

# Purgatory Pt 1

by David W Brown on December 20, 2021. © All rights reserved

Some say they're goin' to a place called  
Glory and I ain't saying that ain't a fact  
But I've heard that I'm on the road to  
Purgatory and I don't like the sound of that

Iris Dement - Let The Mystery Be

&

The little town had shrunk like a cheap cotton shirt in the twenty-five years since I'd last visited. The paper mill that gave the town its name closed ten years later, taking half the population with it, leaving the rest to mourn their loss.

Port Aux Voirè's shuttered mill held some good memories for me; the automation project I successfully led there set me up for a partnership with a Big Five accounting firm, and I also fell in love with the little seaside town for which it was named.

The townspeople were friendly and shared an ironic, dry sense of humour born of the peaks and valleys of a commodity-based economy.

I suppose that's why they referred to their hometown mispronounced as 'Purgatory', at times neither heaven nor hell.

A bad business deal and an even worse divorce had left me to ponder retirement in a vastly different light than I ever had. That pondering led me to mentally retrace my steps to a time and place that I held dear.

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I sold my expensive townhouse in Vancouver at the most recent peak and - sight unseen - bought a brand new one just outside of Port Aux Voire. I brought the profit from the sale, my books, guitars, and hope for a quiet and peaceful backstretch to a long, hard race.

A new downtown had evolved to accommodate amenities that my fellow urban expats required.

Organic food, acupuncture, brew pub and most important, a coffee shop. The latter became integral to my daily ritual; breakfast and a triple shot of espresso, then a long hike followed by a decaf and baked treat.

My second week, I recognized the millwright from my earlier time working there. An interesting and incredibly organized guy, Garland retired soon after the mill closed. He invited me to join him and a friend at their table, referring to them as his "coffee klatch".

They told me there were few people remaining in town from the hundreds who'd worked at the plant, some heading to the island for other mill jobs or to the big city.

That's when the conversation took a twist, with Garland starting it down a strange path.

"Remember that guy Hans and his wife Bonnie? She blew her head off. I went to see how he was doing and he asked me if I wanted to see where she did it. Kind of odd question, I thought".

"Mm-mm. Funny guy, Hans", his friend Archie replied.

"And Lorne's kid hung himself from the goalposts over at the high school". Garland was on a roll now.

"Archie, what about that guy who was the mill safety manager? Killed himself in his bathtub, remember? Drank a bottle of vodka and opened his veins with a straight razor".

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Archie nodded. “ And don’t forget the twins”.

I had to know more. “Twins?”.

They nodded in unison and Garland spoke.

“Arlene and Joe’s kids. They rigged up dry cleaning bags with some kind of gas cylinders”.

Archie added, “damned internet’s full of stuff on how to do yourself in”.

My sense of unease quadrupled when they explained that these were only the suicides that they knew of in the past six months.

“We’re really living up to our name”, Archie chuckled.

At home, I ran an online search of the local obituaries for the past ten years and was stunned when I could find a ‘tragic death’ article for more than half of the names or dates matching the obituaries. I found a provincial health ministry study that showed the rate of suicide to total deaths was between one and two percent.

That meant Port Aux Voirè’s rate was twenty-five to fifty times the norm.

What the hell was going on?

My analytical background and readily available time quickly disappeared down this curious and disturbing rabbit hole, searching the internet and local archives for clues.

Until I met Muirèann.

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There was live music Friday and Saturday evenings in the coffee shop, I sometimes sat in with a young local guy who played old blues like I did. One Friday I spotted a rare treasure on a guitar stand near the little stage.

I was squatting in front of it trying to read the faded label through the sound hole when a throat cleared and a woman's voice asked, "planning to touch me?"

Turning awkwardly, I saw an even rarer treasure with a smirk on a very pretty face. She was near my age, tall and lithe with a wavy crown of silvery hair and eyes like matching sapphires.

I stuttered something about "an original Larriveé" and her smirk turned to a warm smile. "Indeed, got it from Jean's own hands down in the big city. Do you know him?"

I told her about my humble collection that included three of Jean's instruments. "But I don't have anything like this", I said.

"Well, play me something", she said, pointing at the old guitar.

I gingerly removed it from the stand and plucked the sixth and fifth strings to determine the tuning it was in. I guessed correctly it was in open G and picked out the opening measures to "Death Letter" by Son House.

"Ah, a blues guy. You're always my weak spot.", she said and sighed dramatically.

Things changed so quickly from that moment that I didn't even realize I was still in the rabbit hole.