

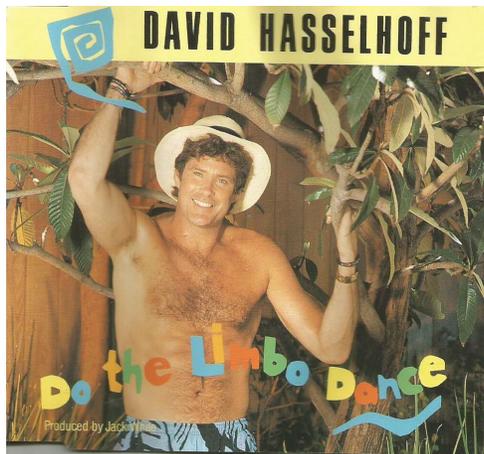


In early April 2005, a deliveryperson dropped off an order of shrimp fried rice to a customer on the 35<sup>th</sup> floor in a Bronx building and, on his way down, got trapped in the elevator for three days.

“I kept yelling,” Happy Dragon’s Ming Kuang Chen told *The New Times* through an interpreter, but his multiple calls on the intercom went disregarded because those on the other end did not understand what he was saying and took no further action to understand. Finally, on the morning of the third day, a Monday, workers heard Mr. Chen yelling and called the fire department because “they thought the man might be drunk.”

What do 81 hours in a 4- by- 6 ½-foot space feel like? “He pointed to his wrist and swirled his finger around the dial...and said, ‘I thought I would never see daylight again,’” reported *The Times*.

Is it irrelevant that Mr. Chen had come so far, got all the way to the fourth, almost third floor? In a building just around the corner from Happy Dragon.



Limbo is *an uncertain period of awaiting a decision or resolution, or an intermediate state or condition*. Limbo is your body trying to drop off someone's lunch special, but you are stuck between the third and fourth floor, and your mind is both delivering fried rice and picking up the next delivery. Your eyes have not forgotten the sun, but over three days anyone would panic, grow thirsty.

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The experience of limbo is not always so acute. I first heard the word thanks to Chubby Checker and his 1962 hit, "Limbo Rock," with its simple, limping melody and kindergarten-friendly lyrics about the mildly uncomfortable party game in which dancers move under a pole, held by two people, starting at their chest level and... *Limbo lower now*.

I remember doing the limbo in grade school, but no one ever tells you *how* to do it, that to execute it properly you need to plié, step wide and bend your back. So there we were, winging it in Mrs. Comerford's class at Most Holy Trinity, most of us outright cheating and ducking under instead of chest-up, making for an unsatisfying game that lasted just a few rounds. We had no idea how low we could go, how low others had gone. We didn't know the world's record for the lowest limbo dance is 8.5 inches.

David Hasselhoff, now remembered for the viral videos in which he's drunk and eating cheeseburgers, contributed to the limbo canon with the lesser known "Limbo Dance" from the early 1990s. Watch the video and it may look like he's chill, but dive deeper—the whole song is a case of denial. He *will not* do the limbo, even though he urges others to do it. He will not show us how it is done. He'd rather lie around in a hammock. And by the end of the song, when I think he's finally gonna get up and do it, he instead plunges slo-mo, feet-first, into the deep end of the swimming pool.

*Clap your hands, it's party time*

*Do the limbo dance!*

Despite not taking his own advice, could Knight Rider have gotten it right? Is limbo something to clap our hands about? We usually think of limbo as a place we don't want to be, or a state we will be, but aren't yet, while in actuality we're in it all the time.

Think: There are teeny-tiny limbos, like standing on line at the supermarket. Riding the subway to work. And bigger personal limbos, like waiting to hear if you got the job, if you or someone you love has cancer. And ones we move through every day, like waking up, taking a shower. That sopping in-between the silent, private you of your subconscious world—*what can you wash away today?*—and the arid in-the-world you.

Sitting in limbo is our job. A meta person-puddle between earth and sky into which is forever falling more drippy, slippery blips of limbo-ness. Get used to it.

*Sitting here in limbo*

*Waiting for the tide to flow*

*Sitting here in limbo*

*Knowing that I have to go*

- Jimmy Cliff, "Sitting in Limbo"

Cliff wrote this song after the death of his mentor and producer, Leslie Kong, who had been with Cliff since the start of his career at 14. Kong was always pushing Cliff to experiment and try new things, like a ma bird escorting her baby to that sacred take-off. In Cliff's own words, on page 136 of *Reggae Roots: The Story of Jamaican Music*: "The feeling of limbo was from Jamaica. I'd been in England four years and come back to Jamaica, not making it in England. Like I leave to make it and come back to Jamaica and find I'd lost the popularity I had. People even start

thinking I'm a foreigner. It's a crying out song. You are in an environment you can hardly..."

Are you shitting me, Google Books? *Page 137 is not part of the preview.*

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The Catholic notion of limbo, from the Latin *limbus*, or edge, is located right next door to hell for those who died in original sin. And there's not just one room in limbo, but two. One for infants who have not been baptized but are too young to have sinned, and one for the "patriarchs of the old Testament," destined to wait in perpetuity. That is, until Jesus comes to spring them.

Fuck the patriarchs, but do you think God would leave a large group of neonates unattended? No. And the word *limbo* is never mentioned in the Bible. The whole idea of a ginormous waiting room for baby-men was developed by Catholic theologians in medieval Europe. It took until 2007 for the Church to cave, when Pope John Paul II commissioned a document stating that "there are strong grounds for hope" that God will save the babies in limbo. Even limbo is in limbo.

What if it's bigger than that? What if we turn the definition on its head and make it, like, do the windmill? What if Catholicism is hosting the Grand Prix of limbo-ing, and only a few elites even make it to the starting gate?

That would include Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini, an Italian-American religious sister who was canonized in 1946. I first visit the Cabrini Shrine in Washington Heights three Christmas Eves ago, to hear my friends sing carols. I walk in to the chapel, and all I see is ceiling. The walls tiled with mosaics featuring events and scenes I assume are significant in Mother Cabrini's life. An ocean liner, a flock of scattered doves, the Mother of Immigrants, everything winking white and gold at the tippy-top. That's how churches are designed; they fiddle with the energy so you're

forced to look up. Like if a building could be shaped like a sound, the Cabrini Shrine would be the highest note, played by the shiniest horn.

That feeling when you are alone at an airport terminal, waiting for your flight and looking at the sky.

Then I see the altar, where a nun is encased in a glass coffin at the front of the church. Hmm...maybe one of the sisters who taught at the adjacent high school has just died, and they have to multi-task during Christmas Eve mass to get the casket ready for a funeral service. Why isn't anyone else staring? Why do I have this tingly wish to jump up and float around the mosaics, like we're in some bounce house at Chuck E. Cheese's?

*Oh riiiigghhhhhh.* Because this is the *Mother Cabrini* Shrine, and so that has to be Mother Cabrini. And she did not pass away on Wednesday.

“It’s the body of the first American saint!” my singing friend tells me as he takes my arm and escorts me out when the program is over. “It’s so powerful! You see this in churches in Europe all the time, but in America, not so much.”

I go home and Google Mother Cabrini. She died in Chicago on December 22, 1917. The next day, when I tell my sisters about it while rooting through our Christmas stockings, they know exactly what is going on.

“She’s incorruptible,” Barbara says. It’s the Roman Catholic belief that the bodies of some saints, because they’re so holy, undergo little or no decomposition. (cf. Saint Zita, who died in 1272 and was found to be incorruptible when her body was exhumed 300 years later.)

Say that Mother Cabrini landed smack dab in the middle of Heaven, no limbo layover, soul born to eternal life. Yet she also left something behind—a vibration, her unseen presence—in her body in Washington Heights. (And it’s not just in Washington Heights—her head has been

preserved in a chapel in Rome, while an arm is at her national shrine in Chicago.)

Look She is not just lying there. Her physical remains are active, *at work*, in service, buzzing, living, punched in and on the clock. You can get a hit off it. This is Olympic-level limbo, the art of being in two or more sets of limbos-within-limbos spontaneously, and functioning and focused in all of them. Not suspended in wait or fear or doubt, but making limbo an in-spot in its own right.

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Based on Chubby's and the Hoff's interpretations, I wouldn't have guessed that the limbo dance dates back to the mid-1800s in Trinidad. It was often performed as a funeral dance, said to reflect the cycle of life. When the dancer successfully clears the pole and looks up unscathed, it is considered the triumph of life over death.

In a February 1963 interview, the host of the Australian version of American Bandstand asks Chubby about this phenomenon, if the limbo dance originally signified "the passing from death to the twilight zone into heaven."

"Wha?!" laughs Chubby. "Maybe." Kinda like, *whatever, dude, that's cool*, and goes on to share how kids are so much better at limbo than adults.

Besides Mother Cabrini, animals have limbo down pat. My cat Ira shows me how fluid and light life in limbo can be with every move. What he does is beyond a leap or a jump—I call it a *bloop*—and it has just 3 steps:

1. He's on the ground.
2. He's suspended in mid-air.
3. He's where he wanted to go.

It's the sustaining of step 2 where the juice is, and he stretches it out as long as possible, legs tucked in close like he's sitting in some chair in the air.

If you're a cat not of the type to jump right in, you plunk yourself in the limbo puddle and fake it until you make it. Ira's brothers, Derrick and Lorenzo, always want to go out in the hallway, where they roll around on the carpet and get scratches from the UPS guys. Ira, no way. When he's feeling brave, he'll sit right in the doorway, head, shoulders and front paws in the hallway, tail and back legs in the apartment. He's not about to move, so I stand there holding the door until he's finished, a kitty Istanbul calling two worlds home.

Ira has learned at a young age to take comfort in two-in-one behavior: half of you facing the future, the other half rooted in the present in a way that makes it the past. The Hoff doesn't want to live forever in the space in which he's on vacation some place where he is beloved, where people ask him, "Why isn't your hair like Knight Rider's?" What if he wished hard for that hair again, and still there is not even a half-inch of growth? Then what?

Maybe then you order Chinese take-out and pick it up yourself, put on the 45. Let Chubby sing it with the pops and the cracks as you open the shiny crown of your hairless head to the sky, glowing globe a lantern lit, a landing strip to the start of something else.