

JERRY OLTION

UNCERTAINTY

Jason is excited as he parks the demonstrator LeBaron in front of his house. He parks on the street so his neighbors can see it, and maybe decide to buy one. That's not likely, but it's possible, and a car salesman plays the odds. If you greet enough customers, put the cars in front of enough people, someone will buy one. As they have done today. A brand new Imperial, cash, and Jason already has the commission check in his breast pocket.

He fingers the crisp paper as he walks up the driveway to the door. Yes, still there. And just before Christmas. Ginny will be pleased. He tries the doorknob before he goes for his house keys, but it is locked. Not a good sign. If Ginny were home, she would have left it open for him, maybe even met him at the door. Unless she got caught up in something and forgot the time. That's happened before. So Jason sets his briefcase on the concrete step and fishes in his pocket for the keys, unlocks the door, and as he steps into the darkened house he says loudly, hopefully, "Honey, I'm home!"

The silent house returns not even an echo. Jason switches on the kitchen light and takes a cautious sniff. NO aroma of freshly baked bread, no meaty heaviness of a roast or even a hamburger casserole. The wave function has collapsed, the universe has chosen. Ginny is not home today.

She might have been. That's the most frustrating aspect of the whole thing. Until Jason checked to see, she might have been right here in this kitchen, wanting him as eagerly as he wanted her, but the very act of arriving was enough to set the universal dice in motion and tonight they came up snake-eyes.

He turns around and steps outside again, closing the door behind him. A virtual couple pops into being on the sidewalk beside his car, a teenage boy and girl walking arm-in-arm. She nods at something he says, then laughs. They take three steps before vanishing, their very existence swallowed in the quantum foam.

Jason shivers and opens the door again, but Ginny is still gone. He knew she would be; the universe can't be fooled that easily.

He sets the commission check on the kitchen table and plods through the house, shedding briefcase, shoes, tie, and the rest of his clothing along the way into the bedroom, where he collapses backward on the bed and stares at the ceiling. The lunar landscape of its textured surface is dimly lit from the evening light filtering through the window overlooking the back yard. Jason tells himself that the ceiling is a good metaphor for his life, that the even pattern of bumps up there results from the same randomness that haunts his marriage. The carpenter who made the ceiling had no idea where each speck of grout would go; he just

sprayed them upward in a great shower of mud, and the overall, aggregate pattern of those thousands of flying particles turned out to have a kind of order to them. Even though it was theoretically possible, the carpenter probably didn't worry about them all landing in the same place, or inexplicably avoiding an area shaped like, say, the face of the Madonna.

It's a lousy metaphor and Jason knows it. Yes, overall he and Ginny have a happy marriage, but he wants her now. Now, this instant, warm and cuddly with her auburn hair dancing in loopy curls around her ears, her smile wide and inviting
. . .

Jason gets up abruptly, pads into the bathroom, and takes a shower. He scrubs off the day's sweat first, then closes his eyes and satisfies his other need as best he can. It isn't enough. He opens his eyes, looking at the bright white tiles with the beads of water forming and falling from them. Thousands of drops, spraying randomly off his chest, yet forming an even distribution along the wall. A Gaussian distribution, named after Karl F. Gauss, the German mathematician who studied randomness before Schrodinger, the other doyen of particle behavior, was even a boy. Jason knows these things. He has read up on the subject. Yet as so many physicists have learned, knowing how a phenomenon works doesn't mean he can control it.

Jason still needs some kind of release. He reaches forward and turns the faucet slowly to cold, gritting his teeth until the primal whoop bursts from his lungs. This time the whole house echoes.

The next evening she is home. Jason knows that last night has nothing to do with tonight, that random events by definition cannot influence one another. A tossed coin can come up tails a dozen times in a row and still have a fifty-fifty chance on the next throw.

But tonight it's heads. For Jason. Trouble is, evidently Ginny is having a sort of day, because the moment he opens the door he feels himself fading away. He gets a glimpse of her talking on the phone, but when she turns she looks right through him and Jason goes where virtual particles go when they annihilate.

When awareness returns, he is sitting on a stool at the end of a polished mahogany bar. A tall glass in front of him holds ice and a straw, and smells of gin. Jason groans. Of all the places he could go, why does he keep coming here? Only a cheap motel would be worse. But either way, whether he reeked of gin or perfume, if he were to go home now his marriage would be mined. Jason knows this with instinctive certainty. Ginny may suspect where he goes, but she must never know.

He orders coffee from the gray-haired bartender, slurps down two cups while watching the other patrons in the mirror. How many of them came here voluntarily? he wonders. How many are victims of chance?

In one of those random moments when all the voices are silent but one, he hears:

"Okay, a Frenchman, a Mexican, and a Texan are in a balloon . . .

"Jason laughs, but not at the punch line.

When he gets home, Ginny is gone. This time it works in Jason's favor; there will be no argument tonight, no attempt to explain the inexplicable. No warm wife to snuggle with either, though. On the whole, Jason doesn't like the trade.

He looks in the bedroom closet, but her suitcase is still there. Sometimes it and some of her clothing is gone and he knows she is at her mother's, but tonight she could be anywhere. She could even be right here at home, simply phase-shifted so they cannot interact.

He goes to bed and holds her pillow, imagining that it is her.

The next day he considers calling her from work to find out what he'll be facing when he goes home, but he has tried that before and it doesn't work. Early knowledge gives him no more satisfaction than none, and finding her home during the day doesn't guarantee anything anyway; she is indeterminate again by the time he arrives.

He imagines one of his co-workers overhearing him on the phone, maybe even saying something like, "Checking up on the little woman, eh?" but he knows that will never happen. Such a statement might be misconstrued, and even if the meaning could somehow be made unambiguous, whether or not their wives are home to greet them at night is not something men talk about. Not these men, at least. Yet Jason wonders if they all straggle with the same uncertainty. Some of them even have kids; Jason shudders to think of what it must be like to go to bed without knowing that your child is safe in his room. Always wondering, as Jason wonders on the lonely nights, whether this time your loved ones are lost for good. Or whether you are lost to your family.

He and Ginny have decided to wait until they solve their problem before they have kids of their own. It's one of the few things about which they both agree perfectly.

But the problem has no solution. Heisenberg proved that. You can never know both the position and the disposition of your spouse to infinite accuracy.

That night he takes a pickup from the lot and brings home a Christmas tree. He backs into the driveway so he unload it easily, and as he gets out of the pickup he sees Ginny smiling at him through the kitchen window. A great weight slides away from him, and as he takes the few steps to the door he squares his shoulders, shakes his head so his hair will fall into that slightly mussed state

she likes so much, and opens the door. "I'm ho-ome," he calls playfully, and she smiles, comes to him, kisses him with lips warm and soft and tasting of cookie dough: She is baking snickerdoodles, Jason's favorite.

"Tell me how they are," she says, handing him one still hot out of the oven.

He blows on it to cool it, takes a bite, feels it melt into a burst of sweetness and spice in his mouth. "Mmmmm," he says, then kissing her again with crumbs still on his lips, "Mmmmmmm."

In the bedroom she helps him change out of his suit, running her hands over his body and kneading the sore muscles in his back just as he'd wished she would for the last two nights. He rubs her back as well, and is about to unbutton her shirt when the oven timer goes off. Laughing, she twists away, and he feels a momentary pang of regret, but then he laughs and dresses in his casual clothes. There will be time enough for that later.

They decorate the tree, he hanging the gold balls and she the silver. They're careful not to let the antiparticles touch. Ginny suggests using just one kind, for safety, but Jason shakes his head and says, "If we did that, the energy balance would be off."

When the tree is decorated, heavy with cosmic strings and shimmering gamma rays, Jason goes into his study to wrap presents. He has bought many small things, not wanting to repeat the fiasco of two years ago when he bought Ginny a single diamond necklace. Of course when she opened the box, it was empty. Fifty-fifty chance. This year she'll get a few empty boxes, but half of them will be full.

He has even bought multiple presents for the cat, though he hasn't seen it for days.

After dinner they cuddle on the sofa. They whisper, they tickle, they laugh. Jason kisses her, softly at first, then more deeply. In the rush of excitement that follows, her shirt makes a quantum shift to the floors then in a quick chain reaction the rest of their clothing follows. Inexorable pressure brings them together, the heat between them building and building until they undergo fusion.

Jason wishes they could remain in this state forever, but the isotope is unstable, as it always is. Fission inevitably follows. They move to the bed when bare skin begins to cool.

Later still, as they lie side by side under the covers, moonlight softening the shadows, he realizes this is the time he loves the most. The quiet time at the end of a perfect day. Hesitantly, he asks, "Do you-- do you ever wish it could always be like this?"

She nods, an almost imperceptible tilt of her head. "Of course I do. But it can't be."

"Why not? he asks.

"Because it isn't. The universe doesn't work that way." She turns on her side, away from him.

He knows he is treading on thin ice now, but he can't leave it alone. "I just wish --" he begins, but she says, "Jason, I can't always be your fantasy lover."

The moment has become as fragile as a uranium atom. Jason pauses, his mind seething with the possibilities. Virtual particles come into being, annihilate, while he tries to decide. Should he fire a neutron into the nucleus, directly into the heart of the matter? Increase its weight with questions until it splits apart, and in splitting yields its secrets? Or should he shield it, preserve its glittering presence for as long as possible? Jason feels the entire universe quiver with anticipation as he considers the ramifications. Weighs the options. Decides.

"Oh, but you are," he says, kissing her earlobe and nestling up against her like one spoon behind another. He holds her, and as she drifts off to sleep he thinks, You are my fantasy lover. And all the craziness, all the uncertainty, is worth it for these moments when it's fantastic.