

The Wiles of Fate

“So Roger Dickinson, your New Year’s resolution for this year was, ‘I will never make another New Year’s resolution again, ever. Why?’ ”

Roger tried to focus on the wraith-like spectre glaring at him, “Who or what are you?”

“I’m known by many names but you may call me Conscience if you wish.”

“What? Where do you come from?”

“I live inside your brain.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, that’s impossible. What utter rubbish. Go away, I have a headache.”

“I can’t go away. I’m part of you. And your headache is because you did not carry through your previous New Year’s resolution, or any others before that. Is that why you won’t make one again?”

“Which one was that?”

“Not to get drunk again.”

“I don’t remember ever promising that.”

“Really? How convenient. Have a look at this,” the apparition waved its hand and a hologram appeared showing an earnest Roger sitting at a dinner table and swearing to surrounding family and friends that he would never get drunk again.

A sudden, irrational fear clutched at his throat. That was him. He heard himself utter the words but could not recall having ever said them – or having been at that dinner table.

It was as though the apparition read his mind, “So you begin to see the problem that you have brought upon yourself?”

“What problem?”

“You can no longer remember what happened.”

“Of course I can.”

“Really? Where and how did you acquire the headache that now plagues you?”

Again, fear clutched at his throat, he had no recall of yesterday.

As if reading his mind, the apparition said, "You cannot recall any of the last 35 years' worth of New Year's resolutions either. Come let me show you", and it reached out its hand.

Roger took it and suddenly found himself hovering just under the ceiling looking at himself lying on the bed.

Terror struck deep into his psyche but for the moment he could not respond in any way.

"Look," said the apparition, sweeping its hand over the body on the bed and suddenly the scene changed and a much younger Roger sat on the edge of the bed holding his head in his hands and moaning, "This year I'm going to resolve to never get drunk again."

With each successive wave of its hand the apparition conjured up a Roger, a year older, looking the worse for wear and making another New Year's resolution. He heard his own words ringing down the years, "I'm going to travel more. I'm never going to get drunk again. I'm never again going to lie to my wife again. I'm going to drink less. I'm going to lose weight. I'm never going to get drunk again. I'm going to go to the gym every day. I'm never going to get drunk again."

And so they rolled on and on.

Roger could not remember them yet he knew he'd made them, and failed to see them through. This kind of not knowing that he knew, yet he'd forgotten, terrified him.

Wide eyed he looked the apparition in the eyes and let out a strange pleading question, "Am I dead?"

"No, not yet, but you soon will be if you carry on drinking. The alcohol is already affecting your memory. But then, as we have seen, you are incredibly weak willed and will kill yourself with alcohol in spite of anything you may promise, you simply cannot keep any of them."

The apparition motioned downwards and Roger felt himself floating down towards his body.

His body turned on the bed, as if in an effort to prevent him from re-entering it, and it simply fell off the bed.

As he continued to hover above his body, the terror gripped him again.

Anything, anything is better than this terror he thought. Who was frightened? He or his body? Confusion gripped his being. But which being?

He looked at the bed. His body was lying on the side where his colt was strapped to the bed. Who was doing what? Was it he? Or his body?

This turmoil frightened him to the degree that all he wanted to do was to end it, permanently.

It was as if his body read his thoughts. His throat tightened as he watched it reach for the colt, turn the weapon towards its head, and pull the trigger.

Seconds later, the door was flung open and Maggie stormed in, "What the hell . . ."

She stopped short, looking at his body with the colt in its hand, surrounded by bits of ceiling plaster.

"You useless moron, can't you even get it right to kill yourself. All you've done is ruined the ceiling. Give me that gun."

He watched as she prised the Colt from his body's fingers and pointed it between its eyes.

Now paralysed with fear and unable to control anything, he was drawn downwards and slipped back into his body, staring past the barrel, staring past his wife's head and seeing the apparition, still under the ceiling, grinning mischievously.

He heard the concussion as the Colt fired.

He let out a groan and everything went black.

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Consciousness came slowly to Roger bringing with it an acute awareness of a throbbing head and the remembrance of a terrifying nightmare about resolutions. He shuddered as he remembered bits of it, particularly the relish with which Maggie had shot him.

Roger groaned, just a year ago he'd made a New Year's resolution never to get drunk again and already he'd broken it. He tried to remember what happened last night. Slowly it came back, "Oh no, I'm sure I never drank too much. Those buggers must have spiked my drinks to make me break that resolution, just because this time I said no more resolutions, ever. Maggie will never believe me. She's going to kill me."

As he struggled onto his elbows, out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of unfamiliar objects on his bedside table.

He turned towards them - a glass of water, two tablets and a note.

With a heavy heart he picked up the note, “Roger there are times when your stupidity really pisses me off. Last night was one of them. If you can still think coherently this morning then: 1. Drink these tablets for your hangover. 2. Your breakfast’s in the warming oven. 3. I’ll be back shortly. Maggie.”

Filled with confusion and trepidation he pulled on his trousers and stumbled down the stairs. At the bottom of the landing, he bumped into his daughter who merely gave him as disapproving and as disdainful a look as only a teenager can as she simply glared accusingly at him.

Bewildered, he ignored the look and asked, “What’s going on?”

“Of course you wouldn’t know,” she snapped, “You came home blind drunk last night. You stumbled over the hall table and broke it and then puked all over Mom’s Persian carpet.”

“What? Really?”

“Yes, Really.”

He was silent for a while, mortified by what he’d just heard and, because of it, more than puzzled by the note.

He drew in a deep breath, “I suppose your mother wants to kill me?”

“Lucky for you, no. She’s gone out to fix the table and to buy the stuff for that disgusting favourite of yours, tripe and onions.”

Suspicion and guilt now merged into total confusion, “Why would she want to do that when I’ve pissed her off again?”

“Because you actually redeemed yourself, quite cunningly, I thought.”

“What? How? What do you mean?”

“Well, we managed to steer you onto the bed and when Mom tried to pull your trousers off you started kicking and yelled, “Leave me alone woman, I’m a married man.”

Ray Hattingh