

The Universe of a Stupid Old Man

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Walter knew that he was an old man. Ninety-seven seemed extraordinary to Walter, never having lived a particularly healthy life. He had lived in this nursing home for the past seven years. He'd found it impossible to go up the stairs in the old family home that he and Margaret had bought sixty years ago. He dreamed of that house every night when he lay down in his still unfamiliar nursing home bedroom. He dreamed of Margaret and, in his dreams, they were young: only forty or so. Nothing special happened in those dreams. Just chatting and sitting and, perhaps, walking. Walter missed Margaret and had loved her more than anything. She had died almost forty years previous but he still ached with the loss when he woke every morning. He missed his house, his children, his work and his garden. Walter missed walking and life as he used to know it. Walter knew that he was an unhappy old man. He would watch the TV and see stories of extraordinary lives. Ordinary people would sail around the world or climb Everest or live with African tribes. In the newspaper, he would read of regular individuals, postmen, mechanics, factory workers, doing incredible things like sailing up rivers, driving across continents and jumping off buildings.

Walter was in the navy during the war and had briefly seen Gibraltar, Italy, Greece and Egypt from a boat. After the war, he'd met Margaret and settled in Hertfordshire and hadn't been abroad since. She had lived for the children and they had adored her. As a couple, they had sacrificed so much to give the children the best chance in life. Now they visited once a week if he was lucky. Ungrateful grandchildren would run around and disrupt the routine. He knew they visited out of duty and resented their youth. They had so much time and yet his life was spent.

"I wish I could go back and change the things I did with my life," exclaimed Walter to a surprised carer called Chantelle as she was busy changing his sheets one morning. He had noticed before how attractive this one was and felt a pang of regret as he watched her slim body move easily around the room.

"There, there," Chantelle replied, kindly but patronisingly. "I'm sure things haven't been that bad."

She quickly finished what she was doing and left in a slight hurry, worried the old man might start talking to her about more than what he wanted for lunch. She was a young carer, seventeen, and was looking forward to seeing her new boyfriend after her shift finished to go driving in his new car. She used to talk a lot with an old woman called Harriet down the corridor. She had been a happy old woman with twinkling old eyes and had claimed that she had been a lot like Chantelle when she was seventeen. That had made Chantelle happy. Harriet died last week and, for now, Chantelle didn't want to talk to anyone else in the same way.

After she'd left, Walter sat for a few minutes in silence trying to calculate how much older he was than that pretty young carer. A gentle wind was blowing through an open window. Walter could see the new leaves dancing in the breeze and the spring flowers winking colour at the cars driving past. Walter stood up. He hadn't stood up since last Christmas and found it surprisingly easy.

“Maybe those pills are doing some good after all,” he grudgingly thought as he strolled easily around the room. His joints were moving freely. His lungs were full of the fresh air and his heart was beating strongly and steadily. Walter broke into a trot. He looked in the mirror at one end of his room and saw himself, a ninety-seven year old man, running around his bedroom like a ten year old. He hadn’t run like this for thirty years and he could see a wide look of surprise in his grizzled old features reflecting back at him in the mirror. Stepping up to his armchair, he wrapped his elderly fingers around the frame and, with a little effort, hoisted the full weight of the chair high above his aged head. His arms felt strong, light, supple and young.

“Feels good, doesn’t it?” spoke a voice from close behind him.

Walter let go of the chair and it crashed to the floor. Standing in one corner of the room was a tall, dark man with a close beard and wavy black hair. He was wearing a beautiful tailored suit and glossy black shoes that shone like dark stars. His eyes were abysses of shadowy night and his teeth were a string of faultless pearls that grinned joylessly yet beautifully at Walter. The man was leaning casually against the peeling wallpaper taking in the ramshackle surroundings like a potential property investor. Walter sat quickly on the bed.

“Who, the bloody hell, are you?” Walter spluttered.

“Hello Walter,” the character spoke calmly, “I am the Devil. I am Lucifer. I am the Angel of Darkness. I have come to help you.”

The door burst open like an explosion and in burst Chantelle behind the rotund and muscular frame of the manager, Fran, her enormous bosom appearing like airships from the mist. Fran could never remember which of her inmates were partially deaf so she spoke to everyone, including her staff, with the same articulate and strident volume.

“What’s the matter?” barked Fran, loudly. “We heard an enormous crash. Who did this to your chair?”

“That man,” croaked Walter, pointing with huge eyes to the corner of the room. “I don’t know that man.”

Both Fran and Chantelle followed Walter’s eyes and then looked at each other to confirm they were not seeing the emperor’s new clothes. There was nothing in the corner and their expressions quickly changed from confusion and concern to sympathy.

“Now then, Walter.” Fran expressed vociferously. “Do you think you might want a lie down? I can get you something that might make you feel better?”

The Devil’s eyes had not left Walter throughout the whole incident. He was smiling coolly and now put a finger to his lips and shook his head.

“No thank you, nurse.” Walter whispered, still looking into the empty corner. “I’ll be fine. He’s gone now.”

“That’s good. We’ll let you rest. Lunch isn’t for another hour and a half. It’s chicken today. You like that, don’t you?” The two women left without waiting to hear if Walter liked chicken.

Once the door was closed, Walter spoke. “Does this mean I’m going to die?” The Devil opened his mouth wide, shut his eyes and laughed at the ceiling for a moment.

“That’s not up to me, Walter, I am only here to help you. You told that cute little nurse that you wanted to go back and change things in your life. I’m here to help you do that. Do you mind if I sit down?”

Walter was listening carefully now. He was not a religious man and had never really believed in a God. This man appeared convincing, however, and Walter couldn’t deny the evidence of his own body. He walked over to the upturned chair, stooped down, righted it and offered it to the Devil. His back was strong and he tested it by stretching before sitting back upon the bed.

“Thank you.” the Devil sat down, crossed his legs and placed his arms on the sides of the chair. The cufflinks sparkled like pools of silver. “Have you ever heard of quantum mechanics?” he continued.

“Not really,” replied Walter, taken aback.

“It’s a fantastic concept really. Simply wonderful and with some brilliant consequences, one of which we shall be using. It’s all to do with particles, Walter. What we are made of.” He pointed aimlessly at the room around him. “I’m sure you know a lot of this already but the universe is made up of uncountable numbers of atoms. Billions of the tiny things go in to making you. These atoms are incredibly small, you know. If you were able to take a million of them and line them all up in a row, they would be able to sit in a long line on the top of a pinhead.” He looked pleased with this statement and waited for Walter to raise his bushy eyebrows in interest before continuing. “Incredibly, however, these atoms are mostly made up of empty space with a minuscule dense nucleus in the centre and relatively insubstantial electrons making up the rest of the atom. Two months after you were born, Walter, a man named Ernest Rutherford proved this concept when he fired particles at a gold sheet. Most of them went through the atom but just a few bounced off this enormously solid nucleus. Are you following so far, Walter?”

“I believe so,” answered Walter honestly.

“Around each nucleus, therefore, you have several particles of electrons that behave like waves or, if you prefer,” the Devil chuckled, “several waves of electrons that behave like particles.” He paused, uncrossed his long delicate legs and leaned forwards.

“One of the fundamental rules of the universe, Walter, was discovered when you were just sixteen by a German called Werner Heisenberg. In 1926, he came up with Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle, which, in essence, told the world that to know what a particle is going to do, you’d need to know it’s position and it’s momentum or, to put it another way, where it is and which way it’s going, yes?”

Walter wondered where this conversation was going but nodded his head anyway.

“Well, he found that he could not know both these pieces of information at the same time.” The Devil exclaimed. “Amazing isn’t it? What this means is that, within this universe, one can never predict what an electron will do or how it will behave. One can only list a probability of it being in a particular place at a particular time. Mathematics has been used by physicists, Walter, to describe the state of a system at a given time but, and this is the vital thing, as soon as anyone tries to measure what those little electrons are going to do next then, bang!” He clapped his hands. “They come up against Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle and they’re stuck like a car with no wheels. They’re not able to

read the future even when talking about insignificant little particles.” The Devil looked very smug with this fact.

“Now electrons, as part of atoms, are what make up this universe around us and, although no one can predict exactly how these atoms are going to behave within the universe we can relatively easily come up with a *probability* of how something will behave.”

The Devil stopped talking for a moment and looked around the room. He glanced at the faded photographs, the regulation bed sheets, and the trinkets on the windowsill. He looked at the picture on the TV and the small wooden wardrobe. He turned back to Walter.

“Where were we? Oh yes, predicting the behaviour of objects. Now most of the time, we don’t need to know how these electrons will behave precisely. If I throw this on the floor...” he nonchalantly picked up a photograph of Walter’s eldest son and violently threw it down, shattering the frame into a million pieces, “...we know how it will behave. Perhaps a million or two electrons may spin slightly differently but as a rule, when you have billions upon gazillions of the things, everything kind of averages out and we get what we would expect. A bit of a mess in this case,” he smiled. “In theory, however, if enough of those electrons behave improbably...” the Devil picked up another photograph, this time of Margaret. He flung it to the floor where it bounced gently, spiralled through the air like a gold medal athlete, and landed perfectly back on the windowsill where it had been before, “we can get the object to behave improbably. Nothing is impossible. There is no magic involved. There is no such thing as miracles. Only improbabilities.”

Walter was impressed. His mind was working faster than it had done for years. He could feel the neurons in his brain firing down pathways previously unexplored.

“Now this is important, Walter, because the choices that you’ve made throughout your life have not been determined by God. They have been choices that you, yourself, have made. No higher power can make you do one thing as opposed to another. You’ve been given, rather generously I feel, something called ‘free will’.” The Devil looked remarkably pissed off at this and made Walter feel decidedly nervous. “There are, reassuringly, simple probabilities as to how people, such as you, will behave. Most of the time, individuals are disappointingly predictable. For example...” the Devil pulled a pistol from his jacket and unceremoniously levelled it at Walter’s heart. “Would you like to live or die?”

“Live, live!” Walter hurriedly answered, squinting through a sudden rising panic. The Devil put the gun back in his jacket and leaned contentedly back in the chair again.

“As predicted.” The Devil stated as if this proved everything. “Only one in a million would choose death under those conditions. You have behaved according to probability. The atoms that make up the neutrons in your brain have fired in a conventional way. Now, listen carefully, because what I’m about to tell you is the amazing thing that is a consequence of quantum mechanics.” The Devil spoke slowly, pointing at Walter with a knobbly finger.

“God is a deterministic fellow. He likes to stay in control and, as Einstein put it, doesn’t play dice. Every time those electrons behave in a particular way, new universes are produced where all the alternative choices have been made. This makes up the infinitely varied multiverse. History, you see, is not a single line but is far more like a many-branched tree where every possible branch of history is

realized. Every time you make a choice, and you make a lot of choices in your life, you are simply choosing which universe to occupy within the multiverse.” He paused.

“A fellow called Schrödinger illustrated this well when he imagined a cat that had been put in a box with one atom of a radioactive sample attached to a vial of cyanide. If that radioactive particle degraded within the hour, a mechanism would trigger the vial and the cat would die. If the particle didn’t decay, the vial wouldn’t be broken and the cat would live. Crucially, the box was sealed with no windows so you can’t see what’s going on. Now, Walter, is the cat alive or dead?”

“I wouldn’t know.” Walter said, still a little breathless from his encounter with the gun.

“Exactly,” said the Devil, happily. “There is no choice, scientifically, but to consider the cat both 100% alive and, simultaneously, 100% dead. Once we open the box, we would discover that the cat is, let’s say, alive. However, the moment we open that box, a branch of the multiverse is created and an alternative universe is opened where the radioactive sample behaved differently and the cat would be dead. These two universes would then carry along in parallel to one another.”

Again, the Devil paused and looked about the room. This time his eyes lingered on the photograph of Walter’s youngest grandson.

“Every decision that you have made in your life from what to name your first child to what you want for breakfast on April 7th 1957 has created alternative universes where you will have made alternative choices. There are an infinite number of these universes, Walter; countless different spins of electrons are conjuring up innumerable scenarios as we speak. This means that even the ridiculously improbable is occurring, somewhere, in an alternative universe. Somewhere there will be a universe where you chose to die a moment ago and I will have blown your brains out with that gun.” Once more, the Devil smiled. “When a choice of yours has been made, your life continues in that universe with the consequences of that decision affecting future decisions, which, in turn, create further universes with scenarios which may or may not affect future decisions etcetera, etcetera. Are you following me?”

Walter didn’t really get it but he was a little worried about having his brains blown out so nodded anyway.

“Walter, have you ever wondered how your life may have turned out differently had you just made one or two slightly different decisions? Have you ever realised how tiny decisions can create such enormous consequences? If Hitler’s great great grandmother had chosen to visit the fishmonger before the baker in her village one spring morning in 1802, she would not have noticed the young man who happened to be visiting from another town and would eventually become Hitler’s great great grandfather. Future history would be transformed. Have you ever wondered how your own history might have been different?”

Walter had to admit that he had and nodded his head.

“Now’s your chance, Walter. Now’s your chance to find out. I heard you talking to that nurse. I know how you feel and, as I said, I’m here to help. I have a key,” the Devil produced a large key from his jacket, “and this key will take you to any of the countless universes I described to you earlier. All you have to do is tell the key which decision in your life you would now like to change. This will then transport you to see how your life is different in the universe where you made that one alternative

choice. All the choices that follow will be the most probable of alternatives. They will be how you would have acted under those new conditions. If you like it, you can stay. If you don't, you can move to a different universe. You can move three times using the key."

The devil stood up, stepped towards Walter and placed the heavy object into his wrinkled old hands.

"Now, I hate to break this to you," he smiled and looked down at Walter. Walter could see his glossy hair sway sinuously in the draft from the window. "There is a large blood clot in a secondary vein in your leg. It has been there for twenty minutes. Remember, we can only talk of probabilities, but within this universe you have a 99.9% chance of dying within the hour when that clot hits your coronary artery. The women who work here are downstairs and only have a 0.03% probability of coming back to this room within the hour. You are Schrödinger's cat in the box, Walter. How will you act? I hope to see you later."

The Devil's voice was still echoing in Walter's ears when he vanished with a small pop. One moment he was there, the next moment he was not. Walter looked around to confirm he was alone and stared down to study the key in his hands.

Walter felt excited and energised. He had been waiting for seven years at the nursing home. Part of his unhappiness was the knowledge that he was waiting. Waiting, with some trepidation, for the next phase of his existence that, he had assumed, would be his death. But this key gave him the opportunity to live again, to explore new paths and to paint new pictures with his life. Above all, Walter relished the opportunity to take the risks he hadn't dared do before. He only had an hour to live and, instead of being scared or, even, apprehensive, Walter felt liberated. After all, he had nothing to lose now. The long wait was almost over and there was still a chance for a last hurrah.

Where should he start? He thought back over the nine decades of memories that were stored in his mind. Walter's cerebral cortex fired pulses of thought down neural paths that had remained idle for forty or fifty years and, the brain being what it is, Walter was easily able to cast his mind back to the early 1920s.

His school building was an imposing Victorian structure with towers and turrets and small windows. The teachers used the cane regularly and the boys would never talk out of place. Not like the children these days. Walter had come from a poor family but was never seen without his tie done up, his shirt tucked in and his cap neatly upon his head. He had a small leather satchel that he used to keep his books and pencils in. It was a good school with good teachers and good discipline. Not like the soft rubbish you get now. Walter never grassed on the lad in the year above. What was his name? Underwood. Howard Underwood. Walter was a big lad. Had a bit of a belly. Nothing like some of these fatties you get nowadays with their computer games and hamburgers. Nonetheless, it used to get him into a spot of bother now and again. Walter had never told anyone but Howard Underwood had made a quiet, young Walter's life a living hell.

"I wish I'd given that Underwood a taste of his own medicine," said Walter, aloud and touched the key.

Everything went dark and chillingly cold. A pulse of energy shot up Walter's creased old arm and something gripped his wrist hard like a constricting snake. His arm was being pulled steadily and powerfully as if dragged into another universe.

And then the smell brought everything back: that musty stale aroma of Victorian learning. The red brick wall of the building was standing in front of Walter and he recognised the tubby lad in the shiny black shoes, grey socks and garters. The young Walter had his back against the faded wall and had his short arms folded across his podgy stomach.

"Right then, chubby, I got eight beats from old Mr Twitcher today. You're gonna get the same from me seein' as it was your fault I was there."

Tears came to old Walter's eyes. He knew what was to come. His shirt would be ripped up to expose the puppy fat peeking over his belt before Underwood would employ his brutal physical torture to the exposed shame of a fat white tummy. He could see the younger him cower at the anticipation of what was to come.

And then, as Underwood was stepping forward, the young Walter flung his fist forward into the nose of the older boy. As Underwood collapsed to the ground, young Walter skipped forward with startling pace and put his substantial frame behind a hefty kick to Underwood's face.

Immediately, a crushing headache hit the old Walter's brain like a depth charge. He reached up to his temples with trembling fingers as he screwed his eyes up against the agony behind his retina. Walter fell to his knees and flickered his eyes open and shut as mysteriously different images flashed past: skies, ships, people, unrecognisable colours and objects. Then, just as quickly as the pain had descended, it left and Walter sat up.

Fresh memories were in his head: new memories from a new universe and new existence that had blossomed from that one change. He could elatedly remember hitting Underwood at school. He could recollect the respect he gained from the other pupils. No one messed with Walter after that. It had been the same when he left school. He'd joined the factory with his father when he was fifteen but this time, in this universe, he was one of the tough lads on the assembly line. Again, he had respect. He'd won medals during the war. There they were on the wall, a dozen of them at least. He'd earned a hard reputation as a businessman upon returning to Hertfordshire. He'd taken over businesses and built them up. His two sons owned them now that Walter was an old man. Walter could see himself reflected in the mirror that covered one wall sitting in a throne of a chair and watching an enormous wide screen cinema style TV. The room was vast with a Jacuzzi bath and a massive double bed. The walls were fashionably adorned with colourful prints and the window looked out over a faultless rural view of rolling hills. Walter was fabulously rich and successful in this new reality. The aggression he'd chosen in that one schoolyard incident had taught him to fight and scrap for money, reputation and, above all, respect. Walter was impressed with himself. "This is a real man," he thought. "This is a tough, rich man and this must be a happy man. This is what I want to be." The photograph of Margaret was sitting in a gold frame on a polished wooden cabinet.

Walter checked his new memory for Margaret. Yes, it had been the same. They'd met at a dance in Stevenage on May 6th 1946. He'd been desperately shy and she had to ask him to dance. They'd swayed in each other's arms for an hour before he'd plucked up the courage to kiss her tenderly

on the cheek and move hesitantly to her full lips. Walter had felt his body shake with fear and had been, above all, cripplingly embarrassed of his own embarrassment. He was so inexperienced with women despite being almost ten years older than Margaret but she had guided him gently and opened a new world to the tough man. She was able to relate to people and empathise in a way Walter could not. The children loved her completely. Walter went back through his fresh reminiscences. They'd argued more in this universe. He was more belligerent with her. She was more belligerent with him. She just wouldn't agree with him in this reality and he had to teach her. He had to be firmer with her, harder and more... aggressive? Had he hit her in this universe? Yes, he remembered it now. She was arguing with him in front of the children. They were only small so it must have been the 50s. It was acceptable back then wasn't it? Didn't everyone discipline wives in those days? She was rude to him, disrespectful. Above all, Walter valued respect. His children respected him, his friends respected him, his business associates respected him and his wife must respect him. Still, Walter looked back with acute shame. She'd forgiven him, of course. She was so kind. She died, as in the previous universe, of cancer on October 15th 1979 aged sixty. The children were adults by then but were heartbroken and Walter never remarried. His children never talked of his physical attacks on their mother. Or on them.

Was this universe better than what he'd chosen before? Look at the opulent wealth he had lavished on Margaret and the family. Those children had all the opportunities he'd missed and surely that more than made up for a little loss of temper once in a while? Still, Walter was surprised and impressed at how such a small change so early in his life could transform his future. He longed to have taken a few more risks when he'd had the opportunity.

If only he'd had more experience with women before meeting Margaret. Perhaps he would have been better at dealing with her. Perhaps his violence stemmed from frustration and lack of understanding. Understanding comes from knowledge, doesn't it? Walter's knowledge of women was limited.

Walter had two more choices to change and he thought back to the images of his time in the war. He was thirty-three when called up to the navy in early 1944 because, before that, his factory work was deemed vital for the war effort. He wasn't a fit man and found it difficult to keep up with the teenagers as they patrolled the shipping routes to the forces in the eastern Mediterranean. Walter could remember the crystal azure seas and bright warm sunshine with olive trees on the rugged landscape and the pale rough cottages dotted on the hills. Above all, he remembered the dark eyed Greek girls who had the dubious reputation on the ship of being the easiest girls in the Mediterranean. They were stunning. Their wild thick brown hair would fall seductively over their faces and they would flick it carelessly back to gaze at the smartly dressed British sailors with a look that suggested they were already revealing far too much. The Greeks had suffered heavily in the war and were particularly grateful to be liberated.

Walter had been paralytic with fear when these beauties were near. He had watched with envy as the young bucks strode confidently up to a group of girls, docked their caps jauntily and gave their rakish grins. They used to offer cigarettes and show pictures of home. They used to dance and laugh with these Greek goddesses and use the international language of the body to seduce and enjoy. Walter would listen avidly to the vivid stories told by his fellow sailors but had never been able to go with any

of them. Sixty years on and he could still remember one particular girl in a blue dress, long hair and a bow tied up to pacify the wild curls. She had watched him all evening in a bar. He'd been encouraged to go over but had sat and drunk beer instead. Eventually one of Walter's mates had taken her upstairs.

"I wish I'd gone with that beautiful Greek girl." Walter said aloud and gripped the key tight.

The familiar icy sensation once again tugged him to an alternative universe. The smell of tobacco smoke hit his nostrils like a wet flannel and he could see the girl sat at a small table with a glass of white wine and a cigarette gripped delicately between two slender fingers. She exhaled a white plume of smoke like a downy feather that drifted up and then sank lazily down onto the three young women that were gazing seductively at the British sailors sitting opposite. Walter recognised Jim and Adrian but couldn't remember the other two. Sat in the centre of this group of men was Walter, still stocky, but with muscle having replaced the puppy fat of his early years. He wasn't an attractive man with a bulbous nose, heavy eyebrows and shallow chin but the shirt was tucked in, the tie was done up and the sailor cap sat proudly on his meaty head. He looked smart, if a little drunk. A glass of beer with several empty bottles littered the small table in front of the young Walter. His hands were fidgeting with the glass, turning it endlessly around. Occasionally, his eyes would meet the sultry gaze but would then look nervously away.

The old Walter watched with excitement and, he was surprised to find, a little envy. The girl's blue dress clung easily to her young body. Her long brown legs played with each other under the table and, as she leaned forward, her smooth naked shoulders curved gently forwards to frame her slender neck, cute chin and pouting lips. He was a fool not to have done this in the first place. As he watched, the young Walter downed his drink, rose, a little hesitantly, to his feet and paced through the tobacco smog to the opposite table like a man called to execution. The young Walter smiled stupidly at the Greek's breasts and slumped down next to her while the girl's friends moved quietly to another table, giggling to themselves like a flock of hens. The young Walter leaned over and kissed the girl softly and tenderly on the cheek before moving tentatively to her full lips. The girl reached up to touch his face and Walter could see his younger body shake with fearful exhilaration.

Again, the overwhelming pain punched the old Walter in the head. The wiring in his skull was breaking, reforming, morphing into the new, alternative universe. It lasted for longer this time and the throbbing was so intense that Walter dropped to the ground and shut his eyes against the flashes of colour. Again, like someone flicking a switch, the relief was instant and Walter looked up to investigate this new reality.

He was in the same grand room, sitting in the impressive chair watching a film on the imposing cinema style TV. Nothing much appeared to have changed. He was still rich and respected. Walter cast his new mind back to that night in the Greek bar. He was quite drunk that night but, yes, he'd gone to bed with that girl and she had splendid hips and lovely tight thighs. Or was that another one? Walter realised that he'd slept with a number of different girls during the war, not just in Greece but also in Italy, Yugoslavia and Palestine. He could remember his confidence growing with each obliging, liberated conquest so that, by the time he'd returned to Britain, he was no longer a retiring timid bundle of nerves around women but a socialised outgoing cad. He'd lost count of the women he'd been with and could remember fewer names than faces.

What had happened with Margaret? In this universe they'd met at the same dance, just like before, but he had made the first move. He'd been confident and self-assured and he could remember thinking that the young Margaret enjoying that. Yes, they'd kissed that night but with none of the withdrawn timidity of before. He'd been the one in control that night. He'd been the one in control of the relationship.

A sickening pang of guilt struck Walter with the realisation of what he'd done. Burned in his new memory were Margaret's eyes condemning him, tears streaming from them, inconsolable as bitter disappointment tore the vivaciousness from them. Why had he cheated on her? Because he could? Because he didn't know how not to? It had not been because he didn't love her. It had been a year after their youngest son was born and was just some office trollop at the business. It hadn't meant anything, at least not to him. To his beloved Margaret it had meant her life, her love and her soul. She had gone quickly downhill after that. They didn't divorce but lived increasingly separate lives.

Walter looked around. He put his trembling hands onto the key and made his final wish.

"This room looks familiar. There are two men sobbing over there in the middle of that old rug. Those must be their wives and children comforting them. There's a doctor looking at that old man. There's that old bat, Fran here as well. Hang on... that old man is me. What's that doctor saying? Something about a heart attack? What's all this about? There's Margaret, she'll know. What a beautiful smile you have, my darling. Look at our children all grown up. If only you'd met our little grandchildren. There they are, look. What are they so sad about? They must have really loved me despite me being a miserable old failure that never achieved anything. Perhaps it was a good life after all. Maybe I did achieve something. I'm glad I chose this universe. Yes, my dear, there's nothing I'd like more than a bit of a chat. We could go for a walk as well maybe."