



The Universality of Maureen

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Water gushes down from the showerhead onto me and my troubles are washed away. They of course accumulate again, as does the dirt during the working day. But a good shower – nothing beats it – not a good *hard hot* shower. Who can go without it and say that they've truly lived? The only problem is something curious happens every time I have one. I get under the showerhead on a workday morning at 6.45, and lo and behold, after spending a mere 5 minutes there I come out to find that it is already 7.40.

Waiting for me as I step out of the bathroom is my wife, Maureen – bursting to berate me. She tells me that she has been pounding on the door for the past half hour for me to hurry up – couldn't I hear her? And I say no, the water's too noisy the way I set the shower jet. She asks: couldn't I set it a little quieter? And I explain that if I can't indulge in that intensity of showering then what's the point? I might as well get the cat to lick me and you know how *long* that will take!

'Oh Tom...' she says and shakes her head despairingly. She says 'Oh Tom...' so frequently that I almost believe my name *is* 'Oh Tom'... Anyway, as she says 'Oh Tom' I gaze at the steamed up mirror. Bit by bit it clears – revealing my reflection more and more distinctly. I am fat and 52. Oh well... At least I *smell* nice.

Maureen didn't always use to call me 'Oh Tom'. A few years before we had the new shower installed, I would only get transported 25 minutes into the future. I will never forget the plumber. He looked like he had come from another planet – especially with his green Mohican and all those cobweb tattoos on his face and arms. Even his tongue was tattooed; still, he charged a reasonable rate.

'You try the shower then!' I tell Maureen, 'See how long it takes you!' But she refuses to test out the phenomenon. Herbal baths are her thing... in the *night*...

Now it probably won't surprise you and cause you a heart attack to discover that I always arrive at work late. My manager – a young man of 23 – barely out of nappies and Clearasil; is sometimes moved to inquire about my habitual lateness. Usually I

fob him off with a sob story about the sorry state of the London Underground and how it needs mouth to mouth resuscitation and at least 15 Messiahs to sort it out, but today – *today* I decide that it is time that I am *honest* with the man – not just honest, but *concise*, so I tell him that I am in possession of a time travelling shower that transports me 55 minutes into the future. His forehead clearly seems to bother him. I offer him an Anadin, but he waves it away. I explain to him that it’s true; I do like a good shower in the morning... the invigorating pleasure of hot water pouring down one’s back and all those nooks and crannies... to a certain extent it is a Zen-like experience, but I would never lose track of *that* much time.

Now you would think that a manager of his youth would feel awkward about admonishing a member of staff endowed with so many more years of experience and say we say; more wisdom? but this is not the case. He says that he wonders what he did to deserve such a useless, hopeless case like me working for him; that I am never going to get anywhere and that the likelihood that I am going to be passed over for promotion again is over 201 percent. He asks me if I ever worry about my future. I say that I try not to get too worked up about it and he says that maybe I should. According to him, my lateness is just a *symptom* of my problem. Although my body smells nice, my attitude *stinks*. Honestly, I don’t know why he lets my lateness bother him so much. I always make up for arriving *late* by leaving *early*. I don’t know what he wants from me. If he wants me to stand to attention and click my heels, then he can *forget* it! If he wants me to turn into a machine, he can go jump off a cliff and slash his wrists!

Often Maureen tells me that maybe I should look for another job – 20 years without a promotion is possibly not a sign of appreciation. Next year, I promise her, definitely next year. But *how* can I leave? How? Working in the Civil Service for 20 years – why, I’m *institutionalised*. If I weren’t there I’d be on medication. Leaving would be like stepping out of the warm familiar shower of safety into the harsh cold air of the unknown without a towel to wrap round my body.

Maureen and I hold a dinner party and I share my theory about the shower with our guests. Huh! I shouldn’t have wasted my breath: I am showered with a hail of laughter and derision. Even my so-called supportive wife scoffs at the idea. ‘You’re a daydreamer, Tom, admit it!’ she says, ‘When you’re in the shower you’re composing operas in your head.’

‘That’s simply not true!’ I say, ‘That only happens when I do the washing up!’

It is only after the guests have gone and I am hovering the vol-au-vent crumbs off the floor, that I realise that although I am rich in years and clean, no one respects

me. Often I hear her friends whisper to each other: ‘Why does she stick with him? Why?!’

‘I *don’t* know!’ says the other, ‘I just *don’t* know!!’

It’s true; she is more *responsible* than me. With me around she’s never needed children. She drives, I don’t. She earns more than me and I don’t. (She sometimes refers to my wages as ‘pin’ money!) She’s better turned out – her ‘bob’ hairstyle always immaculate. She is grace personified while I am an intrinsically scruffy, clumsy clot. Yes... why *does* she stick with me?

A week goes by and I pretend to have a cold so that Maureen goes out alone to Brent Cross Shopping Centre – poor Dear. This provides me with the perfect opportunity to prove my theory and find out what would happen if I *actually* did stay in the shower for a long time. I walk into the bathroom and stand under the showerhead. I give the bathroom tiles a final look – plain white tiles – choice of the previous occupants – boring bastards. Then I draw the shower curtain and embark upon my journey. I turn the water on full blast.

It feels good – the exhilarating hard shafts of water descending upon my body. With my trusty loofer I scrub my back and start counting elephants after my watch clouds up.

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After counting 3,600 elephants, my back feels quite sore from exfoliating, so I turn the shower off. I calculate that I have indeed spent a whole hour in the shower. I pull open the shower curtain. The bathroom tiles are the same design but are now voice activated. Be black! They become black. Be blue! They become blue. I reach out for a towel. It is silver and sadly, not very absorbent.

Now all I need is a copy of the Guardian and to take it back with me in a waterproof bag. The *date* printed on it will prove my case! Normally it is left unread on the coffee table in the living room, so that’s where I go. And there is the paper – resting on a silver levitating coffee tabletop of the ‘easy to Hoover under’ variety. And there is Maureen. I recognise the back of her immaculate ‘Bob’ immediately as she bends over to water a silver houseplant. She hears my footsteps and asks: ‘Darren? What’s taken you so long?’

I tell her that it is not Darren; that it is Tom and *who* is this Darren?

She turns round. Her mouth and nose is made of metal. ‘Tom, where have you been for the past 20 years?’

‘In the shower.’ I reply.

‘Don’t be silly, Tom.’ she says, ‘that’s always been your problem... You were always silly...’ As she starts to polish the silver leaves, she gazes up at me and says: ‘Time has been kind to you, Tom. You haven’t aged a day since I last saw you. How come you haven’t got a titanium nose and mouth? How do you cope with the pollution?’

Suddenly, we hear the front door open. ‘Maureen! I’m home!’ bellows a rough unwholesome voice.

‘That’s Darren!’ says Maureen. ‘Quick, you better hide!’

‘Don’t worry, I’ll explain everything to him.’

‘He’s not the type to listen.’

‘Maureen? Who’s that you’re talking to?’ Darren shouts. His heavy footsteps can be heard as she ushers me into the bathroom. She explains that 5 years after my disappearance I had been declared legally dead and that she had got married again.

‘You better hid in here.’ she says, ‘Darren’s got a nasty temper and he’s very paranoid on account of finding me with 6 other guys, so please don’t land me in it.’

I hold my paunch in, jut my jaw out and say: ‘Why, this man sounds like a thug! I’ll sort him out!’

‘He doesn’t lay a finger on me, Tom.’ She says, ‘But those guys... some of them are still in traction.’

I release my stomach. ‘Ah... right...’ I say and step back into the bath. She draws the shower curtain.

When she leaves the bathroom, I hear Darren say to her: ‘Who were you talking to?’

‘I wasn’t talking to anyone.’

‘Don’t give me any of that crap!’ he snarls, ‘You’ve been seeing that hologram player repairman again!’

‘Nonsense!’ she cries, ‘W-w-what you doing?’

‘Going to the bathroom,’ he answers menacingly, ‘I heard you take someone into the bathroom.’

I hear Maureen tug at the doorknob – trying to block Darren’s entry. ‘Darren, if you trust me, you won’t go into that bathroom.’

‘Get out the way!!’

I hear the door open a little, then shut a little and open a little and shut a little and open fully with a loud thud. Through the shower curtain, I could make out a huge hazy figure approach me. Do something! I tell myself. Do something! I turn the

shower on as Darren starts to pull open the curtain. Droplets of salvation fall upon me. The curtain remains half open... Phew... Gosh... What a relief... After all that, I need an extra long shower to relax.

* * *

As the dark stains of time wash off my body and twirl like a vortex into the plughole, I wonder to myself: where do all those seconds, minutes, hours, days, months and years go? Down the drain – probably. I forget to count elephants and count mongooses instead and lose track of how long I have been in the shower.

My skin is noticeably prune-like as I enter the living room and find that Maureen is now an android. The only part of her original physical body that has remained is her left ear. Her ‘bob’ slides lopsidedly on her titanium head. She says: ‘Tom, where have you been for the past 40 years?’

‘Where you left me!’ I reply.

A weird distorted doorbell can be heard. ‘Oh God!’ she cries, ‘That’ll be the Android Police! It’s illegal not to be an android! You’ve got to hide!’

Despite my protests, I am ushered back into the bathroom and made to step into the bath again.

The ringing continues. I hear her open the front door. She tries to sound composed. ‘Oh, hello. What seems to be the problem, Officer?’

A monotonous metallic voice answers: ‘Don’t give us the ‘What seems to be the problem, Officer’ rubbish! We detect you are harbouring someone who exceeds the legal maximum of humanity! We detect there is someone in your bathroom who is over 5 per cent human!’

‘Don’t be silly,’ says Maureen, ‘what would I want with a human being? They carry such *horrible* diseases and are so *difficult* to please..’

‘Solar radar doesn’t lie!’ says the tedious mechanical voice, ‘Move aside madam! Come on boys...’

Even in the bathtub, I can feel the vibrations of their heavy footsteps, as they come ever nearer. Through the shower curtain, I can make out the hideous silhouettes of gigantic android policemen entering the bathroom. Back! Back! I need to go *back* in time! But how? To be quite honest, I never gave the issue any thought. But what if I was to turn the temperature the *other* way? I have always had *hot* showers and so far I had gone into the *future*. I adjust the shower control. Perhaps having *freezing* cold water raining upon me will *reverse* the time-travelling

process. As the shower curtain is pulled open; I turn on the water. Cold! Cold! Oh my God! Very cold! Freezing! Arrrrrrgh!!!!!! The curtain remains half open.

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I continue to get goose pimply and turn an unflattering shade of blue until I count 3 hours worth of elephants and at least 20 minutes of mongooses. I draw the curtain. I have shivered needlessly. The bathroom is still futuristic. A silver towel comes out from the wall and wraps itself around my body. I step out of the bath onto a conveyor belt that conveys me to the living room.

I find that my wife is now a 12-foot tall space rocket. The only recognisable aspect of her is the ‘Bob’ parked on the dome of the vehicle. ‘Tom,’ she says, ‘I thought I’d never see you again. I’ve been waiting for so long – over 60 years. Darren and I are over. You may be silly and a daydreamer, but I still love you.’ Her voice may have sounded synthetic, but the sentiments she expressed could not be doubted.

The living room starts to shake. ‘What’s happening?’ I ask.

‘Oh, that would be the world ending.’ says Maureen, ‘The planet’s about to disintegrate due to the complacency of governments and transnational corporations.’ She explains that the remaining population has been adapted so that they can travel to other planets. ‘I’m sorry, if I belittled you over your wages. It’s at times like these that you realise money means so little. Care for a ride?’ A latch door opens automatically on Maureen’s body and steps come out.

Entering Maureen is a strangely comforting and sensual experience. I find myself in a living room decorated much like the one we had when we first lived together. Maureen’s voice booms out from some 1980’s stereo speakers: ‘Tom, you better prepare yourself for lift off.’

There is a seat belt fitted on the sofa. I secure myself and look for something to read. On the coffee table is a scrapbook – highlights of all the news I had missed over the years. There is a cutting of an obituary about my manager. Apparently he had died of a heart attack at the age of the age of 30 due to working too hard. Poor guy... Very sad... Still... it largely vindicates my approach to life.

‘Put on the TV,’ says Maureen from the speakers, ‘You’ll be able to see where we’re travelling to.’

I comply and see before me the futuristic living room. Maureen begins the countdown: ‘10... 9...’

Maybe she had changed physically in a lot of ways, but she was still basically the woman I had married and loved.

'8... 7...'

I don't know how we will fare together. I'm prepared for a bit of turbulence.

'6...'

I have never learnt to drive... Have always been a passenger in life... Guess some things never change...

'5...'

I realise that I have by-passed that awkward stage in my career between stagnation and retirement, but I have also by-passed all those happy years I could have had with my wife. Still, regrets are for people who have showers that can go *back* in time.

'4...'

We have a lot of catching up to do, but we're not worried. When my limbs have gone through the inevitable withering and decaying process, Maureen will have the technology to replace them. My whole flabby body will be adapted for intergalactic space travel. With the technology we have available we can exist forever. Wondrous sights await us. Together, we have a lot to look forward to.

'3...'

This probably sounds silly, but sitting here, I have never felt so close to her before. Touching the sofa; I can sense what she is feeling. It is as if everything I touch is Maureen. Everything is Maureen and Maureen is everything...

'2... 1... Lift off.'