**Ménage a Deux**

Despite leaving the office early, the sun was already low in the sky as Lawrence Oakley made his way from Byrdden Spinney station and up Chapel Hill towards his home, a dispiriting two mile trudge away in the outskirts of the market town.

Someone had once told Lawrence that the Cotswolds were “what Americans think England looks like” and that was about right, the autumn light giving a rosy glow to the glib monotony of the [Cotswold] stone of houses tastefully restored by their insufferable owners with their Agas and their wicker log baskets and their season tickets to media jobs in London or whatever the hell it was they all did.

The General Theory of American ghastliness was, no doubt, a grossly unfair generalization, but a solid case could be put forward for the Special version. Wechsler! – the head of the physics department at Tolchester New University, where Lawrence was employed doing post-doctoral research.

Tolchester University was “new” only in the sense of its having been established around seventy years ago in a period of post-war optimism, its infrastructure, research quality and morale having deteriorated markedly since its brief heyday, should it indeed be said to have ever had such a thing. “New” may also have been intended to highlight its closeness to Oxford, while at the same time emphasizing the founding Labour government’s ideals of greater modernity and democracy in contrast to that stuffy, outdated institution. These days it’s physical proximity to Oxford only served to highlight its distance in every other regard.

A round of funding largesse in the early twenty first century had seen Tolchester hubristically aspire to hosting a world-class physics department. To that end they had hired Wechsler – the rumours had it at great expense – from MIT. Made Professor at the age of thirty eight, he had followed up his fantastically promising early research with exactly nothing that Lawrence could see. Now, six years later, his intellectual impotence manifested itself in his holding back the efforts of anyone brighter than himself, and in his trying too hard to play the role of an English academic – the Volvo-driving, tweed jacket-wearing, Guardian-reading ponce.

More to the point, or at least in particular, Wechsler was currently blocking the publication of his, Lawrence’s, paper. It was a good paper. The title, *A New Inequality in Super-Symmetrical Time-Dilation Effects* was just right. Snappy enough to get noticed but at the same time, sober enough to be taken seriously. The research it contained was possibly ground-breaking, though originating from such a low-rent institution as Tolchester, it would be hard to get published in a journal of any self-respect or prestige. Regardless of any of that, it was the only ticket he had out of that dump and away from Wechsler.

After evading him for weeks, Wechsler had found a window in his allegedly busy schedule that afternoon.

“It’s all very well aiming for originality,” Wechsler had begun. He was wearing the darker, and viler, of his two tweed jackets, the material shot through with pink and blue threads in an effort, no doubt, at jauntiness. He had paused and looked at Lawrence, as if trying to remember which of his grand total of two post-graduate researchers he was. “As I was saying, it is a commendable attempt at creativity, errm… Oakley. But I am afraid that the math simply does not add up. Perhaps it might be better to stick to something more solid and mainstream next time?”

Who the hell did Wechsler think he was to tell him that his “math” didn’t add up? Wechsler was a one-trick pony, with his over-reliance on Feynman diagrams, and no ability to see beyond them. Didn’t he realize that time, and maths, had moved on?

The worst of it was that Wechsler was right. The maths did not add up. Lawrence’s instinct, however, was that the theory *was* fundamentally correct. The lack of balance in the equations, he felt, pointed to a genuine inequality in the nature of time-dilation effects. Hence the title of the paper.

He had tried to make this case to Wechsler, who, with a look of disappointment had merely said, “Perhaps you could come back to me when you have more than instincts or feelings to go on, Oakley?” He had rearranged his features [twisted his face?] into an expression no doubt intended to convey encouragement. “And you may find that you learn something in the process of discovering the mistake in your calculations.”

Lawrence kicked up a spray of water as he stomped across the ridiculous sixteenth century wooden bridge spanning the river Byrd. A schoolboy urge came over him to throw a stone at the small flotilla of self-satisfied ducks passing underneath, but he was stopped, firstly by the fact that he did not have a stone, and secondly by the realization that none of this was exactly [entirely?] their fault.

Still – the day had not been a complete washout. He had had lunch with Sarita Kapoor and was pretty sure she had been flirting with him. She was eight years younger than him and fresh out of grad school, but the age gap should not really matter, surely? He was tall, six foot one inch if he really stood up straight, had thick blond hair of which he was secretly rather proud, hazel eyes with flecks of green and a still-slim figure. There was no reason that a young woman such as Sarita should not find him attractive. He worried that his chin was slightly weak, though. Maybe he would grow a beard.

Were you allowed to have a relationship with a colleague these days? There could be complications. Lawrence had once read that the top two places where couples met were “at work” and “at a dance” – though given the wording of the second one, it must have been research carried out in the nineteen fifties. Killjoy HR departments were doing their best to put a stop to the first, and he was not much of a dancer.

A potentially more significant obstacle to any relationship with Sarita was that he loved his wife. Sally was from [Birkenhead?] the “posh part of Liverpool”, and Lawrence couldn’t help but feel he had married up in social status whenever he visited her parents’ house, with their multiple Mercedes and en-suite bathrooms. They had been together for five years, and married for eighteen months. She might not understand his work like Sarita did, but she understood him – far too well, perhaps – in every other way. Their sex life was great and inventive (that thing with the spatula and the oven glove she had started doing recently) even if the frequency had dropped off somewhat over time.

He could not imagine being unfaithful to Sally. Well – he could *imagine* it, and where was the harm in that? Except for the problem with the HR department. That would have to be [worked around] for the fantasy to [work]. Perhaps if he and Sarita *and* Claire from HR all got together? No. The fantasy disciplinary hearing didn’t bear thinking about.

He turned into Stanmore Drive, a row of ex-council, semi-detached houses into one of which he and Sally had moved four weeks previously. They were planning to paint their front door a tasteful shade of deep blue – partly because they liked the colour, but also so they could tell their house apart from the identikit collection on the street.

He passed the house two doors down from theirs belonging to newlyweds John and Jenny Llewellyn, who had introduced themselves and brought round a cake on the day Lawrence and Sally had moved into the street. Judging by the way they had held hands and shot each other giggling glances the whole time, as well as the whole business with the cake, Lawrence had guessed that they were keen Christians who had been saving themselves until marriage, and were now going at it like rabbits. This – the first part of it, at least – had been swiftly confirmed when John had invited Lawrence and Sally to join their local Pentecostal congregation.

Sure enough, as he glanced upwards, he saw the outline of an embracing couple silhouetted against the drawn curtains.

The next house was theirs – number 21 – and Lawrence fished in his pockets for his keys as his feet crunched up the short gravel drive. They key would not turn in the lock. He jiggled the key back and forth for a while before his brain slowly processed what it was seeing – the number 23 on the door. He was next door. He had walked past his own house.

He retraced his steps and walked up the drive of number 21, noticing an unfamiliar Volvo estate parked at the end of the drive. The embracing couple was no longer to be seen. Could that have been John and Jenny at number 19? He hadn’t really been paying attention.

Lawrence let himself into the house and went through to the kitchen. He could hear muffled sounds coming through the ceiling from the bedroom above as he shakily poured himself a glass of water. A solitary oven glove hung on the hook in front of the range cooker and – he checked – the spatula was missing from the earthenware utensils pot.

A folded copy of The Guardian lay on the table. Lawrence and Jenny did not get a daily paper, though Lawrence occasionally bought the Telegraph for the crossword.

Should he quietly leave and come back later? He couldn’t bring himself to do that and found himself, without thinking about it, climbing the stairs. He paused outside the bedroom, realizing that he was still holding the glass of water. He couldn’t burst in on his wife and her lover holding a glass of water. He put it down on a small table on the landing, making sure to find a coaster first so that the glass would not mark the wood. Sally was very particular about that sort of thing.