



The Choices
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The Choices

**A Short Story
by
Michael Graeme**

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I am sitting here in the lounge-bar of the McKinley Arms Hotel, by the shores of Loch Lomond, and I am staring out into the twilight at my choices. I have been this way before many times and I always seem to go wrong at this point, so you must forgive what must seem like fastidious caution, but I simply have to get it right this time!

I have pondered the course of all the lives I can remember living and have come to the conclusion that the evening I spend here is crucial to the intricate unfolding of things. Now, this is unfortunate because, you see, it's not as if my choices are unlimited here - in fact they boil down to only half a dozen or so, at least that I can see. What's more, at one time or another, I've played each of these choices out to its conclusion, and found them all wanting. Without fail, they all lead me right back here, to this one evening, to this time of deepening twilight, and to this sense of creeping despair.

I learned early on not to go for choice number one which is basically the woman in the bright red dress who is just now preening herself by the bar. That particular path is just too tiresomely obvious, and its consequences predicably devastating. I'll admit, it's a wild ride for a time, but I'm always left feeling cheated, mainly on account of my untimely demise at the hands of her insanely jealous husband, who turns out to be a "fixer" for a Glaswegian mobster. Presently, however, it's the gentleman in the blue suit just entering the bar who is locked into that particular cycle of bad luck. He's what you'd call a well groomed and highly polished predator of womankind, and I've never really warmed to him at all. That's not to say I don't pity him as he singles her out yet again. I'm only wondering how many of his own lives it will take before he finally wises up.

Choice number two is simple: I can get up, walk out, drive on through the night, and seek fresh connections in the Highlands. I've done that of course, many times, but my path cycles right back here just the same as it always does, and it's thus I've come to believe my escape lies solely in the as yet unseen choices this hotel might yield.

I'll let you into a little secret: you can forget all that reincarnation stuff; this life is the only one you get - you just get to play it over and over again. I don't mean it's the same each time - that would be pretty dull and I can assure you, you do have free choice in the paths you take - it's just that certain situations have a mysterious way of drawing you in time after time, no matter what you do.

Take me, for example: I'm always born on December 21'st 1960. The biggest expansion I've managed was out to 2057, but that was a bore, and for all my time I seemed to achieve nothing more than a vast brood of useless great-grandchildren, and no understanding whatsoever of my purpose. Then, at the other extreme, as a child, I remember once getting bound up in someone else's bad luck, and for many lives I couldn't get past the wheels of their truck in 1972. For all of that though, I'm particularly fond of the summers of those early years, and I tend to repeat them if I can as they're still pretty much the best things I recall, and probably the most satisfying too on account of their delightful innocence. I just have to remember to avoid a particular street on a particular day if I want to wriggle through into my later life - even if that life only ends up delivering me right back here.

In the main I live to a reasonable age, for which I'm always grateful, because, in general, my lives are good. It's just that I'm never able to understand what on earth it is I'm supposed to achieve by living them. I mean, I do suppose there is a point to this endless repetition of things, and perhaps I'm a hopeless optimist but I'm guessing we expand our bubble of time over and over, until we get it right. Whatever *it* is.

Now, my life's path seems fairly well managed up to this point and I tend not to vary it much because you never know what's going to throw you off course. But perhaps managed isn't the right word, except in the sense that the best way of managing things, I've found, is to leave them well alone. When you do that, and give in to the flow of things, you can look back at some point and see the logic in your direction, like being swept along by an invisible ocean current. I'm happy - charmed it seems - and everything is spot on, until I walk into this place.

However many times I've lived my life, I've only ever made it this far in my journey: a man, 45 years old, sitting in the lounge-bar of a hotel, on his way up to the Highlands. I walk in as someone who is going places, and I walk out into a lifetime of disillusionment, certain in the knowledge that I've lost my way, and that anything else I might achieve is wasted.

Anyway, choice number three pertains to the bar-menu, but my selections here don't appear to effect things very much: Steak, fish, potatoes or chips? Of all the senses, taste seems to be the least likely to alter the course of one's fate. Choice number four is more fertile ground and pertains to the relationships to be struck up with the various people I can

see. Like me and the woman in the red dress, everyone is pretty much a fixture of this moment, our individual bubbles of time overlapping, so to speak. I've connected with them all at one time or another, and followed each path to its similarly fruitless conclusion, so I'm thinking my only chance lies with the energizing influence of the strangers who occasionally walk through the door and lend a flavour of strangeness to the occasion.

For reasons that should be obvious by now, I no longer fall in love with the woman in the red dress. In spite of what the cynics among you might think, true love will usually alter the course of things for the better. It's just that the opportunities are somewhat limited in here and, though it's not really her fault, the woman in the red dress is really quite incapable of returning love. For the moment she's an alcoholic and a recreational drug addict, her fate having long ago locked her into a cycle of repeated self-destruction. For her, release, if it comes, comes not through me, but through the solution of the enigma of her own route through time.

Should she ever work it out, there will come a time when she no longer props up the bar of the McKinley Arms Hotel and no one will be happier than me when she finally disappears from the cast list of this ghastly evening, but my magnanimity is tempered somewhat by the thought that there might also come a time when all the other pilgrims here will find their particular solutions and disappear, one by one - all of them,...

Except me.

So, I get up and, for want of distraction, sit in the chair next to mine, but I've done this before and it makes no difference. In a moment I'll probably go and sit in the corner by the clock, but these are not real choices, just trimmings around the edges. The big turning points must come, from the roads we take, or from our encounters with people. Now, I should add that there is nothing random about these things. Only from the perspective of a single expansion might they appear random to you, but once you see things the way I do, the patterns become apparent: the dynamic thrust of the clear path, and also the cloying heaviness of the subtle traps, like this one. This night in the McKinley Arms is indeed a very deep and sticky trap - and surely one that can only be interrupted by the unravelling of another's fate, and the drawing of them through that door!

Now: some times back there was a woman in blue jeans and a pink tee-shirt. She'd been travelling my way, heading for Fort William, and for a couple of lives we'd met up there and spent some days together. She was soft and gentle and had a scent of sandalwood, and I should have made more of it than I did, but I always ended up alone after waving her off on the train to Mallaig.

Things had been going pretty well and we'd started looking at each other like everything was meant to be, but then I guess I just stopped to think about it for a couple of seconds longer than I should, like waiting with my camera for the light to pick things out just the way I wanted them, only for the sun to suddenly go in for the rest of the afternoon. The next time, I'm thinking ,I'll get on that train and go with her, but she must have veered off some expansions past, and I've not seen her since. So, I find myself in the unusual position of aching for memories of a future I never had.

Of course, my biggest fear is that that was it; that somewhere in that one encounter was my only chance of solving this puzzle, and I missed it! But surely there would be no point in these continuing expansions, one long bubble of time after another, if they no longer served any purpose? Surely something else will turn up! Someone will walk through that door and change everything!

So I wait.

This is not a bad bubble of time to be stuck in, I suppose. There are worse, like those beginning around 1900 and expanding through two world wars, drafting whole generations into the trauma of mechanical mass slaughter. Now, from one point of view there's a lot of interesting material there to work with, lots of life altering choices, and it may be that it's easier to make progress in a sea of such catastrophic upheaval. But what does a middle aged Englishman of my generation do? Much of life's nastiness has passed me by, and the most dangerous thing I do is get behind the wheel of a car. Still, since I've no choice in the times I'm dealt, and I can only work with the times I have!

How long I sit here tends to vary. With some expansions it's about the time it takes to finish my drink. With others I linger until "last orders", which marks the bounding condition, and prevents me sitting here all night.

I'm not sure at what point one wakes up to my peculiar perspective on life, nor even if its a natural phenomenon, for I've never met anyone else like me. It could just be a freakish delusion I suppose, but I'm pretty sure it isn't because one does have a very real sense of the repetition of things. I mean in certain situations, like this, once you enter the familiar, you do have the ability to predict the probable run of events. In a moment for example the woman in the red dress will pick up her glass, and there's a good chance the coaster will be stuck to the bottom of it. Then, the old Glaswegian gentleman sitting beside me will turn over his newspaper and begin the crossword - it's interesting that the clues are always different from the time before, which suggests to me the similarities of each successive expansion are only superficial, and at some fundamental level it's not possible to cheat at life simply by knowing it line by line. There are probabilities involved. And it's a probability I'm waiting on now.

The woman in the red dress laughs, and the sound of that laughter haunts me, for in other times things might have been different. In other times she might have been a source of joy, for she is quite comely to look at, and not without a certain personal charm, but for now she is a prisoner of less than auspicious circumstance. I'm the only one who knows it, and this makes it all the more maddening because for all of my insight, I'm just as powerless to avoid this place as the rest of these pilgrims seem to be.

I go up to the bar and order another whisky. There are several fine malts to choose from but my choices make no difference and I've learned to savour each one, without worrying too much about the path it might be leading me down. Remember - one shouldn't try too hard in navigating one's expansion! I'm sure there's a Chinese proverb about that sort of thing. Anyway, while I'm here, I eavesdrop for a while on the flirtatious patter between the man in the blue suit and the woman in the red dress, thinking to myself I could make a lot of money telling fortunes. Like all things its obvious once you know how the trick works, and you're careful not to home in too much on the specifics. Things are going well between them and I sense his fate is sealed once more, so I back away, taking with me the memory of her perfume, which is rare and intoxicating. I think I shall keep it as a souvenir of times past, arousing as it does feelings of hopeless attraction and danger - things that are not without a certain allure.

The woman in the red dress is very tipsy now. The man in the blue suit is leading her towards the door marked "residents only" when her leg collides with my table and the glasses teeter. This hasn't happened before, and I'm not sure if it's significant, not sure if it presages a subtle undertow worth surrendering to. It's over in a moment though: she giggles an apology and now they're heading upstairs to their usual fate.

It occurs to me of course that I can save his life, and on a fair number of occasions I've done just that. It's not difficult: I simply go outside and let all his tyres down, then he can't offer her that lift back into Glasgow in the morning. She's not a patient sort of woman, you see, and a man only gets one chance to perform with her. One slip, like having the bad luck to get four flat tyres, and she sees him as a loser. She's pretty quick to distance herself then, afraid of catching his bad luck, unaware that for the times being she is herself the bad luck fate that inflicts on others.

I sip this second malt slowly and decide against helping him. That might sound churlish, especially since I know it will end with a knife in his ribs. But you see, even when it's in your power to help someone out of a bad turn of fate, it's really quite useless unless they understand the trap they're in, or they'll only be back next time, making the same mistake over and over. Maybe you'll be around for them again next time, or maybe you won't, but we can only do so much, and it's just self indulgent to lose sleep over the immanent suffering of others when you know you can't do anything about it in the longer term. We are, I fear, each of us alone, guiding our own fate towards its mysterious revelation. The best we can do, I suppose, is enlighten others to the true nature of their reality, but, hey, no one listens to me at the best of times, so who in their right mind's going to believe a story like this?

The landlord picks up a hefty old bell and gives it a swing. My heart sinks at its infernal clanging: last orders again! Closing time. No new players will enter the bar now - no transient phenomena for me to collide against, and ricochet myself to freedom. So, there follows only the climb upstairs, to my room. To bed.

It is a small, white chamber, neat and clean, but like all single rooms, somehow depressing in its capture of the sense of melancholic solitude - a harbinger of the stagnation soon to follow. I find the Reader's Digest Book of Short Stories in the bedside cabinet, which seems pretty much a fixture in time, like the hotel, and me, and the woman in the red dress. Then I turn to the page where I left off the last time around. I know all

these stories now by heart of course, but I find there is a certain comfort to be had from such continuity.

Oh, well - in the morning I'll drive that long road to Fort William, and I'll climb the tourist track up Ben Nevis like I always do, for the pleasure of some things never fades, even with their infinite repetition. But there will also be regret, because I'll know I've failed and, worse, I'll know I'm just as likely to fail again, next time around, because I am blind. And I seem unable to feel my way out of this!

Settling back against the pillows, I wonder about the nature of the connections we make. I've pretty much established by now that we're not the passive victims of fate that we sometimes seem. We can shape our way, but I just don't understand the mechanism. I mean, by our expectations do we each invite the path we most deserve, or do we just attract the one we strive the most to avoid?

I realize I am smiling at the spin of my thoughts. There is nothing more to be done now, and in the absence of my deliverance, I take comfort in memories of the coming morning, because it is always bright and Loch Lomond is always mirror-calm and oily-black, and the breakfast always fills me nicely, and then there is the freshness of the road, and that glorious drive ahead,...

This is a subtle run of thought, I'm thinking, and it takes me by surprise because I don't recall ever being so magnanimous before at this stage in the game. Then, turning the page of my book, a slip of paper falls onto my chest - a makeshift bookmark left by a previous reader. It is a scrap torn from a notebook, bearing the penciled address of the Sligachan Hotel, Isle of Skye. And with it comes a faint perfume, that triggers memories of sandalwood and softness.

The subtlety of this moment is the most significant thing. There has been only a ripple of thought, an emotion, a feeling like a gently rising tide, a thing hovering on the very edge of perception, yet it has changed everything! I've no idea who or what is waiting for me on the Isle of Skye, but I do know all my choices between here and there will be correct. I've picked up the current again, and I'm going places!

Now, don't go shooting off at this point and thinking the key to the future always lies in a destination, or in a person, because I've just spent the last three and a half thousand words trying to tell you why I think it isn't. So, what is it? Well, if you really want to know, it comes down to nothing more than a feeling and on one's interpretation of the choices as

they present themselves. What sort of feeling is it you ask? Well, the only way I can describe it is it's more of a letting go sort of feeling, than a holding on, but whatever it is, without it, the right choice is never going to materialize and you may find yourself stuck in some hotel bar, not just for the rest of your life, but for all of your lives... .

... .until you finally wise up!

Thank you for downloading this short story. Other works by Michael Graeme are available for free from the Rivendale Review website at www.mgraeme.ic24.net, or from Lulu.com

From the same author on Feedbacks

Love is a Perfect Place (1999)

A short story by Michael Graeme - a twenty minute read: He scooped some water up and drank. It astonished him. It tasted like he imagined the most perfect water should taste, but it was a sensation spoiled by the queer fact that he wasn't thirsty even though he had walked for hours under a hot sun.

"Perhaps we don't need food,... or water," he said. "Only when it pleases us."

He looked around then at the land and he felt a chill. What manner of place was this? And what manner of being had he become?

The Enigma that was Carla Sinclair (2004)

I was not completely unhinged. She was just a computer program, a crude simulation - at best a never ending animated cartoon with only one character and no story line. But she was "something",... She was a hobby I suppose you might say. Other young men had hobbies, equally obscure, though perhaps more socially inclusive. They collected camera gear, they went fishing, raced cars or drank themselves stupid. Me? I coded in my bedroom. Same thing? Well, not quite. You see, while other people's hobbies took them out of themselves, mine enabled me to climb deeper inside.

Lively Custard (2004)

Short Story - a 25 minute read: Rogue trees are popping up all over the little town of Frinton-cum-Hardy and the residents have begun speaking in metaphors so mixed and mangled, poor Armitage, connoisseur of all things bookish, finds he no longer understands his mother tongue. And if all that isn't enough his young protege, Jenny, from the Books Galore Emporium is having "uncle trouble"!

A Moth on the Moon (2004)

Most people - except the conspiracy theorists - know the United States landed a man on the moon in 1969. What's less well known however, is that the British beat them to it, in 1947.

Escape From Paradise Island (2007)

A 25 minute read by Michael Graeme: Crime doesn't pay. That's what they try to teach you in prison, and fair enough, I might even have left there one day determined to go straight except, suddenly, I was on an island in the China Sea, gazing at a beautiful girl in a yellow Bikini. So maybe it had been worth it after all. But careful now! You had to avoid thinking things like that because they'd a nasty habit of dissolving back into reality and you'd wake up right back in that stinking grey cell: five years of your life already erased, with another two to go, and all because you'd never been able to resist the puzzle of a pretty motor car!

Push Hands (2008)

Phil and Penny were made for each other - the only problem is they are married to other people. When they meet at a Tai Chi class they quickly realise the depth of one another's loneliness and need for a sympathetic ear. Fearful of the consequences, they go to elaborate lengths to avoid each other but their paths begin to cross with chance-defying regularity, pulling them ever more deeply into one another's confidence. Is this evidence of a mysterious power at work, or should they simply have an affair? Middle aged and married for a long time, their apparently unavoidable relationship causes them to ask serious questions of the meaning of their lives and their marriages, and finally to demand that their families respect them for who they really are. But will their families recognise them? Can they even recognise themselves?

Push Hands is a full length novel, complete and free to download.

The Man Who Could Not Forget (2008)

A Short Story by Michael Graeme (a fifteen minute read):

...I have a problem with my memory. It isn't that it ever fails me - quite the opposite in fact. Indeed, my recall of events from all but the earliest years of my life is truly photographic, so there was little doubt in my mind the woman before me now was the one who had stolen the book....

The Magician of Monkton Pier (2009)

Joshua is navigating his eco-boat, *The Mattie Rat* along a dark and stinking stretch of the old canal through Monkton - a city overwhelmed by gangs and gun toting militias. Joshua's seen it all before: urban decay, corruption and the death of hope.

Living on the water, and with no need for money, he's usually able to slip unnoticed through these dark town stretches and into the green beyond. But when he's tricked into picking up a pair of enigmatic hitchers, Joshua knows there's going to be trouble in Monkton.

In spite of his best efforts, the wily old Waterman is about to become an accomplice in the biggest magical stunt of all time. And if the world no longer believes in magic, well, it only has itself to blame.

Crystal Says (2009)

A twenty minute read: So, I'm standing in this crop circle, down in Wiltshire, England, and there's a girl dangling a crystal from the end of a chain. She's very pretty, so I'm thinking I'll have to find a way of overlooking the fact she's probably also some kind of crank if I want to take advantage of the situation here,...

Katie's Rescue (2009)

A thirty minute read: It felt odd, driving into Raworth, because where I come from Raworth does not exist. I know that stretch of road, you see? It dips down to the river Warfe, crosses over by the old bridge, then rises up the dale on the other side. Ordinarily there's just a steep wooded ravine and a picturesque waterfall on the river but, like I said, on this occasion, there was also Raworth,...

The Summer of '83 (2009)

Well, that's middle age for you: you either grow up, grow into it, accept its imperfections, its disappointments, and grow old grumbling at someone, or you ruin yourself on a mad fling with a girl half your age that you know won't last, and then you grow old alone and with only the walls to grumble at.

In the absence of any other alternatives, I know which of the two I prefer, ... but what if there was a third alternative?

The Man Who Talked to Machines (2010)

You have to talk to them, counsel them, mesmerise them into stillness before you set foot anywhere near them. And, though I may not be considered wholly sane, at least I have a reputation for the way I talk to machines.

Pandora and Melanie (2010)

My dear Richard, I apologise for the delay in writing to you but it's only now I am beginning to come to terms with the implications of your discovery, and also the news of your collaboration with the woman known to you as Pandora,...

The author joins in with the doom and gloom and predicts the end of the world, but as you might expect, there's an upside to every situation.

Rosemary's Eyes (2010)

A short story about life, and death: Rosemary was by the house, feeling her way among the delicate stems of a clematis, her light touch seeking the beauty of its tissue-thin blooms. She paused at our approach and looked towards me, her eyes passive, waiting. Then she reached out, inviting my embrace. And when she gathered me in her arms, she raised her lips to my ear and I felt her whispered words, hot and curling against my skin.

"Don't be afraid," she said. "Look into my eyes once more."

The Road From Langholm Avenue (2010)

A story of unrequited love, of unexpected love, of love lost, and found again. With divorce and redundancy looming, our hero, Tom, is left facing middle age with the feeling that he made a wrong turn somewhere in his past. Then, as if things aren't bad enough he's inexplicably haunted by memories of Rachel, a girl he had a crush on at school. With emotions bubbling up to the surface he realises the old business with Rachel has never really been forgotten and that before he can find a way through his crisis, he's going to have to journey back in search of his deepest past. Tom sets out to find Rachel and, regardless of her circumstances, do the one thing he couldn't bring himself to do a quarter of a century ago: ask her on a date. But things don't quite go according to plan. Tom discovers a lot can change in twenty five years, but that some things remain exactly the same. And when it comes to the business of unrequited love, even those closest to him are not immune. This is a full length novel - complete and free to read. It is not a teaser or a taster.

In Durleston Wood (2010)

A middle aged romantic, Richard Hunter has hit the buffers. Divorced and estranged from his children, he trains as a teacher and takes up a post in his home village at his old Primary School. Never more than arm's length away from a nervous breakdown and hopelessly in love with his headmistress, Richard seeks solace in his boyhood haunt: Durlleston Wood. But the wood now hides a secret, a mysterious woman kept hidden there as the apparent "property" of a villain - or so she tells him. As he learns more of her fate, and her plan to transfer her "ownership" to him, he tells himself this is the last thing he wants, while wondering if it isn't actually something he needs more than anything, that far from destroying him, rescuing her could be the one thing that stops him from going under.

This is a full length novel - not a taster or a teaser.

The Lavender and the Rose (2010)

Matthew Rowan finds himself drawn to a secluded valley in the English Lake District where he meets Amanda, mistress of Crag-side, a cottage nestled deep in a fold between high fells. On the surface it seems like the ideal refuge from a world gone mad, but what he doesn't know is that the house sits at the epicentre of a magnetic anomaly and has a reputation for playing strange tricks on the mind of anyone who sleeps there. There's also something peculiar about Amanda, who calls herself Beatrice and leads a secretive life dressed entirely in Victorian costume. *The Lavender and the Rose* is an unusual love story, an erotic adventure, and a spiritual odyssey. It's also a psychological mystery whose resolution will require Matthew to question his understanding of the nature of human identity, and even reality itself.

The Singing Loch (2011)

Scott Matthews, a disillusioned city worker, finds himself drawn into a bizarre corporate conspiracy. From the ruthless greed of '80's London, to the austere beauty of Western Scotland, Scott begins to unravel the threads of an enigma dating back centuries, while gradually falling under the spell of the mysterious and forbidden Singing Loch. Here he discovers love, enlightenment, and ultimately a truth more startling than legend.

The Last Guests of La Maison du Lac (2011)

Writer Richard Graves arrives at La Maison du Lac, a remote hotel in the Swiss Alps, where he hopes to find the inspiration to begin the most important story of his career. It's here he meets the enigmatic Gabrielle, a beautiful Frenchwoman rebelling against her over-protective parents.

As he comes to know more about Gabrielle he realises he must rescue her, and that the story he must write is the one he finds himself living. The story will be a far cry from anything he's attempted before, with nothing appearing to be as it seems, including Gabrielle herself.

As their story unfolds, Richard's instincts tell him that only a tragic ending is going to make sense, and what follows is a desperate battle between his desire for a lasting happiness, and the seemingly darker intent of his muse.

At times mysterious, romantic and erotic, this is a journey that will take Richard and Gabrielle literally beyond the edge of reason, where the only guarantee is that neither of them will view life, or love, the same way again.

This is a full length novel, complete and free to read. It is not a taster or a teaser.



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