

Twin Shafts of Light

By Kenzo Evans

The wind cut right through him, slipping effortlessly past his woollen scarf and raised collar.

He peered into the pitch darkness, trying to catch a glimpse of the train. So did two fellow travellers, fruitlessly seeking shelter from the chill November morning in the draughty folds of their coats.

He had lived through these early morning hours dozens of times. In a few minutes, the train would pull up and, with a hint of condescension, open its doors to its first passengers. Bright and clean, fresh from the depot, it always looked like a Lockean blank slate on which the present was just about to sketch its first strokes.

As the day wore on, the slate filled with a multicoloured mosaic. Every person who entered its realm – leaving traces of late autumn on its floor or fogging its windows with their breath – left a unique imprint of their present on its fabric. With each passing day, the mosaic wove itself into ever more intricate patterns, until by evening it became a chaotic yet all-encompassing kaleidoscope. And then the train would return to the depot, washing away the record of the day –like unauthorized graffiti scrubbed from a city wall – and preparing the slate for another chapter.

Gusts of wind intruded into his thoughts, playing with them like a pile of handwritten pages on his desk. They were snatched from the table, whirled into chaos, shuffled like a deck of cards – only to be set down again in a completely different order. And though everything written was his own, he read the pages with the interest of someone encountering them for the first time.

Every day, every hour, we are offered dozens and hundreds of miniature alternatives. Some we choose consciously, relying on experience and knowledge. Others arise from collisions between countless micro-universes, moving, like us, along unpredictable Brownian trajectories. Like a ball bouncing across a gargantuan pinball board, we build our present step by step, choosing one possibility after another.

Left or right. “Yes” or “No”. Step closer or keep your distance. Surrender to preserve your ranks, or stand firm to preserve your dignity. Accept or push away an outstretched hand. Turn down a side street to avoid a never-ending traffic jam, or take the risk and stay on the main route. Each choice gives rise to its own unique and unrepeatable path. Each shapes a distinct instance of the present into which we are about to step. Every minute, we snatch from thousands of possible worlds the one we will inhabit for the next fleeting span of our lives – and discard the rest without ceremony.

With a faint smile, he recalled the game theory he had studied in his third year at university. Mathematics claimed that in every situation there was an optimal choice. That every question had a rational answer. Say “yes” or “no”, cooperate or defect, take a shortcut or continue as usual. Fight, flight, or freeze. Each step taken toward your goal, it insisted, brought you closer to it.

The mistake of mathematicians, he thought, is their belief that the world is static – unchanging, sealed within its boundaries like a jar of apricot preserve. Having made a rational choice, they celebrate the victory of reason over chaos, convinced they are one step closer to where they want to be – while remaining in the same world as before.

And therein lies the miscalculation.

The old world no longer exists. The moment a choice is made, a line is drawn, dividing the present into before and after. In this newly created after, the choice takes on a different meaning. The new present assigns it a new value, injecting it with the experience just gained: the experience of them having made that choice. What once seemed optimal remains behind, trapped in a version of the present that no longer exists.

Only by giving something away do we discover what we receive in return. Only after stepping through a brightly lit door do we hear it slam shut behind us.

Sometimes we see it at once. The demons hiding in the dark corners rise to their full height, and we realise we have gone wrong. If we are lucky, we may still have time to step back before the door closes.

But sometimes the demons remain silent. They linger in the shadows, letting us believe our choice was right. Years pass. The present that gave birth to them lies buried beneath old newspapers. And only then do they emerge.

The pinball keeps bouncing merrily across the board – but none of its paths leads to the drop target.

He heard a car approaching. A taxi pulled up at the station entrance. A young woman jumped out and hurried toward the platform. Seeing the people still waiting, she sighed with relief and slowed her pace.

Not a bad start to the day, he thought. Had the train not been delayed, she would have spent a good hour out in this weather waiting for the next one. He found himself genuinely happy for her.

And yet, by the same symmetry, everything might just as easily unfold the other way.

You chose the most irrational option – turn into a dead end, push through a door marked “Danger to Life” – and find, beyond it, an entrance to something vast and luminous. Oblivious to the postulates of game theory, you choose cooperation over defection – and it is reciprocated. You bet on an impossibility – and win. A ball, thrown at random, lands in the highest-value slot, and for a moment the beauty and honesty of the universe are laid bare.

But the white demons, like the black ones, may also remain in hiding. That same door may lead you into a rough back street of a troubled neighbourhood – and only after years of hardship, after losing everything again and again, do you finally arrive at something worth it all: your own Elysian fields.

And so – how can we ever know the true outcome of our choices? How can we be certain we have reached the point where we can take stock of our gains and losses? How do we know that what we see now is not merely the end Act I – or Act XVI – and that the demons we have set in motion are not still waiting in the wings?

He pulled his ticket from his pocket to check his coach number. Beneath the dim streetlight, he read the printed words:

“Choose any available seat.”

The answer is that we cannot know.

The outcome of any choice – no matter how distant – will always be a derivative of our present. And the present itself is shaped by all the choices that came before. Every new decision creates a new present, casting fresh light on the past and summoning new generations of black and white demons from the shadows.

The loop has no end. For as long as we exist, we remain within this constant transformation – the present shifting beneath our feet, capable at any moment of reducing the certainty of our past decisions to dust.

A flicker of headlights crossed the tracks and vanished, only to return a second later. At first hesitant, almost apologetic, the light traced the trunks of the trees lining the rails. Then it grew stronger, more assured, until it resolved into a pair of blinding shafts of light.

A minute later, the train pulled into the station and, as if reluctant, came to a stop. He stepped into the brightly lit doorway.

© Kenzo Evans, 2026 | me@kenzoevans.com

First published in Andromeda Magazine,

<https://andromedamagazine.com/2026/07/08/twin-shafts-of-light/>