

Pascal's Wager

Chalk dust swirls gleamed in the low evening light as Andrew McAlpine scribbled furiously across the blackboard. It settled in a thin scum on the dog-eared textbooks scattered around the Isaac Newton Lecture Theatre.

A round-faced girl with dazzling ginger hair eased herself in, carrying a puce jacket. 'Dr. McAlpine, shouldn't you be heading home?'

He rubbed chalky hands into crumpled eyes and nodded. 'S'ppose. How about you, Lucy? - doing anything tonight?'

Her voice dropped. 'It's Thursday, remember?'

'Ah, yes- Happy Clapper night!'

Lucy flushed, as she always did. 'Now, Dr McAlpine, we'll just have to agree to disagree.'

'Must we? Come on, be a love... tell me when you've seen this God chappie.'

Lucy threw an eyebrow into a perfect parabola. 'In your eyes when you mention Anya.'

'Aha! The heart-strings ruse! I don't deny I love my daughter, but, c'mon, have you ever seen this guy, face-to-face?'

'Well you won't find him in that gibberish,' said Lucy. 'You've dropped a gamma squared term after the fourth line.'

'What? Bigger! Although, I must admonish you, Lucetta. It's dreadfully poor form to change the subject like that.'

She slid him a grin 'Maybe so, but I've got to dash. You too; you look knackered, if you don't mind my venturing an opinion.'

'Considering you don't shrink to describe my beloved vehicle as a male menopause on two wheels, I am hardened to your opinions. Whether I value them is another matter.'

Lucy frowned briefly, but lightened as he wordlessly took the jacket from her arms and offered it up behind her. She decided to overlook the chalky prints on the collar, and breathed, 'What would the vice-chancellor make of this inappropriate dichotomy of gender roles?'

Andrew shrugged. 'Nothing, I expect. He'd be far too scandalised by this unseemly touching of your hair.' He tucked a couple of loose strands behind her ears, which obliged him by turning crimson. 'Good night Lucy.'

Outside, in the dark, lay the menopause-machine, its chrome glittering. Later, he fired up the engine, which rumbled to life like a bull elephant in must.

It wasn't the first accident at that bend. As he leaned in, the front wheel hit a smear of diesel and skittered away, hurling him towards the dry-stone wall that delineated the outer curve. He just had time to register:- This. Will. Hurt.

But it didn't. He shot through the wall as if it were scarcely a cobweb. He lay cursing in the darkness, the same swearwords he'd learned, giggling, in the playground. They came in torrents, as if cursing were a commensurate payback for misfortune, with a tariff - two for a stubbed toe, ten for a hammered thumb. He stopped. He didn't want his last thoughts to be blasphemous, even if blasphemy was a victimless crime. He groped for noble thoughts; the incipient grandchild growing in Anya's belly, the joy in her voice when she had rung. Her mother, a glorious gap-year dalliance, passionate nights in a Goanese hostel, a distance unbridgeable by

love, an affair whose only manifestation was Anya. And now Anya, beautiful Anya, was herself to have a child.....

Everything was subsumed by white noise, like a television without a signal. This persisted, but for how long, Andrew couldn't say. He couldn't look at his watch, because that would have required an arm upon which to wear one. There was no arm. There was no shoulder from which an arm might extend.

Later, came a sense of another presence, though there was no conventional sense with which he could identify it. Then a voice, or perhaps it wasn't a voice but a thought, one he knew not to be his own. Whatever it was, it projected into the remnants of his consciousness. There was a wordless crackle of interference, like a microphone being switched on.

He heard his own voice, querulous. 'Who's there? Who the hell are you?'

'Hell, Dr McAlpine?'

'Sorry. Figure of speech. What's your name, since you clearly know mine.'

'Yes. Yes. Well, let's make a game of it? You the mathematician, trained to divine cosmic secrets - you work it out.'

'OK.... able to project into me... a wallop sense of omniscience. I guess I should call you some kind of...god?'

'A god?'

'Alright, just God then. Either way, I've lost the wager, haven't I?'

'Wager?'

'You know, Pascal's wager.'

There was a pause. 'Don't be so sure.'

'But Lucy told me straight up, Repent, believe and be saved. I didn't so I'm screwed, no?'

There was another pause, which Andrew felt compelled to fill. 'Look, sorry about the language. I must still be awash with adrenaline. At least, I would be if I still had a bloodstream.'

Another pause, then the voice came again. 'Pascal was a fine mathematician, but on this, he couldn't have been more wrong. Having purposely made mankind as a thinking creature, it has always irritated me that you were so keen to believe the unverifiable. Truth is, I'm fondest of atheists like you.'

Andrew absorbed this. 'So, you're saying I've curried favour by *not* believing in you? The whole wings, trumpet and cloud routine, because I never *believed*?'

'Wings? Trumpets? Clouds? Is that what you envisage as a reward for a Good Life?'

'Well, no, it sounds dull as...., well, Hell, I suppose. That's just the vision of paradise from the Christian cultural perspective.'

'Hmmm..... You realise who you're patronising, don't you?'

'Of course. Sorry, Sorry.'

'Forget it, I'm only teasing. Besides, there is no such place.'

'So what is my fate?'

'I have one in mind. See if you can work it out.'

'With what? Twenty questions?'

'If you like. Nineteen, now.'

'OK. I suppose my first proper question should be "Can I go back and take that bend a bit slower?"'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'A wasted question, since it can be answered with neither yes nor no. Seventeen left.'

'Can I go back as me?'

'No.'

'Wh...Is that because there were witnesses to mydeath?'

'Yes'

'May I go back as someone else?'

The voice returned, sonorous and paternal. 'Yes.'

Andrew saw the clue. 'Can I be Anya's baby?'

Another pause. 'Yes. That's by far the fastest solution I've ever seen. How?'

'Something in your voice,' said Andrew. 'Anya means the world to me. I've been pouring love into her these twenty-five years. I strongly suspect she'll make an excellent mother. I'd hypothesise those two factors are correlated somehow.'

'So you like the idea of being the beneficiary of your own efforts?'

'Naturally. Anya's mother was forever on about Karma. I never bought it, but it seemed a reasonable metaphor for promoting benevolent behavior....' He tailed off, bewildered.

'What is it?'

'My..... mother. My..... mother. She died..... just before Anya was born.. Was she....?'

'Yes. One and the same. I often like creating pairs of souls that reciprocate love down the generations.'

This information goldfished around his skull. 'And.... my maternal grandfather? I never met him...Are you *actually* saying...?'

No answer came but in the distance, a coffee-coloured belly made its first involuntary contraction.