

# The Universe Is Shrinking

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It's 4:18.

"I went on a trip yesterday."

"Where did you go?"

Her smile is a bit mischievous. Her dentures gleam.

"Oh, we went a long way. Dorothy and I were taken to that park beside the waterfall – Niagara Falls."

"Niagara Falls!?"

And then he calms down.

"Mom, did you go on the trip yesterday?"

"Well, yes. No. The day before... I'm not sure, now that you asked..."

She looks out at the backyard. A dark grey cat is lounging against the sun-warmed garden shed on the far side of a manicured lawn.

"Is that cat always there, mom?"

"Cat? What cat?..."

He sits back in his chair.

It's 4:31.

"Is there a cat out there? Reach me my glasses, will you, son?..."

She squints at the picture window.

"That's why the birds don't visit anymore..."

He reaches for her glasses and places them on her lap. Then he picks up the tv remote, flicking on a nature show.

"Damn cats."

"Maybe that's why there's no rabbits in the yard, either, eh, mom?"

She nods.

It's 4:45.

"Mom. Can I help you down to the dining room?"

"What?"

"Would you like to go on a trip with me down to the dining room?"

"Oh can we?... That would be great fun."

She pulls her sweater down her hips then rocks a bit to get up. She stops.

"Oh, son. Can you find my slippers? I'm not sure where I left them."

Seeing them just under the bed next to her feet, he pulls them out and helps her get them on.

"Son, can you please take a look, sometime, in the shoe stores, for a nice pair of shoes? These slippers are very good, but they're getting to feel funny inside... Take a look at them, will you?"

He pulls off the old slippers. His mother's feet are ninety-one years old, very flat, looking like they've been contained tightly for, well, ninety years. They are almost as wide as they are long.

Nobody makes shoes to fit her. He's tried and tried.

Ten years ago, when his mother was still quite active, they had gone to a shoe store. The pair that sort-of fit were soon put in the closet because they were too slippery and heavy. They are still there. The slippers they got then are what she is now wearing. They don't make the right kind of slippers anymore – some are too sticky, or too slippery, or the metal on them somewhere tingles her nerves. Several new pairs are in the closet with the shoes.

"You're right, mom. The lining is rumped a bit. I'll just cut the lumps out... Your scissors still in the drawer?"

"If somebody hasn't taken them. Try that drawer... Or maybe the..."

"Here they are. Just be a minute."

He turns off the television as he sits down to work on the slippers.

It's 4:58.

He snips the frayed lining from both slippers, then smoothes down the insides.

"Here, let me put them back on. Let's see if that's better."

Her old socks cover swollen and discoloured legs. Looking at them, his gut shivers deeply.

As he gently pulls the socks, being sure not to make them too tight, he makes a note to try to set a few dollars aside to buy her some new ones.

"There. Now let me help you up, mom."

"Ok. Where're we going, son?"

"For a walk down to the dining room. It'll be supper time soon... Then I'm going to have to get on the road. Have'ta take a load to Cincinnati."

"You're going already, son?"

"Yes, mom. Gotta pay the bills... But first we'll go on a trip to the dining room."

"Oh son, I haven't given you anything to eat or drink. There's some cookies in one of the drawers – if they haven't taken them. The girls are very nice, but as soon as I leave the room, they go through all the drawers and take the cookies and fruit and who knows what else..."

"Yes mom. They said they have to, to keep down the mice and things."

"Oh."

"Here's your walker. Is it working alright, now?"

"Yes. The tune-up helped... It's just..."

She settles her arms along the handles.

"These handles are really uncomfortable. And when my hands touch the metal, the electricity goes right into my arms."

"Well, I've been looking for something that would work better. They don't seem to have the right parts. I'll keep looking, mom..."

A long shuffle gets them to the dining room. It is right at the exit. He steers her gently toward the drinks table.

It's 5:09.

"Mom, would you like a juice, now, or a banana?"

She looks around the dining room.

"Oh, no thanks, son. They've nearly finished setting up for... Is this breakfast?"

"It's supper time. The board says that you'll be having ham with mashed potatoes and peas. Sounds good, doesn't it?"

A server hustles out of the kitchen with the last of the plates and cutlery.

"I'll sit over there at my table. That's my table – just Dorothy and me, now. Emile's gone. Dorothy doesn't want to leave. One of the girls wanted to move her to the other side but she said, NO, I'm not leaving Eva! She helps me, she said."

They get to the table.

"I help her take the right pills. Heh heh. She forgets things easily. But she doesn't want to leave."

"Mom. Give me a kiss. I'm going to have to go now."

She gives her son a big kiss.

"Bye, son. Why don't you take a snack with you?"

"That's alright. I'm going to be stopping for supper soon... Well, maybe I'll just have a cookie and some juice."

At the snack table he wraps up the cookie in a serviette, then puts it in a pocket. Pouring some orange juice into a glass, he glugs it down, thinking that it will save him a bit of money at supper, down the road.

Ready, he gives his mother a wave.

"Now you take it easy driving that big truck of yours," she says lightly.

"Bye mom. See you next week."

As he leaves, he smiles at the stone fountain outside the entrance that she calls Niagara Falls. The park benches and umbrellaed tables are occupied by a few people, taking in the afternoon sun.

His Peterbilt is parked on the road.

It's 5:17.

He wipes his nose and eyes, then pats the cookie in his pocket.