

The Dead Cigarettes

By Adair Broughton

In a finite visible universe of over one hundred billion galaxies each containing over 100 billion stars you could take liberties about what life is out there. Evolution dictates difference but laws of nature add semblance to the possible. And who is to say there is not another solar system like ours. This earth, a rotating rock of rapid change, where there is too little water and too much, where a damp cold winter can chill to the bone while armchairs press buttons to switch off programmes narrating global warming. This could be anywhere.

With this planet there may well be another city of rain, within it a story that was never told, lost in some flood forgotten to Noah. It is a harsh testament to acknowledge so many stories as metaphorical when their origins used arrogance as a friend of truth. But some things you have to let lie, and that includes lies. Maybe that's even in the bible.

Is fiction just a home for liars or is it the resting place of truth that just never had an opportunity to spring to life?

Stood before the window, a sad reflection on a sad reflection, his ghost form was resting outside the window like a spider in its web seeking the tiniest of vibration. He never saw his shadow blink, but we miss lots of things we do, even the most intimate. The prey was elsewhere, feeding on thought. His stare could change day into night. His focus was neither the dawn of something new nor the dusk of lost ideas.

Take one certainty, the ongoing desire for liberty, the one thing we should never take liberties on. To be more precise the 'suggestion' of liberty because we are all entwined in moral and social boundaries stepped across or over by different means. In the main we seek solace in that boundary. For most it is enough to pretend freedom but for a tiny minority they need it like the rest require food and water. But inevitably this leads to a question. How do you find the cost of freedom without knowing the price?

The boundary was a burden of brilliance. That was his knowledge bleeding into his philosophy. It was his reckoning, his meaning and his downfall (if it could be considered that). He liked its beauty and intensity. He knew when to step out of it, his moral compass always finding his own north and south. He liked to run far from it, be in his own realm with his judgements even if they formed part of the bigger circumference of the 'laws' of the 'Dead Cigarettes'. This was the dichotomy he found himself precariously perched upon, the somewhat ambivalent distinction of being outside societies rules but inside another set. Maybe it was a case of not seeing the wood for the trees or that nothing actually mattered if the power of destruction of that whole wood was contained in a single match. The small, insignificant, hidden and silent are often the most dangerous.

Yet here he was, the cadence of his movements walking and running alongside that barrier had come to an ungracious halt. Had he entered the world of the lumpenfolk? There are many 'ifs' in a life but life is action and decision and it is always good to question, depending on what we mean by good. It is not the narrator's decision here to comment but I might often interject with loose phrases fired from some clichéd canon. Every moment is a crossroads after all.

There is no role for denying the objective reality of wave-function collapse in this particular story, two worlds is enough let alone many. Yet it serves a purpose, it shows how small decisions can accumulate, how gravitas is added by luck or choice or inhibition. The list is not endless but far reaching. Even a conversation or a wrong turn can lead to big differences in lives. This should all be accentuated because against this background questions can be asked. The saddest words of tongue or pen, what might have been? There are more sad stories of what was and is.

Besides, it is without proof or even reproach that this world is parallel so it is much more than subtle difference. Less is often more. Facts are bagatelle. Every single decision is really a new world that leads to two more.

How strange a fall from grace can be the creation of something powerful. Life is an idiosyncrasy; the universe could be as deeply ironic as the *Tractatus*. Maybe the flap of a butterfly's wing was to blame.

It is the briefest of backgrounds, I realise that, but I'm hoping as the farmer of this field of narration that by chance a seed might well be planted. Let us begin at the end.

The man was staring out the window, through his reflection, a ghost of himself, fixing on a point just beyond infinity.

The sky was a pitiful grey, something akin to the ash from a dead cigarette. Maybe the sun would burn through the cloud by midday but for now the day was as dull as a rainbow made from concrete. Thought was lazy action, the pre-cognition of muscle. He sometimes felt he could only think when it rained, as if the noise was his mechanism of rumination, a constant pitter-patter of driven meaning, subtle like breath, in the background but always required. And his best work was produced in the worst weather. Think of the sea in a storm, with the waves spraying force on stubborn rock, so his fingers were wreaking havoc on the typewriter, breaking their boundaries like the salt blankets trying to suffocate land. Yet he had stopped writing, had lost that intensity, his biological computer suffering power failure of sorts. As narrator I can gift comparison, where he was steam power I was sail, tossed about by wind and rain, floating and drowning in the ordinary apartment block of waste.

And if I am a shipwreck of a writer then maybe he is the saving grace, some sunken treasure of a tale. A man might not be an island but a story could be. I was always running at shadows to chase the main character and suddenly I had caught him, by misfortune not skill. We take what we can? I saw him stare at me once, that is how I know.

But some would say he was never calm, not really, that beautiful placidity that follows the large swells and froth of destruction was never his for contrast. This undercurrent was his weapon, his anger, and his vitality. It would take years from his life, to never feel comfortable anywhere. He was like some innocuous phrase or some wrongly labelled ironic sound bite. He was only happy when he was depressed.

He was unnoticeable yet never missed, the kind of person you would move out of your way for in the street (believe me, that is a rare occurrence in the City of Rain) and then wonder why you moved out the way. His presence was only felt as an afterthought, an aftershock. His voice was a tremor that rocked foundations but only briefly, never enough to allow people to signify the words. He understood people by never socialising with them; his connection was voyeurism and lately death.

The more I think about him the more I feel his motive was pity. He pitied people's lives and misunderstood comfort that was unseen behind closed doors. Life was not rain and concrete and bringing families up in overcrowded polluted cities. Life was in the cracks, hidden behind arguments. It was in first kisses in cinemas or the sweat of a runner pounding streets where every footstep brought him nearer to a girlfriend getting ready in a shower. It was in the heartbeat of exercise and promise. It was in the flick of a switch of a bedside lamp to darken the room and brighten the dreams. Living was in small moments, the things he could not see. It was the picture of a relative in a locket held by a hand remembering the past. It was in that solitary tear that rained down on a cheekbone once kissed in candlelight.

This man was not a social person yet his actions were focussed on ultimate protection of millions of people. Was irony only evident to those that had the time to reflect? I should make it clear. For someone who cared so little for interaction, he had thoughts of keeping society safe from 'them'. It was why he was willing to participate in the society of 'dead cigarettes'. It was his only bonding. His way of reaching out to grasp onto something while trying to get away from the root of what could have made him happy.

Can we only ever really know something if we are detached from it. How does a camera take a photo of itself? There needs to be another. It's how the universe works, from the homunculus to everything around it, a spongy cortex or fluctuation neural pathways, that vast but finite space expanding away from every individual that makes us all central in that finite universe. Observation is key. There needs to be two.

It was an irony of sacrifice, that the greatest heroes are those unknown, those that act for something inside, fundamental to the soul, feeding from its power as an only friend, as if following an ideal from an untapped source. Again, it ached like belief, following an instinct without proof, trusted to a feeling over something easier and simpler but not logical. He found belonging hard but there were arguments to suggest he found not belonging hard too. The power of conviction was stronger as a stranger. He had not found himself, but the world, according to the 'Dead Cigarettes' was now a better place for that reason. (Bare in mind the word hero is only a legitimate word depending on the angle of perspective taken on the events. Time changes things.)

The 'Dead Cigarettes' focussed on questions but he wasn't to know that. He was not interested in the machinery, just the end product. He was an accessory to output without seeing the input.

Would someone kill a best friend to save two strangers? These were not moral dilemmas. They changed lives. Philosophical questions became reality once time had been breached, once the floodgates of the future had broken the dam of the past. It got out of hand while still being controlled, once belief had dipped a claw into soft subtle flesh and the stains of blood were just pretty and deep shades of red on pure white sheets of time. They were masters of feeding power to people, providing a legitimacy like some master of puppets whose real trick was in making people believe the strings were their own to control, some inverse feedback loop of propagating that invisible direction.

Is a man guilty before a crime is committed, before the thought processes have given reason for pre-meditation? If the reason for that crime is due to social upbringing, influences at an age when reason and morale are not yet established where do you draw a line. In a courtroom of people or in a mortuary or in a hospital or a church saying prayers to the wronged? What about if they were coerced through their simplicity or somehow subjugated by subtlety? Nothing was black and white in this grey city of rain.

It was why there was a society of dead cigarettes. They had to make decision. There was only one group of people who knew the truth of what they did. Like the man, I too do not know. I can only suggest that there was an ember of possibility, slow burning and without smoke, warmth hidden away but without the fire of public knowledge. The science said both yes and no depending on the scientist. If truth were the only thing that cannot be improved upon then I would also state that their ability to direct and control if based on false reasoning was beyond betterment. They played their game to perfection but maybe anyone can if they own the rules and nobody else can see them.

On paper it was simple. If you kill this person then these things will not happen, this crime will not be committed and in the future lives will be saved. Who could argue against that? Their deaths were his awakening. The future was the judge.

It was certainly a premise for many science fiction stories, yet here it would not make sense. There was a flaw, why did they have to kill that person, why not take them out of the game, stop them by other means. If the judge was not present how could there be juror? The answer is for your thoughts.

The reasoning was that the conscious mind controlled space-time; the only way to break the rigidity of possible futures was to break opportunity. If a photon is both a particle and a wave then that basic metaphor of duality stops at observation, well for the conscious mind, death was observation. It still came down to two.

We cannot analyse this mans life or ask questions of why he was like he was without other stories being told, and well, if those stories were told I could guarantee your judgement may well be different towards him. Necessity dictates a relationship between reader and subject and to protect that, or for one to be created this has to be a standalone story, like a statue separated from the deeds the statue celebrates. The beauty is in existence not reasoning. Beauty should be for itself and not for the reason of self and so I will refrain from the interesting history, at least until afterwards, or until a crossroads in time changes my decision or until I meet you at the *White Hart* for a beverage of brevity and tales of wonder. Pulchritude is not perfidious. Interesting characters can be different things to different people, that is why he needs space from his past.

I have changed my mind. When our ideas of beauty align themselves outside of mere awe, when I feel your eyes can hold a whole ocean of sadness, or when my laboured breathing is trying to free life of guilt, at that point too you can listen to these stories.

However, one thing should be made clear. This mans actions did not seem to be a reaction to prior guilt. If guilt made him feel alive it was non-consuming. This was not about getting kicks or seeking the seductress of salvation.

He had no need for a computer; he enjoyed immersing himself in the past, even though the past was never his. No one owned it once memory had gone. That which has happened, all the feelings associated with it, even if they change with time, well that is our cheapest and greatest possession after all. This past was not from his footsteps. It was what was passed down as history, generations and centuries. It was the kind of past that memory knew from knowledge not experience. It was the kind of past that only curvature of space-time would tread a path through. And if you don't know where you are going, any path will take you there?

When two worlds collide what happens? The 'Dead Cigarettes' felt nothing did. The two worlds could not convene and take notes. Once a decision was taken the worlds were separate. It was physics in a nutshell. Time travel was possible, theoretically proven. But only future time-travel was, the past was another matter entirely. You require proof? Oh that's easy by the way (just go an awful lot faster relative to the point you want to be away from. The closer you get to light speed the quicker the results).

The past is something else entirely. You do not change it. You glimpse the future and change the present and eventually the past catches up. It is not a trick of semantics or scientific logic; it is the essence of actuality. To be one step ahead of the present you need to take two steps into the future.

Why had the 'Dead Cigarettes' never been caught? It would be easier to show why they wouldn't be. The police felt things were random, unsure of how to progress, noticing similarity but unable to connect the dots. The society used people, taught them to act with subtlety, using the natural flow of city life to their advantage. They didn't get greedy with lives, often taking months to find another person. They were tied to the use of one man, the seer, the person whose body alone could take the viscous fluidity of some river of time and submerge himself into that unknown place of tomorrow and somehow surface seconds after he left.

They could not stop children or block the parents consummating the future life to be killed. They needed a signature of proof, an existence, conscious footprint in the universe; they had to wait till days before the person would act for it to register. It had to be that late because they did not know what else might happen if events changed too far before. Guesswork was abhorrent and never needed.

Truth of what they learned was as easy as switching on the television, that common denominator of every house in the city. There was little romance other than producing energy and focussing coils. There was still a lot to understand but they had introduced humanity to the process. Morals became the glue that kept them grounded and honoured. They disliked interfering with the basic paradox of stopping someone being born who wouldn't then need to be stopped. Philosophy of sophomores became the paradigm of the 'Dead Cigarettes'.

There was a complexity, knots in time they could not untie. There was one man travelling to the future and he was ill and on decline. (This was not the man staring out the window I should add. Their stories are interwoven but not entwined. They have separate ropes on which to hang their ideals.)

It did not work with others, they had tried and people got ill but there was nothing unique about his physical make-up. His cells were degenerating but that could be from the vicinity of energy he 'jumped' with. It was never far in the future, weeks at most and the man was barely gone before he came back. Seconds barely registered for those operating the machinery but always he would be paler on return, like a wax model on the verge of melting into a forgotten candle whose flame burnt some but lit many. What makes us live is often the thing that kills us in the end. Like the sun, it gives life but it cannot be forever.

The earth rotated, so did the solar system, by jumping to the future even by the smallest amount he was not displaced outside the city. Why? That is why it was always local. Like riding a bike and throwing up a ball, it would still land in your hand as wheels carried you forward, even though you could be yards from where you threw that ball up. Well time was a wheel too. Angular momentum had its own boundaries too and limitations. A wise girl once said, freedom is not free. It is only now I understand what it was she knew.

So how was the world parallel? I was misinforming you. It was the same world, the same city. Subtle differences made sharp contrasts. But you must understand, I am beginning to believe there is more than one world, even though we only ever have access to one reality. We are living all our decisions. It is choice and observation that are the bedrock of free will. But I know nothing, I will admit to knowing that.

The future man knew something was lost each time he left, not his soul, something more fundamental and not yet figured. He had brilliant glimpses of both realities, he had seen them both and to him that signified they both existed. Each leap was a dream more real than yesterday's reality. It was a weight beyond mass, beyond the constants like gravity. Yet he knew physics and laws and possibility so he delved no deeper than was required. A lack of understanding did not constitute magic or a higher order realm or metaphysical degradation of the mind.

The man whose reflection stayed dry in the rain was still thinking, was beginning to realise everything he had done. Feelings seemed to be less of a burden now; his fear had been his strength. A fish can still drown. It seemed for the first time he had real choice and a decision was his alone. He thought of the future, one where he lived and she died. He thought of another, some polar opposite, where he died and she lived. They were the same, he could see no difference, and not now the future man had no more sojourns into a quantum leap.

What would happen? It was conjecture, his antitheses; the guessing was the enemy all along.

He would be in the same city of rain, the same dull grey life that ached wherever he was. He saw smiles of people too close to their own existence to realise its state. He looked out of windows and saw mundane employment that paid bills to make enough money to eat and live and wake to another day of mundane employment. He had missed something else he was sure. Some real purpose that kept people going. He thought of the future man and was jealous of what he could do, disappear from time, however briefly. What did he really see, what did it feel like?

The future man often wanted to see the futures of people he knew, to know they would be ok but he had little time to do anything before the sudden rush of light swept him back to the drains of the shallow past.

He usually flicked a switch, found the local news, looked for an article about some crash on the motorway from drugged drivers, an item about a man going berserk with a gun in a shop, about a bomb killing twenty people on a bus. He looked for footage and names before the spinning began. If he came back dry it was often weeks of depression, for wasting his illness,

for not being able to help for one last time. It had been his last time twice now, never being sure if his strength could hold one more time. He was weak, like a man in a desert seeing a cup of water but having no strength to lift it to his lips.

It already seemed final, as if the energy that took him there was wrapping him like a shroud. Once again it was the future.

The TV was on, in the same apartment he always 'fell' in. He couldn't master that word, it seemed unfitting, but saying landed was also wrong. There was only movement on leaving. He would arrive standing, his eyes adjusting from a blur to a sharp headache that passed once he had regained his focus. He never went to explore, or even stepped outside the apartment. It was about getting information. There was no glamour, no magnificence or surreal amazement at being in the future. What was the future but someone else's present. There was just a constant weight, the weight of two lives out of sync but there was a breath of freedom, a hint that this was what it was like before his illness. His cells were doing their own thing, replicating away from himself, mocking what he could achieve, his magnificent step for mankind. He was only the sum of his parts now. Discretion was his partner, he did not feel special but he knew there was a reason for putting something right somewhere even if he knew that the event would still happen in a parallel world.

It was the news programme with the same dulcet tones delivered with perfect voice but monotone feeling. They showed a photo of the woman, drunk, crying by the side of the road, a policeman reluctantly holding her shoulder, his touch tentative trying it's best not to pass judgement but failing. This was just another death, a man lying dead by the side of the road, with nighttime in his eyes. There was no reflection of dirty streetlight yellow in his eyes, no staring lucidity that could frighten even day into night.

It was nothing new, happening in every city in every part of the world. Yet his name sounded familiar but the spinning began and the disappointment joined in the spiral decay of reaching back in time. They had information to stop the death of one man. That was not a success. Numbness drowned him, swallowing time as if being bilious was the best he could ever feel. His throat constricted like he was constricted by fate, strangled by two points in time, converging into a point, like the train tracks of a wrecked possibility.

And then he knew once more he would be returning to a point seconds after he left, his body abused from those missed seconds in time.

He rested on that apex of moment barely conscious as his body once more felt the pains of reality. He was home but what did that actually mean?

That one name, a gift from the newsreader, and acknowledged death was much more vital than he could have realised. He told the 'Dead Cigarettes' of his disappointment but they assured him it was important. He could rest and close his eyes, travel on dreams journey instead, where the pain of today was lost in a realm of his own making. Sleep felt like real compassion, like his best friend. There would be no waking. Time had taken his last breath.

This was no insignificant moment.

The 'Dead Cigarettes' lost no knowledge when he died but a doorway. No science had changed, no genetic alternatives, except the slight, miniscule DNA differences that were the significance of us all. But they could not replicate what happened with the man. It worked with no one else and now he was gone. Yet the name he had given, on what was to be his last trip, which was significant, less believable than the time travel. It seemed to have purpose, reasoning, something outside of random luck or chance.

They could not believe that someone was controlling this but how could chance, on the very last trip, provide the killers name and his death.

They thought hard about this not knowing how much time they had. They knew it was close. What options did they have? Should they tell the man? His name was on the news, not now

but in the future, maybe a few days time. He had done all they asked and now he was the possibly the last information from the future they would have. Why was that? What were the repercussions? They were prepared to save everybody else so why have doubts about this man. He had been perfect for their needs, professional, without passion and full-bodied with discretion. He had done all they asked. They had an opportunity to silence the 'Dead Cigarettes', so no information could ever leak out. They could resume their posts; forget their dilemmas and moral gaming. They owed no one, assured in the facts that people were alive who shouldn't have been. That was enough. It made them powerful to be such saviours.

But they told him. Keeping him alive kept open the realm of promise. If this was meant then the scientists were placing bets in faith. They never said it, certain looks at each other or small inquisitive nods would show there was still something they did not understand but they wanted him alive, just in case they found another future man. It made everything make some sort of sense. The man could save himself who would then be used by them again to save more.

It was a more difficult decision for their killer, their moral subjugator, and their equaliser. That was what he was. They left the decision with him, gave him the facts and it was why his eyes were burning through glass chasing neon demons to invisible parts of the city. This was not about changing routine. If he stayed indoors then he couldn't be hit. They had told him knowing he would act. Maybe they should have lied about what the woman was about to do but then they were acting on principles and however misguided this seemed appropriate.

In many ways he had never questioned this before. That was why his stare was burning through glass into the bokeh lights of hazy life in the apartments opposite, the rain adding melting thoughts following the path of least resistance down the glass and he could not help but think that each droplet was a bead of sweat slowly dripping down her spine after bouts of love.

What he had never cared for hit him like some beautiful curse. He felt something for this woman. Maybe it was the force of their futures coming together, and he had power in that knowledge. He thought of games he could play, meeting this woman in advance and making her fall in love with him. He thought of letting her hit him with that car but being prepared for it and surviving. But this would lose him all respect with the 'Dead Cigarettes'. He was playing with more than just his own future here.

It had started to consume, the beginning of distaste and regret but it had not taken hold. He was confused by feelings and angry with himself for being open to them. He hated to question, it made choice something human, and a choking distaste of everything he fought against. And still the rain fell; it's constancy less a reassuring backdrop than an opening of thoughts being washed away forever.

He loved her and hated her. She was a stranger and the one person who was as important as his mother. His mum was a lost memory but she had provided him with life. This woman was taking it away. She was at fault; drink diminishing her faculties, her reaction time yet she still looked magnificent. He had watched her from afar; she had even smiled at him, and something friendly he was not used to. She had smiled for him to get out of her way, rather than her get out of is. That was rare in his life of course.

He thought of his actions, of what he was stopping. He had stopped many dying for lots of different reasons but why stop at his own feet. This was a question of self worth. At what point can we justify our own existence over another?

He had to live now with what the past had created then. The past was not an author or director but something passive that was the background, colourless and comment less. It was hard to live with, the explosions, the politics, the need to blast anger with shreds of bolts and nails onto innocent people who harbour no thoughts other than living life to seek happiness at any available opportunity. He was not above them; never giving time to individuals yet he was sick of the destruction that belief was causing everyone. And that was just one news item,

one more failed recourse, a suicide bomber and no value of life. Religion was only one of the enemies.

Killing pained him yet he immersed himself into the role dictated or offered by the 'Dead Cigarettes'. If the only constant thing is change, then consistency is the thread that runs through hypocrisy.

It was too easy to believe. How was belief tangible? He felt people were deluded not knowing about evolution about what was possible and what wasn't. Yet again, his own knowledge had been stretched beyond the realms of what even he thought possible only in theory. The 'Dead Cigarettes' had opened his eyes with the beautiful E8. So the topology of the universe had been found, it was as simple and beautiful as an E8 polytope, from which the theory of everything could be deduced. So it was all about gravity all along. The fabric of the universe was a thin cover to many other dimensions. And now they had even shattered his knowledge of what could happen in time. They explained this with diagram, with analogy, with tempered brow and absolute commitment. For it to make no sense it first had to make perfect sense.

Maybe he only believed in others belief. Quite possibly that is what everyone could be doing. Alone and with no communication, no future, no possibility. Well what would we actually believe then? This unique event was the beginning; he was at the origin, the outset, remarkable that he was part of it. Fantasy was reality.

The 'Dead Cigarettes' had learnt how to kill a paradox, what some scientists had labelled a universal safety mechanism. Were his killings meaningless in the bigger scheme of things. Lives were continually destroyed whether through old age or accident. So time was fluid but age was always part of time, consistently linear and fought against but with always one winner.

Or that was what he knew. The science had been a blessing. He had read a book '*Crossing the Bridge of Infinity*', had found science had not answered all the questions, that just as his despondency was creeping down on him like the mist on a mountain, the smoke from the twisted end of a finished cigarette, one that had got him thrown out of a bar, evaporated from the blue grey of time into another place.

He had not meant to kill the man, that blinding light of anger had burnt an intensity not born of hatred but loss of freedom, how he had felt that every part of the future would be a lockdown of laws, gradually but consistently not being allowed to do many things, society progressing to some rigid autonomy of grey boredom. So people could only smoke in private, not even on a street. It had been a step too far, the smallest straw that burnt and broke a camels back.

It seems puerile and sad that something as innocuous as smoke from a cigarette could have caused so many changes in the world. It is right people are forced to do things for their own benefit. It was about drawing a line.

His anger had been more like a bullet, viscous and swift like punctuated pugilist unable to connect the dots in any formulaic pattern of punches. Then he was surrounded by shadow and felt himself being lifted onto his feet asking who had asked to kill for him, that it seemed messy even if they had been told to diversify their methods. (He didn't understand this until afterwards of course.)

He knew he was part of something bigger and his confidence grew much to his own surprise. He could not change what was. Where are they taking me he thought?

He had entered the world of the 'Dead Cigarettes' by accident, by killing a man from his own anger but it had been someone they had wanted killed. They were able to use him by covering for him, a promise that he would not go to jail for his crime. He was free as long as they helped him. When they described what they did he was incredulous at first but softened each day. Then it suited him, became part of him.

He named them himself, his own moniker. It was the dead cigarette that gave him this new identity. He didn't care for their 'real' name or their politics. That suited them too. The questions he asked were of science. They told him truthfully all they knew. He asked nothing of them individually.

I must interlude, this is one of the strengths of the 'Dead Cigarettes', they can force change or persuade with subtle directions, they can even induce free will and allow the narrator free reign. I'm more constrained in this role because I'm yet to know what power the reader has, whether they can choose their own ending too. Maybe in a multiverse a story can do that with each possible word following each possible word until in one universe the story exactly matches the maximum experience for a particular reader....

What he couldn't figure was that if time was a line you could move along, why hadn't anything changed? He began to realise other possibilities, that maybe the future man was seeing something that did happen, that other realities were also possible. If it was on the news in the future then it had happened somewhere even if he was changing history. These thoughts build up slowly, confusing at first. His only clear moment had been when he was told of his own death and the drunken woman who had killed him. In one world he was dead. In one he wasn't. He felt like that cat.

There can only be one future and one past they assured him. But you have to have faith that what we tell you would have happened, that the changes you made have made the world better. He had his own belief then even if he did not know it.

It was somebody else who was meant to kill that person. His anger had stepped in and now the 'Dead Cigarettes' had another person to assimilate into their games. Were they games? Well now I need to confess something. I have no access into the inner workings of the 'Dead Cigarettes'. I know they are intelligent members of society, high up in their career paths and spheres of influence. Some of them have access to latest scientific research and discovery, others to police records etc. What I never saw were their meetings or equipment. I had no opportunity to see how they came to their decisions. It could have been a game but for what purpose. They were intense, serious people and were not frivolous in what they did or what they gave away. Often there were many months between 'acts' but some of this was born of necessity through the future mans illness.

Maybe I should spell it out. The 'Dead Cigarettes' believed they could change the world for the better, to put it bluntly 'kill' someone who would harm society. They were acting morally on information obtained from an alternate future. They admitted freely that they could not change the past but they believed that they could stop terrorists, murderers, politicians who would be bad for the city, country and when they could outgrow or magnify their sphere of influence, then eventually the world.

It was understandable that this man would feel part of something much bigger, would want to help, and would do what he was told. They told him everything but the silent fear of having murdered a man in cold blood was always following him like a shadow. So what if the man he killed was going to murder three more people in a drug killing.

The man who hated laws and boundaries had become subservient to a secret society that seemed above the law but followed a distinct set of rules itself. This however, was not his particular dilemma.

It was like he could be free and anonymous while being controlled and directed. Side by side the conflict was agony and now he stood in his room facing the city and looking straight into a future that contained both a left and right. It was no mans land and he was scared to go over the top but knew staying where he was felt like an admission of cowardice.

He had killed a man, had been set free and saw that it was not his decision. Yet guilt could have made him stop at any time and admit what he had done. If he cared little for people then prison would not have been his hell. Prison was claustrophobic, too much close proximity. He liked books and his room, to watch rain on windows and always think of what was and what

could be. Deep down he felt something, the most tenuous link to another place; he was getting nearer to it, letting it pull him subtly closer.

Space-time paths crossed and he had unwittingly prevented many more deaths in the future. He felt relieved when he was told that. It was the day guilt died forever. The guilt he had never felt being born.

The only thing he did not know was where the knowledge came from. He was given a name, told about the future. He knew it was true even if he did not believe it to be true. This was not good or evil or even something tangible. It was basic math; it was about one life too many. If killing one saved many then it was the right thing to do.

But now it was a choice, one on one. The choice was his life. It was now something complex. He had no more people to save if the future man was dead. Maybe they could find another and if so he would be helping more in the future.

Yet now he stared into the forgotten ash of the city of rain, looking at the bleak lights harbouring lives in other apartments. The sky seemed a little lighter. He couldn't do this, and it confused him. He felt something more than the sum of the parts of his previous trips into death. He felt they had got it wrong, that she was of no harm, just a child in an adult themed world. He was willing to forgive her mistake. Could he go and see her and warn her of the drink.

There was no answer and he knew it.

People looking at her had no idea, yet he did. That was a power. Snippets of conversations would fill his mind, imaginary visions based on 'Dead Cigarette' facts. He knew one day he would see this world, see the delay, the inverse loop of times deduction due to E8 topology. A world that could see itself was both beautiful and intense.

News items seemed dislodged like failed avalanches. Everything waited on a precipice. He felt the world didn't know of what difference he had just made. Sad families retreat on quick deaths to console and regroup yet he could not tell them of what the dead person was capable of. He would sit and listen to that radio till music had cleared the voices of unseen newsreaders from his mind. He thought of the future man and the sacrifices that man had made. Did he regret never meeting him?

Weeks would turn into months and then years. There was no rush. He knew time was just a tease. All things shall pass and all things will happen.

Eventually that call came, a new name, some life. He would listen to the horrific future on the other world and knew what had to be done on this one.

There were no other cities or other people he was told but nothing was proven. Why should he be special, why should the future man be so unique. Why had peace not been found, what was failing? Why change the future if it caused less than a ripple. And this woman had only ever been seen as an activist, he had walked past her, looked at her badge requesting peace? A lyric from a forgotten singer, give peace a chance. Yet she was some harbinger of destruction on the city? She was a news item, had killed a man but she was no killer.

There was a story for her drinking and he had no access to it. Maybe he could find it. Maybe it was another tale to be told.

His reflection still had no answers. What if they could read his mind? Did they know he did it; they had the future, both of them. They had access to one future. So why did he have doubts to what was already decided?

A smile crossed his lips; a little sun broke through the metallic clouds casting a soft light into his room, the shadows and reflections disappearing, the lights from other apartments now fading in the sunlight. He knew something of time now. This was his present. This moment

was his and at this very point of time there were many futures, each of them real and waiting patiently to happen. He didn't have to do anything. Every decision was a reality somewhere, even this one. He could wait. Something would happen, it always did.

What would you do?