’t.’

‘Fly,’ he added. ‘She’s got a sense of humour on her, my sister. She really has. I could tell you some stories.’ He shook his head, grinning.

Oh God. He’s not going to keep on telling me boring stories about his boring sister all the way to London, is he?

But he didn’t start a story. Instead, he turned on the radio. There was a hum and a fizz, then the sound of a familiar jingle came from the back of the pick-up.

‘Five o’clock,’ he said. ‘Top forty. I like listening to the charts. Music’s a load of old rubbish mostly, but it’s an institution, isn’t it? Like Sunday tea. Margy can’t stand it. She says pop music’s an insult to five-year-olds. So I only listen to it when I’m on my own. Suppose you listen to it, don’t you?’

‘Sometimes,’ she said, without enthusiasm. She never listened to the charts – except when she couldn’t help hearing her sister’s radio blaring through the wall. It was a part of the Sunday afternoon routine – a routine she hated. It was no accident that she’d chosen a Sunday afternoon on which to run away. When she got to London, Sunday afternoons would be over – for ever. Life would be one long Saturday.

Sundays really drove her crazy. That long, dull, final dead-end straight of the weekend that began with lunch and stretched through the evening to bed. Dad watching the football or a film or a game-show or anything on TV; Mum pottering about the kitchen, washing-up, baking, ironing, before she too was drawn to the television; Brian, her brother, out in the garage tinkering with his motor bike; Diane in her bedroom with the radio on, supposedly doing her homework, but more likely trying out some hideous new shade of nail varnish or eye shadow . . . And in every house in the street it was the same. The whole place was dead or busy with things that amounted to nothing. Sometimes she thought she’d like to run up and down the street, rattling on the windows like Wee Willie Winkie,

shouting, 'Let's do something! Why are you all so boring? You're wasting your lives.' But she never would. And anyway, she'd get no response. They were all corpses round where she lived. Dead-end people living dead-end lives. That was why she was getting away. Thank God she was getting away.

Her thoughts were interrupted by his singing - nasal, tuneless.

'I like this one,' he said, smiling and turned the volume up slightly. When the chorus came he sang along happily, with no inhibitions, as though he were on his own - the way her dad did sometimes when he was in the bathroom, safe behind a locked door. She felt embarrassed for him and wished he'd stop. There was nothing more embarrassing than wrinklies trying to pretend they were with it. Like teachers at school - Miss Young always going on about her favourite bands, what gig she'd been to. As if they could give a monkey's what she did with her weekends. As if they couldn't see she was just trying to win them over. Sugar the pill. The only people it took in were dirbrains like Gofa.

'Sounds brill, Miss Young,' he'd say - or something equally inane. And she'd say something like, 'Yeah, it was wicked.' And all Gofa's crew would laugh heartily. It made her want to throw up.

All of a sudden she really did feel very sick. Her face went flushed. She needed some air. She wound the window down a little and felt the cold, wet air whoosh in against her skin.

'You all right?' he asked. 'You look a bit iffy.'

She felt too sick to speak.

'That's travelling on an empty stomach,' he said. 'You want to eat something before you go on a journey. "You won't get for on an empty tank" - that's what my sister Margy says.'

It was the last straw. In her nausea and tension his words rubbed on her like a match against a matchbox.