**Ménage a Deux**

After an atrocious day at the laboratory, Lawrence Oakley came home to find his wife in bed with another man.

Despite having left the lab early, the sun was already low in the sky as he 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 sure enough the autumn light was casting its tedious rosy glow onto the glib monotony of the yellow stone houses, each one tastefully restored by its insufferable owner 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. [Rework, and get number right.]

It was perhaps unfair to generalize negatively about all Americans, but a solid argument could certainly be put forward in specific cases: Wechsler – the head of the physics department at Tolchester New University, where Lawrence was employed as an untenured post-doctoral researcher.

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 had deteriorated markedly since its heyday, if indeed it could 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time emphasizing the founding Labour government’s ideals of greater modernity and democracy in contrast to that stuffy, outdated institution.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 Aaron Wechsler –rumour had it at great expense – from MIT. Made Professor at the age of thirty eight, Wechsler had followed up his fantastically promising early research with exactly nothing that Lawrence could make out. 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, ahh… Oakley. But I am afraid that the math simply does not add up. Surely you see that your equations imply an inversion of the [time axis / future light-cone], in clear contravention of the causal geometry of the Einsteinian space-time manifold? 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. Feynman diagrams! Didn’t he realize that time, and maths, had moved on?

The worst of it, though, 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. An urge came over him to throw a stick at the small flotilla of self-satisfied ducks passing underneath but he was stopped, firstly by the fact that he did not have a stick, and secondly by the realization that none of this was entirely their fault.

Still – the day had not been a complete washout. He had had lunch with Sarita Kapoor and was 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.

There could be complications to a relationship at work, though. He 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 thirties. 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 more than satisfactory and Sally had an inventive streak (that thing with the spatula and the oven glove she had started doing recently – where had she got *that* from?) even if the frequency had dropped off somewhat over time.

He could not imagine being unfaithful to Sally. No – that was not quite right. He could imagine it with no real trouble at all – Sarita’s slim but curvaceous figure coming not entirely unbidden to his mind - but where was the harm in that? Except for the problem with the imaginary HR department. That would have to be dealt with 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 next door to 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 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.

And 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. The 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.

He took a deep breath. He would be calm, dignified and civilized.

He opened the door, and his eyes swept the room. Everything was much as normal: the clock radio on the bedside table set five minutes fast, the half-finished cup of tea he had brought up for Sally that morning, his book left folded open next to his pillow. The only slightly jarring details were his wife, lying spread-eagled on the bed, and a man with his back to Lawrence, his trousers around his ankles and his jacket discarded on the floor behind him. His jacket. His tweed jacket. His tweed jacket jauntily shot through with pink and blue coloured threads.

“Get off my wife, Wechsler, you cocksucker!” Lawrence [hissed], grabbing the man by the shoulder and spinning him around. The word “cocksucker” was, he realized, somewhat inexact given the circumstances, but it would have to do.

Instead of looking embarrassed or ashamed, the man’s face turned purple. He rounded on Lawrence.

“Wechsler? Wechsler! Who are you calling Wechsler?”

Now that the man had turned to face Lawrence, he could see that it was not, in fact Wechsler.

The man was older than Wechsler, maybe somewhere in his mid-fifties. He was tall, looking straight at Lawrence with green-flecked hazel eyes as he squared up to him. He had a mane of white hair, with streaks of the original blond still present. His generally slim build was marred by a slight looseness around the stomach and a loss of muscle tone in the upper body. A neat white beard covered what Lawrence saw was otherwise a weak chin. A scar running down his cheek from his right eye gave him a rakish look.

Lawrence was sure that he recognized the man, but he could not place where from. A colleague from the university? Someone from the town? A TV presenter?

In the face of the man’s rage, Lawrence’s first instinct was to apologize for what had, after all, been a pretty egregious insult, before he remembered that he was the injured party. He squared his shoulders.

The man’s anger had not diminished and he took a left-hooked swing at Lawrence. His legs tangled in his trousers as he did so and he fell forwards, his fist catching Lawrence a glancing blow just below his right eye. In the split second before the punch landed, Lawrence saw – as if in slow motion – that the man was wearing a diamond-inlayed Tiffany wedding ring, just like his own.

He crumpled to the floor, the man falling in an undignified heap on top of him.

“Larry! Stop it, Larry!” Sally yelled, sitting up and glaring at the two men.

Lawrence pushed the man off him and turned to Sally, his anger directed at her for the first time. “You know I hate it when people call me Larry!”

“I wasn’t talking to you, *Lawrence*.”

“It’s just a youthful affectation,” the man growled. “A desire to be taken seriously. He thinks that *Larry* sounds infra dig. I know I did.”

“Don’t patronize me, old man!”

Blood was dripping down Lawrence’s face onto the cream coloured carpet. Sally would not be happy about that. He put his hand to the fresh cut running down his cheek from his right eye and looked again at the man’s scar. He touched the small birthmark on the left side of his nose. The man had the same mark.

He sprang to his feet and took in the scene: his wife sitting on the edge of the bed, wearing hold-up stockings (she never wore them for him) and [glaring] at him; the crumpled, stained bedsheets; the bedside light knocked over in the scuffle; the older man – his future self, he was now sure of it – on the floor nursing the knuckles of his left hand, his corduroy trousers still around his ankles, looking abashed and guilty for the first time.

Lawrence could not contain his emotions.

“Yes!” he shouted, clenching his fist and pumping the air. “I knew it! My research! I was right all along!”

He took a deep breath, puffing out his chest. He made an obscene two-handed gesture to an imaginary audience. “Whose *math* doesn’t add up now, Wechsler?”

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[*Change scene so that Lawrence is in a great mood? Then crash later at home. We get more up-and-down then.*]

Lawrence sat at his desk at the university, its chipped veneer top strewn with pages of equations. The room was cramped and shabby, last painted in high contrast tones in the nineteen eighties. His computer was painfully slow and had an ancient seventeen inch CRT monitor which took up half the desk. The ones in the Arts Department were sleek recent models with huge silver screens so flat you could barely see them when looking at them from the side. What, if anything, did they use them for? Maybe the Dean felt that members of the Physics Department had their minds on higher things and would not notice. If so, he was wrong about that.

Lawrence’s mind was not on his surroundings. The previous night had not ended well. Larry had pulled up his trousers, made his excuses (“*must be careful to avoid overstretching the time-potential”*) and left. He had made some adjustments to a chunky device strapped to his wrist which he had called (*“pardon the pun”*) a Timepiece, and had simply vanished, leaving behind only a slight scorch mark on the bedlinen where he had been sitting and a lingering smell of aniseed. Lawrence had argued with Sally and spent the night in the spare room, his fever-like dreams a swirling mixture of Sally’s stockinged legs, his non-equating equations and Larry’s hairy arsehole staring up at him like the unblinking Eye of Sauron.

Despite his lack of sleep he had leapt out of bed early and headed straight into the University. Now, eight hours later, the equations were making no more sense than they had in his dreams. Even so, he knew he was right! Without doubt there was a Nobel Prize waiting for him for this. But the Nobel would be the least of it: global fame; the respect – and just as importantly, envy – of his peers; his own research institute (the “Lawrence Oakley Centre for Chronophysics”); international conferences begging him to be their keynote speaker. He could take Sarita Kapoor with him.

He looked down at the sheet of paper in front of him – an attempt to reformulate the problem in terms of n-dimensional tensor matrices. It was hopeless. As he ripped the page from the notebook and scrunched it up, Wechsler put his head around the door.

“Do you mind if I come in, Oakley?”

Perhaps wisely not waiting for an answer he came in and sat, leaning forward, on the threadbare armchair facing Lawrence’s desk.

“I’ve been thinking some more about that paper of yours,” he said. “I wonder if it might been a good idea for you to consider a different, ahh… a different *focus* to your work?”

Lawrence frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Well… theoretical physics is not for everyone. It is a very, ahh… a very *demanding* discipline.” He put his hand on the desk as if reaching out to Lawrence and gave a look which could have been intended as caring or pastoral. “Perhaps you would be better spending your time concentrating on undergraduate tuition, or maybe on the experimental rather than the theoretical side?”

“What?”

“They are both very worthwhile contributions to the, ahh… to the *edifice* of science.” He paused and looked Lawrence in the eye. “Or perhaps a career outside academia? I believe that physicists who fail to make the academic grade can often make a good living in banks, or in *hedge funds*, as I believe they are called. Though I cannot for the life of me think how or why.”

Lawrence had had enough. He stood up and put both his hands on his desk, looking down on Wechsler.

“Who do you think you are, you old fool? I am on the verge of a major breakthrough here. Something that your feeble excuse for a mind would not be able to comprehend…”

Wechsler narrowed his eyes. “Doctor Oakley. I would advise you to calm down and think before you speak.”

“No, Wechsler – you shut up and listen to me! How dare *you* lecture *me* about *my* ability, you pathetic imbecile? When this paper is published the only claim to fame that you and this tinpot institution of yours can hope to have is your association with *me*. *You* will be begging *me* for a job as an experimentalist in *my* laboratory. So get back to your paper-pushing, and leave the real physicists to do their work!”

He sat down and started gathering his papers, in a gesture intended to dismiss Wechsler who stood up to leave.

Wechsler turned back, his hand on the door knob. “So you’ve got the math to add up then, Oakley?”

[“Not yet – but I will!”

Lawrence saw Wechsler shrug as he closed the door behind himself.] *Cut?*

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As Lawrence let himself into his house, he reflected that his interview with Wechsler had not ended with quite the *coup de grace* he had been aiming for. Still – the old cockchafer would get what was coming to him soon enough.

He glanced through the letters in the rack in the hallway before going through to the kitchen. Larry was sitting at the table reading The Guardian and drinking tea out of Lawrence’s favourite mug, a bright yellow design with the words *The World’s Greatest Physicist* written on the side in silver paint.

Was the blighter sneaking around to see Sally every time his back was turned?

“Get your hands off my mug!” he said. *You damn dirty ape*.

Larry finished a crossword clue and looked up at Lawrence. “It’s my mug too. I guess we need to learn to share. I’ll promise not to use it when you’re around.”

“Look here, *Larry*. Why can’t you just clear off? I don’t come around to your time, drinking tea out of your favourite mug.”

Larry sighed. “You’ll get there in the end, don’t you worry. Then you’ll find you’re not allowed it as much as you might hope. She doesn’t like it. Won’t have it in the house.”

While Lawrence was trying to work out whether or not they were still talking about the mug, Sally came into the kitchen. He was pleased to see that she was fully dressed.

Larry sprang to his feet and fetched a second cup of tea from next to the kettle. “For you, my dear.”

The creep was trying to make him look bad.

“I would have made you one,” Lawrence said, “but I’ve just this moment got home.”

“That’s alright, hon. I didn’t want two cups anyway. It’s nice to see you boys getting on better than last time.”

The two men glared at each other.

They all sat at the table. Lawrence was the only one without a cup of tea.

Sally spoke first. “I asked Larry to come round. We all need to talk this through.”

Larry folded his arms and rolled his eyes upwards. “I can’t believe I’ve put the temporal capacitors through another duty-cycle for a *chat*. Do you have any idea how many gigawatts it takes for each trip back here? It’s not like it will make any difference anyway. I should know.”

“I don’t see what there is to talk about,” Lawrence said, looking at Sally and thrusting out his lower lip. “I forbid you from seeing him!”

Sally laughed. “Really? Are we living in the 1950s?”

Larry leant back in his chair. “The lady has the right to make her own decisions.”

“You be quiet, Larry. And Lawrence, you need to start thinking more clearly about what is really in your own best interests. Larry is *you*, just twenty five years older. The poor man! I can’t believe the things he told me about the future Sally. She sounds like such a cow. She’s so cold to him. Can you believe she’s even stopped doing the thing with the spatula and the oven glove?”

Larry set his lips. “Ever since John Lydon stopped presenting Bake Off, she says her heart’s not been in it.”

He sat forward blinking more than normal, his eyes glistening. Lawrence was not as pleased as he felt he ought to be at this display of vulnerability from his rival. Did it put him under some obligation to be sympathetic, or at least not unpleasant, to the old git? Overall he thought not, though it was a closer run matter than he would have liked.

“She accused me of being unfaithful,” Larry said, [his eyes downcast]. “I hadn’t done anything – at least not then. She said that wasn’t the point – she knew I was going to be unfaithful because she, and I for that matter, could remember that it had happened. I said that I had no desire to cheat on her. She brought up the business with Sarita Kapoor.”

“Who is Sarita Kapoor?” Sally asked, looking sharply at Lawrence.

“What happened with Sarita?” Lawrence asked, keeping his eyes away from Sally’s. Had it been a one-off fling, or a deliciously drawn out affair? Perhaps he could get Larry to give him some tips on what Sarita liked.

“*Nothing* is what happened,” Larry replied. He looked at Sally with a soft smile. “Your husband loves you too much to go fooling around with other women. Though the way Sally was treating me, I sometimes wish something had happened. Can you believe that she accused me of being unfaithful because of something I was going to do in the future, but hadn’t done yet? She refused to have anything more to do with me – in that department at least. What choice did I have? I didn’t want to be unfaithful to my wife. So here I am.”

Sally put her arm around his shoulder.

She turned to Lawrence. “I can’t imagine not loving you, Lawrence. So can’t you see why I love Larry as well?”

Lawrence stared at Sally in silence for a few moments. “So you’re saying that it’s because you love me that you’re dropping your knickers for this old gimmer behind my back?”

“You have to think clearly about what you will want to have happened when you get to be him in the future.”

Lawrence sighed. “I can see that he’s fed you some sob story, but I don’t have to go along with it. I don’t mean *forbidding* you.” He looked across at Sally. “You can do what the hell you like. Well – so can I. I won’t work any further on the time-dilation theory, and then none of this will happen.”

“What difference will that make?” Larry asked, a look of what appeared to be genuine puzzlement across his leathery features. “It’s October 24th today.”

“So?”

“The most famous date in modern physics. The date that the Chrono-Lagrangian equations were first pre-published to the arXiv repository.”

“But I’ve not published anything. I haven’t even worked out the final form of the equations yet.” *The math still doesn’t add up*, he thought bitterly.

Larry’s frown deepened. “What’s that got to do with the publication of the Wechsler Inequalities?”

Lawrence stared at Larry. He felt as if gravity had been turned up to three time normal strength. He could feel the skin sagging on his face. He seemed glued to the chair, and could not move his arms. The *Wechsler Inequalities!*

“It’s such a privilege to be here on this date,” Larry continued, his face lighting up. “I mean – to be here again, that is. I know I didn’t fully appreciate it the first time around. Let’s take a look at the paper, shall we Lawrence? I can’t wait to see your reaction to it for the first time. So simple. So elegant. I know I would never have thought of applying Feynman diagrams to the scrappy precursor equations we came up with. The man’s a genius, and fully deserves the global fame and recognition he has received.”

The information was only slowly sinking into Lawrence’s mind, like water into ground that has been baked dry.

“The *Wechsler Inequalities*,” he repeated in a monotone, staring blankly ahead. “Does he acknowledge our work at all?”

Larry gave a curiously shy smile. “Oh yes – we’re quite famous in our own way. A footnote in the paper thanks an unnamed colleague whose – I quote – *misdirected ideas nonetheless pointed me in the right direction*. If I introduce myself to other physicists as Larry Oakley all I get is a blank look, but if I tell them that I am the *misdirected colleague* they know who I am straight away. It’s quite the ice-breaker. I’m thinking of getting it printed on my business cards.”

[*Larry works in the experimental division of the Aaron Wechsler Centre for Chronophysics. “It’s a very prestigious position.”*]