



# Purgatory

RJS COUSINS

*A Novel*

# PURGATORY

RJS COUSINS

© Eigtaku

RJS Cousins

[www.eigtaku.com](http://www.eigtaku.com)

*In loving memory of absent friends.*

# PROLOGUE

Whatever happens, I've spoken up.

One day, the weight of the world on my shoulders, the next I'm weightless.

Make a difference.

What matters is now.

# CHAPTER 1

MORNING.



*“A warning. An alarm.”*

A mirror sees my weary, weathered face.

Slap face both sides.

Cold water. Mouth open.

A light flickers. Exhale.

Here we go again.

The sofa.

The last few minutes of something precious resembling rest, while the kettle boils. Steam clouds the windows.

Wake up again. Not able to move. A sigh. A blessing or a curse. Antidotes and cures for the day that lies before me. Reaching across the floorboards. Crawling. I can barely move.

A neck tie, an inch too tight. Loosened, it reveals the truth. Hardly a prize winner.

Just enough to keep the wolf from the door.

Out of the front door, tripping over waste to be disposed of.

I whisper goodbye. Have a good day, but outside the house.

I whisper to myself. There's no one else.

I look both ways, yet I know not why.

Waiting for fate, yet impatiently doubt if this day will be any different.

So long as I survive, I maintain a perfect balance of rage and peace. Respected but destitute.

No one will notice. The show

Must

Go

On.



# CHAPTER 2

## PURPOSE.



*“As long as a mechanism is functional, it’s existence is justified.”*

“But what if it was broken?

Obsolete?

Old fashioned?

A new car outside? The pristine record player or an unread book that’s a gateway to experience the poetic works of...”

“Is your brains relationship to your fine or gross motor skills that much different to the cogs in a pocket watch or the pistons of an engine?”

*A brain held together by force, glue and twine.*

**“What are you talking about, sir?!”**

\*sniggers\*



*I have no idea.*

“Where’s your text book?”

No talking.

Test time.”



# CHAPTER 3

## EXILE.



*“A vase of flowers on a classroom desk.”*

I close my eyes and turn around mid sentence. I notice. I realise. I remember.

*A new start for a new life, but waiting for you is waiting to die.*

*Circling days on a calendar. The circling vultures.  
Ready to live off scraps.*

*A victim of circumstance. You had your reasons, for which I will never forgive.*

*You could have talked to me. To anyone. All I ever wanted was honesty, but I was no use at all.*

*A parent is God in the eyes of a child, but all that they believed in was taken away.*

*From the outside looking in, you both had everything  
you could ever wish for.*

*It can't be for nothing.*

*I'll not repeat the same mistake.*

*Your silent screams will no longer fall upon deaf ears.*

*No one knew. No one had the slightest clue how  
miserable she was. A favorite hiding place in plain  
sight.*

*I'm living with the promise of dissipated guilt.*

*Was it a reason to leave, or an excuse to escape?*

*Back in the room.*

***“You OK, sir?”***

***“Apologies. My mind wandered for a second.”***

*The daughter of a teacher, let down by her father.*

*The past is a shadow that grows and chases you  
forever. It never leaves.*

*There's always the candlelight of truth in a dark void  
of regret.*

*I close the door as quietly as I can. I've forgotten  
something. I try my best to not supply any  
ammunition for a scolding. No one could ever be as  
angry at me as I am at myself.*

*Old habits die hard.*

*For now, I have to balance a temporary necessity with  
a tortuous obligation.*

*Looking into the eyes of someone who knows that the  
real you could have healed wounds.*

*For now, all I do is open them, with no hope of repair.*



# CHAPTER 4

## THE NEXT DAY.



*“Another alarm. Another warning.”*

Eyes blurred.

A half- drunk whiskey next to me. Condensation from the melted ice.

The light flickers on.

A slap with both hands.

Kettle boils.

The house left. The train missed.

I’ve been rushed. Flustered.

Forward facing.

No time to show weakness.

*No time to mourn.*

*An echo chamber of sycophants.*

“You’re a hurricane in your own shot glass,  
gentlemen.”

**“Pretty sure the phrase is “storm in a teacup”,  
sir!”**

Possibly.

“The strength of the wind and the size of the vessel  
is relative to your own self worth, after all.”

\*A perplexed silence\*

“Back to work.”



# CHAPTER 5

## THE END.



*“I allow myself to experience the outside world sparingly and with extreme caution.”*

Between Friday night and Monday morning is my purgatory.

An avenue for confession in a courtroom of strangers. Throw caution to the wind and let the glow light my face.

It’s a grand gesture to share solitude with the devil of whimsy- awkward, fake first impressions, apocryphal tales and misguided confidence are reluctantly exchanged.

Whatever physical or intellectual currency is traded for my wit, humour or wisdom will stay within the confines of my stupor. Of my stage. Of my fuselage.

In reality, I stare into a precariously emptying glass, wondering if anyone else is as desperate for

company as I am, yet just brazen enough to entertain a rusting old fool like me.

Going nowhere as fast as I possibly can. Flogging myself with doubt for the bait that was adulation, only to be dismantled by cynics or the ignorant.

That was 10 years ago.

Now I'm waiting for a train that has already left, but regardless- for these hours. These precious hours, I can be anyone.

No one has to know any different, I'll never see them in the real world.





# CHAPTER 6

## AFTERMATH.



*“What happened is inconsequential. Again.”*

Monday morning.

I raise my head just enough to be polite.

Dependence. A gloriously naive concept.

“Look at yourselves.”

Constantly trying to assert authority in a cruel and disingenuous world, fuelled by your misguided sense of rebellion, only to wallow in the glowing embers of your spectacular mistakes which are burned to the ground by your pathetic egos, stubbornness and complete lack of identity.

“You’re all here as a result of failing to enter your first institution of choice, as am I.

You’re all staring vacantly at me to dictate the right course of action, correct?”

I know my voice is becoming increasingly pompous.

“The theatricality of grandeur.

The indulgence of ceremony.

Let us accept our fate and enjoy ourselves as the makeshift gang of runts and mongrels we are. Stand up. Rise.”

*Rectify not only past indiscretions but also disparing misconceptions.*

“These four walls confine us but they do not define us. Let your voice be heard by the voiceless. Ensure that deaf ears do not fall to the ground.”

I start to shout.

“Don’t let your guard down. Don’t let your mask slip.

You have a chance. Take it.

TAKE IT!”

\*awkward silence\*

\*bell rings\*

Everyone leaves.

Of course, everyone leaves.



The walk home.

A dark alley.

I glance at someone. They might recognise me.

Head down.

Keep walking.

The danger passes.

Enemy or friend.

Teacher or student.

God or disciple.

It's everyone for themselves outside the confines of security. A law but no rules. A paradox of authority. A hero to a precious few in a place without choice. Valued by price. Only important to those that know who you are. Out of context. Out of pretence.

Just another footstep getting quieter as the time passes.

My front door creaks shut.

No one noticed.

Breathe.



# CHAPTER 7

## PRODIGY.



*“The same task, expectations of a different result.”*

Condensation fogs my lenses.

My confessions ready for the world to hear, but no one is prepared to listen. A haze of triumph one minute, defeat the next.

Shirt hanging out.

Spilt coffee on my hands.

Jack of all trades, master of none.

Spinning too many promises. Spinning scrutiny into room for improvement.

Some waiting for wisdom, but most expect nothing.

But there is always one.

Always ready. Listening.

Surrounded by chaos, she sits.

She listens intently. Book open. Pencil sharpened. It is almost like she is in an alternate

“REALITY!”

I shout.

The lads at the back sitting on desks at least compensate me with their attention, if not their manners.

“Three forms make up the illusion of the real”.

What am I *talking* about?

“A shared reality. Micro and macro.”

“You...are as real to me as I am to you because we rely on our brains to interpret electrical signals from our senses with some degree of synchronicity or common distinction, hence the general conclusions we have gradually developed through linguistics over time- translation, opinion or objective

observations- the sky is blue, water is wet, this is attractive...”

**“Don’t worry, it is nearly lunchtime.”**

I hear facetiously whispered. Not only do I indulge, I embrace.

“Ah! Therein lies the whimsical passing down of a reality through the fourth dimension- time.

Time is the most futile human interpretation and a desperate attempt to rationalise finding structure in nature. The inevitability of our existence, as well as its demise.

Manifested by an entirely uncontrollable yet manipulated natural phenomenon. A phenomenon beyond our comprehension. Ironically in a world of electricity, stock markets, new multi national companies, peer pressure and other... \*ahem\*

Extracurricular activities...”

**\*giggles\***

“The phrase “make hay while the sun shines” is paradoxically as relevant today as it is romantic and antiquated.

Technology is our crux. Our lifeblood.”

*Nothing is important until you've realised you've failed.*

“A “lone” reality.”

“Imagine yourself alone. No communication with the outside world. Do your thoughts or actions affect the “real” world? Is in in the comfort of solitude that you can be truly be honest with yourself?”

“The human brain- indeed human nature craves stimulation. We are social animals, to a fault. Relying on information. A word. A voice. An opinion. Acceptance. Vindication. Adulation. The envy.”

“Moulding and shaping yourself into a carefully curated entity suitable for an efficient existence amongst peers, superiors, assets, the competition... enemies...”

“You're all enemies of each other, and you are your own worst.”

*Am I of no use? Seeing out the clock? Function has replaced “real” experience. Your assessment of me is no more accurate or “real” than thinking...*

“This snake...”



*\*GASPS\**

“Will not bite, because it is not provoked. His tactics or calculated preparation are even more cunning than the threat of the damage he will inflict upon you.”

A few of the students eyes are wide with fear. One or two tears starting to form.

I'd better restrain myself.

“Honesty. Expression. Compassion. True bravery.

All idealist concepts crippled by the void between our true selves how we want others to accept, respect and embrace us”.

*As much as I try to convince myself of my own misguided bravado, I'm waiting for the floor to,open beneath me.*

“Your perpetual state of creating an alias will only ever destroy the need to seek the liberty and catharsis of the third reality-

The altered space”.

**“Sir... are you... ?”**

**“EXACTLY!”**

*Well, not now anyway.*

*The students were more attentive than ever before. Maybe it was psychology playing it's part. You see, the mere presence of the tank occupied only by rodent remains indicated a threat that may or may not have existed. Before rational analysis could be implemented, their wired brains had already concluded that there was indeed something to be afraid of.*

Theatricality and conviction- valuable weapons.

Their eyes wide, occupied by intrigue but now no doubt perplexed.

“You see, altered states of consciousness affected by either stimulus”

**\*sniggers**

“Or in fact, your subconscious can indeed influence your shared reality.”

*I've lost them.*

*I look down at the tank.*

“Say you had a dream so vivid, that it directly affected your interactions with people the next day. A dream you had about a distant friend or... relative

who needed you... so raw you felt an impulse to get in touch, only to realise you may have...

Saved their life?”

“Or a final conversation with someone you dreamt you’d never see again... a premonition...”

...

“Reali—“

The bell goes.

Never mind.



# CHAPTER 8

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS.



*“An empty seat. Staring at the illusion of choice.”*

A handful of places to remain anonymous. I've walked past most of them, but I always seem to end up here.

The door closes behind me.

I have a responsibility. I can tell them the truth that no one wants them to hear.

A balancing act.

What is their metric for success?

The hallucinations of popularity?

Survival?

Too much of this coexistence is obligatory.

Guilt cripples the soul.

This futile attempt at redemption.

To make a difference.

Is it itself an act of selfishness?

Am I using them to exorcise my own failings?

Silence is the only answer I need.

**“You good there, wordsmith?”**

**Your scribbling is...”**

“I’m fine”.

Notebook slammed shut like the door closing from the gales.

Another patron. Probably just as desperate and lonely as I am. I have no energy to spare for pleasantries. We make eye contact.

An acknowledgment.

A nod.

That’s enough.

The last remaining burbon clings to the inside of my throat. I prepare to venture out, almost in a state of petulance, as if their presence in an otherwise empty establishment is enough to irk me to the point of exile.

This one horse town. This last chance saloon. This last roll of the devils dice for a soul not worth saving.

Maybe I'm okay today. I peer over my shoulder one last time.

A break in character is, for better or worse, a change. Different sides of the coin. Depends what mood I'm in. Some days I indulge in the company of strangers, but more not than often.



# CHAPTER 9

## THE BEAST.



*“Turning a page is equally leaving behind the past and embracing the future.”*

In class again.

I quieten them down.

“Your lives exist together, your lives will exist apart. There’s no relationship that can’t be broken, yet no doubt it’s unable to be repaired.”

“It will always be a mutual choice. If an imbalance occurs, it’s time to walk away. No matter how painful it is. Apologies may be sincere but forgiveness is sacred, if ever eternal.”

*Drowning in shimmering remorseful eyes... it’s just too hard.*

“The har—... The hardest stage is acceptance.”

A pragmatic turning of my back on those who need you the most.

It's for their own good.

The greater good.

A lifetime of self punishment, one day at a time, until the clouds gather and the wolves come.

Gradually, more and more start to listen.

They are not mocking me anymore.

You only ever value those worse off than you. Only taking notice of those with an opportunity. A piece of the glory to spare.

WORSE! You convince yourself that you're relieved.

“At least I'm not THAT guy”.

Those better than you?

Who is to say.

Who has the authority to define success or failure?



As soon as you define something...

You kill it.

...

I stop.

I run out of steam.

Hero... saviour... tyrant...

I can not define myself, yet it's hard to accept my reputation.



# CHAPTER 10

## PATRONAGE.



*“Spend your life chasing shadows, or let yourself be warmed and blinded by the sun.”*

The walk over the bridge.

The last few nights. The same place.

There’s a figure that leans over the barrier.

A fair drop. The pain would be awful. Maybe not enough to finish the job. Still a risk. Shallow water. Sharp stones.

I’m not brave enough to interfere. Intervene.

Would I want someone to take notice? Would I want to be saved, or be the one with the paradox of guilt and ignorance.

The gnawing knowledge that I never offer to help.

“D..Don’t...

You shouldn’t...”

“Do what?”

“Jump.”

“Ha ha! I just like the view. The flow of the river. The constantly changing light and reflections. It’s mesmerising.”

“Please forgive me. I misunderstood. “

“Sounds like it’s on your mind, though, no?”

“I wonder if it would make things easier. Truthfully? I’m too much of a coward.”

“I’m not sure I can help you. Maybe a drink? There’s somewhere I go. It’s quiet. People leave each other in peace.”

*Sounds perfect for an old misanthrope like me.*

“A short walk in the rain won’t hurt.”

I guess not.

But the lights are off. The lights have never been off since I moved to the area.

“I know, I had to nip out.”

“You own this place?”

“Kinda. I’m the silent partner. I tend to stay low key. It’s easier that way. I’ll leave all that to the front man.

You’re a hero one minute, therapist the next, referee, judge, jury... unreasonable, obtuse, belligerent, a legend, brother or father they never had...

It’s too much. One too many incidents in the small hours. Needed a rebrand. New clientele of which you are one.”

“So, I’ve been chosen (?!)”

“It’s a sanctuary of sorts. An escape from the pressures of the past.”

“I don’t like change. I have a place.”

“Well, it’s your choice, I guess, but at least here me out. I’ll try not to bore you. Here, I’ll get the door.”

The lights come on.

The whirring of coolers, mechanisms and various distractions.

“You might think the place you go is special, but have you noticed that everyone who comes to this town never says anything important. Advice they can’t take? Ambitions never fulfilled?”

Wallowing in self pity. But you’re different. You came HERE.”

“No one asks questions, no one listens to each other. A decent enough balance if you ask me.”

“You’re listening to the wrong voices. They might seem like they don’t have much to say, but believe it or not, there IS comfort in talking.”

“Maybe that’s my problem. My students listen whether they like it or not. They’re young. Impressionable. Naive.”

“They’re more astute than you know. They respect you more than they’d ever admit.”

“So what can I change?”

“What do you feel you need to change?”

“The past.”

“Sorry, can’t help you there!”

*No one can.*

“Do you believe in second chances?”

“I’m not sure I deserve one.”

“So, you’ve planted this cancer of guilt and doubt in your head? You can’t expect anything to change. No one will ever forgive you until you forgive yourself. You think you can change?”

“I’m serving my sentence.”

“In solitude? Being consumed by your self pity? Second by second extracting every last grain of integrity? Because what- you made a mistake?”

“I didn’t make a mistake. But I was weak. I snapped.

My daughter... she...

My wife left me. She couldn’t be around me after...”

“You know what we are going to call this place?”

*Amaze me...*

“Purgatory.”

“Ha (!) so that’s your play? Coerce me into confessing my sins and then I’m forever in your debt? Things happen for a reason. I brought this on

myself. Karma is a mirror. All I see is the selfish monster I became.”

“Do me a favour. Make peace with your daughter. With yourself.”

“I can’t. Besides, why should I trust you anyway?”

“Who said anything about trust?”

Then why should I believe you?”

“I’m not asking you to believe me, either.”

“Then why are we here?! Why am I getting this epiphany of free advice from someone I’ve never met?”

“You may not know me, but I know you. Walls have ears, and long memories.”

“Don’t even try to threaten me.”

“That’s the spirit!”



A brilliant yet troubled professor, blinded by the pursuit of success and trapped in the centre of his own ego is unable to process the tragic passing of his daughter, who his wife convinces him he is responsible for. Exiled and alone, he somehow gets a second chance teaching a group of disenfranchised students with problems of their own. After a tense yet cathartic meeting with a local, both his past and his ambition converge. Seeking closure with his wife while mentoring his students becomes an emotional struggle endangering both his reputation and his students.

A visceral, minimalist short story confronting emotional subject matter, Purgatory is a sharp, noir psychological drama ambiguously merging personal struggles with social commentary.