

In Parallel Universes

We had not been out past 10 PM in years. Joyce often turned down invitations for fear I would fall asleep over hors d'oeuvres or her feet would give out as she attempted to rise from an unfamiliar commode. The Jefferson wedding was a happy exception. Not only did I stay awake through that endless hour until the bride and groom emerge from the Klieg lights to signal dinner is served, but Joyce processed to and from the hotel bathroom several times without once calling 911 to get back on her feet. When we finally returned to our condo, I waited at the foot of the stairs until she had completed her ascent, wondering how those tiny heels could support such a mass and fearing that if she lost her balance, I would not be able to get out of the way in time.

“Help me with these,” she commanded, collapsing on the bench at the foot of the bed and sticking out her feet.

“Aren't they painful?” I said, poking around her left ankle for a buckle.

“This is the first evening I have been pain free in years,” she exclaimed as I peeled off the straps.

I was about to start on the other shoe, when I saw a blue light winking at me. Holding up her foot, I looked closer. Something like a computer chip with a LED light was embedded in her left heel.

“Did you step in something at the party?” I asked, trying to be discreet.

“Give me that,” she snapped.

I pried out the chip and handed it to her. She extended the other foot to be unbound.

“What are these things?” I asked as I removed the other shoe.

Another chip was stuck to her right heel.

“It’s an atomic equalizer that neutralizes magnetic fields and restores the atoms in your body to their correct alignment.”

“I didn’t know that our atoms were out of alignment,” I ventured.

“Telephones, lamps, computer screens, the refrigerator, everything has electromagnetic fields that disturb our atoms.”

“Is it wise to reset them after all these years?” I wondered, fearing that her attempt to perfect the atomic structure of her body would have no better outcome than her attempts to perfect me.

“What do you know about atomic imbalance?” she snapped, her favorite line whenever I dared question her latest obsession. “You have one, too.”

“I do?”

“Look under your left heel.”

Sure enough, one of the chips was under the shoe insert, blinking shyly at being discovered like an elderly man leaving a pornography shop.

“Don’t you feel better?” Joyce demanded.

I didn’t know what to say. After all, it was the first night in years where I had drunk four glasses of wine without losing consciousness.

“How does it work?”

“That’s a trade secret,” she said, rising triumphantly from the bench and tottering into the bathroom.

As I undressed, I remembered our ship going through a degaussing station during the War to neutralize the magnetic fields around it that would set off German mines. The human body, however, is not metal, and the air around us is not the sea that generates an electrical current as a ship passes through it. It was late, however, and I dared not risk a confrontation over magnetic theory with a woman who could climb stairs on spikes.

The natural healing industry prospers by a single maxim: if a little is good for you, a lot must be very good. Thus Joyce, with me in tow, had progressed from sampling various herbal remedies and laxatives to massive doses meant to cleanse our bowels and cells of decades of toxins, and ward off a panoply of diseases. Regardless of sometimes bizarre effects, she would increase the dosage until, like Schopenhauer, she demonstrated once again that satiation or frustration is the inevitable end of human aspiration.

I knew she was doubling down on the chips when I caught her in my closet removing the chip from my shoe.

“I’ll order another for you, Walter,” she promised. “They come in two-packs.”

The next few days she fluttered about the condo, speed-dialing her friends to arrange an endless series of lunches at the club. It was a relief to have her away at noon when, if I were careful, she would not know that I had had a martini before lunch, and was often fortunate enough to fall asleep with my grilled cheese and tomato soup untouched. As she was finishing her toilet one evening, I looked at the shoes she had been wearing. There was a chip in the heel and the toe of each one.

The next day I was dabbing the tomato soup off my forehead with a dish towel after falling asleep over lunch when the front door suddenly banged open, and Joyce returned an hour early from her luncheon.

“What are you doing?” she exclaimed, as if I had been caught boiling the kidneys of a small child in her favorite pot.

“I wasn’t expecting you so soon, dear,” I replied.

“Just look at this mess!” she exclaimed, stalking into the dining room. “I can’t leave you alone for a minute.”

I had not done a very good job of sopping up the soup with the grilled cheese. She spun around to face me.

“Just once, Walter, just once,” she began, spinning around again. “When I come home, I hope . . .”

She spun around again, and again, and again, faster and faster.

“I’d be careful with those heels, dear,” I cautioned. “They might mar the parquet floor.”

For the first time in over 50 years of marriage, Joyce was beyond words. She pirouetted like a ballet dancer, hands cupped, right toe pointing to left leg, but instead rising on her toe, she turned on her left heel like a wobbly gyroscope trying to reach a critical speed. Then she was spinning, arms out, head back, faster and faster until the floor beneath her smoked, and the years and the pounds flew away. Instead of an overweight late-seventies woman, I glimpsed a prima ballerina in her twenties, whirling in the same blur that Einstein imagined we would see when travelling at the speed of light.

Still spinning, she began to levitate and then turn clockwise in the air. Faster than an airplane propeller, she became a distortion in the cosmos, until the whole universe began to turn with her. The dining room table behind her vanished, and I saw a great mass of stars swaying and tumbling in the grand and majestic dance of the universe. Slowly, like the vortex of a whirlpool, an opening appeared, and she was sucked into it. Quicker than water running down the sink, she disappeared into a wormhole to another dimension.

I staggered back into the living room and collapsed in my favorite chair. Overwhelmed, I stared at the fissure in space-time that had opened in our dining room. Had her newly realigned atoms drawn her into a parallel universe of perfection? Who had ever witnessed such an event but God?

But was she really gone? That was the question that tormented me. According to quantum entanglement theory, the futures of two particles that have once interacted are

forever joined. Could I ever be sure that she was not coming back? I resolved to keep her disappearance a secret just between us.

As the days passed, I had to tell her increasingly aggressive friends that she was out with one of the others when they called. In the evenings, after I had grilled a steak on the veranda, I would sit in my chair and study the starry array surrounding the wormhole in the dining room. Sometimes, just for fun, I would toss a pistachio shell into the vortex and watch it disappear I knew not where.

One night as I was feeding it pistachio shells the vortex quivered. I was leaning forward to see it more clearly, when something shot out of the hole and struck me in the forehead.

“Ow!” I cried, reaching for it on the floor.

It was Joyce’s wedding ring. Of course it could have no place in a perfect world. Even in this flawed universe, it proclaimed a unity that had been lacking for decades. I decided to take it to a jeweler to sell it, after enough time had passed to create a credible story to explain her absence.

“Sorry about your wife,” the jeweler said, examining the stone through his glass. “When did she pass?”

“About three weeks ago,” I said, relieved that he had chosen such an accurate term to describe her exit.

“I didn’t see anything about it in the paper,” he said, looking up at me through his jeweler’s glass like a biologist examining a paramecium.

“It was quite unexpected,” I replied, studying my reflection in the lens.

We agreed on \$5,000 for the ring. I wish now that I hadn't let him talk me into signing a bill of sale.

Meanwhile Joyce's friends were becoming more demanding.

"We're all here together at the club," one of them insisted over the phone after she had been gone a month.

"Then she must be with you," I said and hung up.

The next few weeks were the happiest in my life. I had enough money for a steak and a bottle of Bordeaux every evening. Then I would sit in my armchair and watch the cosmos circling before me and wonder what to name the stars. One night, however, I had to turn on a light to read. Like a flashlight when the batteries are wearing out, the worm-hole galaxy was starting to fade.

A few days later, as I was finishing my cold steak sandwich and beer at lunch, the doorbell rang. I ignored it. Joyce had often ordered things from the television, and if I did not go out and sign for them, the delivery people took them back. The bell kept ringing. I opened another beer. Then they started to pound on the door.

Enough, I thought, leaving the beer in the kitchen and opening the door. Two enormous policewomen, one behind the other blocked the entrance.

"You Walter Grimes?" the larger one demanded.

"Yes."

She was wider than the door, wider than two Joyces glued together. If she turned sideways to enter, she would knock her partner off the porch.

“Officer Mindy Jackson from women’s crimes division,” she introduced herself.

“And this is Officer Janice Taylor. OK if we come in?”

“I’m in the middle of lunch,” I replied, starting to close the door. “Please call back for an appointment.”

“Let’s cut the crap,” Officer Mindy said, gripping the door with an enormous hand. “Where’s your wife?”

“She passed,” I said remembering the jeweler’s *bon mot*.

“Where’s her body?” Officer Janice shrieked from behind Officer Mindy.

“In cases like this, one never finds a body,” I said. “Now if you will excuse me . . .”

“We got a search warrant,” Officer Mindy interrupted.

It had been a long time since I had seen a search warrant, but it appeared to be in order. While they jostled with each other to determine who would try to squeeze in first, I went back to the kitchen for my beer. Officer Mindy very nearly didn’t make it.

“I’ll take the upstairs,” she said, gripping the rail and pulling her enormous bulk up the steps.

Officer Janice asked where to find the basement.

“You got a crawl space?” she asked.

“You would have to ask Joyce,” I replied, retreating to my chair.

An hour later they joined me in the living room, obviously disappointed. Officer Mindy was wheezing from her exertions.

“Just tell us what you did with her,” she said. “We can put in a good word for you with the judge.”

“I’m sure Joyce would prefer to stay where she is,” I said.

“Listen, Mister, we know you did it. We have the motive.”

“Motive for what?” I cried.

Towering over me, she held out a copy of the bill of sale I had signed for Joyce’s ring.

“Ready to give us a statement?” she said, stepping back to high five her partner.

“Be careful,” I said as she approached the wormhole, but she wasn’t listening.

“We got him now, don’t we, gal?” Mindy cried, beginning to raise and lower her huge feet in a parody of a football player in the end zone.

“You know it, sweet cheeks.”

Then Officer Mindy’s heel caught in the indentation Joyce had burned in the floor, and she tumbled over backwards. Like a spider web hit by a bumble bee, the galaxy buckled, and Mindy’s expression changed from surprise to horror. I heard a low whirring sound, like a paper shredder stuffed too full.

“Officer in trouble!” she screamed into her shirt speaker.

Officer Janice and I watched as the galaxy turned her round and round like a dish on a Lazy Susan. Then with a crash the door flew open, and a SWAT team clad in black burst inside.

“What the hell’s going on?” demanded a heavy-set man in a black helmet, who appeared to be the SWAT team leader.

Officer Mindy was dangling from the wormhole, half in and half out, like a five year old overwhelmed by a carnival ride.

“She’s stuck in a wormhole to a parallel universe,” I said.

“My ass,” she moaned.

“Come on, guys, let’s pull her out,” the heavy-set man said.

So two men grabbed her legs, two grabbed her arms, and together they pulled until she popped out on top of them, and the wormhole shriveled up to the size of a basketball. Fortunately the heavy-set man and the other SWAT team member were able to roll Mindy off their teammates before they were suffocated.

“I don’t believe it,” Officer Mindy said, running her hand over the place where the missing protuberance had resided. “I lost my ass.”

“Don’t worry, Babe, we got an ambulance outside,” the heavy-set man reassured her.

“It isn’t bleeding or anything,” Mindy said. “Whatever it was, it’s better than bariatric surgery.”

With that she held up her arms, and the SWAT team pulled her to her feet. Then she lurched outside under their admiring glances and the jealous eyes of Officer Janice.

“What the hell happened?” the heavy set-officer asked me.

“My wife Joyce was transported through a wormhole into a parallel universe,” I explained. “I don’t know what they’re going to think over there when Officer Mindy’s derriere comes floating down out of the clouds.”

I had trouble falling asleep that night. When I last saw it the wormhole, the only sure proof of my innocence, was wavering precariously above the dining room table. Without it even the most brilliant theoretical physicist could never corroborate my testimony. What could I possibly say when Officer Mindy and Officer Janice returned with an indictment for murder?

I had just gone to bed when I heard someone panting and grunting downstairs, like a scuba diver struggling to take off a too-tight wet suit. Pulling the sheet over my head, I wondered if SWAT teams gave criminals time to get dressed before they hustled them off to prison.

Finally a strained voice cried, “Keep pushing, damn it!”

With a last grunt the suit snapped off, and a body rolled free onto the dining room floor.

I turned over, promising myself never to open a second bottle of Bordeaux again, and the noise stopped. I was just going back to sleep when I heard someone pulling herself up the stairs. I was terrified. Then she was in the bedroom door, wheezing.

“Officer Mindy?” I whispered.

Projected by the nightlight, a huge shadow entered the room and collapsed on the bench at the foot of the bed. Slowly a familiar perfume enshrouded me. It was Joyce returned from I knew not where.

“May I help you with your shoes, dear?” I asked, getting out of bed and bending over her outstretched feet.

I had to cut the straps with a pen knife. The LED lights embedded in her soles had gone out, and the chips disintegrated like charcoal as I pried them off her feet.

“Where have you been, dear?” I asked.

“We’ll talk about that later.”

I had to pull her to her feet. She lurched toward the bathroom and struggled to enter. Finally she turned sideways and squeezed in. I held my breath when she turned on the light.

“Oh,” she cried when she saw herself in the mirror.

Her buttocks were encased in the same blue uniform trousers that had once adorned Officer Mindy, and she had the most enormous ass I had ever seen. From downstairs came a wet slurping sound as the sphincter to a parallel universe closed forever.