

One less concern

The improbable dream.

Victor Thijssen

When Peter looked outside, rain was still pouring down. They should have called it global soaking instead of global warming, he thought. He finished his coffee and considered his options: take the old-fashioned way and get soaked, or use the modern and dry way of travelling.

"Would you like a refill sir?" the waitress asked, holding a coffee pot with coffee strong enough to make the glass crack. Peter turned his head and looked at her name tag.

"No thanks, Andrea, I'm already late. Could you bring me the check please?"

Andrea nodded, a bit disappointed, and Peter noticed that she took a glance at his ring before she walked back to her colleague. He looked at his finger and couldn't blame her, it truly was a beautiful piece of craftsmanship, a titanium ring inlaid with two drops of crude oil shaped as the yin and yang sign, captured in a small circle of 18-carat gold. Once a precious gift and sign of recognition: now worth just as little as his empty coffee mug.

Peter averted his eyes from the ring and looked back to the building on the other side of the square. The raindrops on the window almost made it appear as if Gaudí and Escher had teamed up to design a magnificent, but at the same time impossible, edifice. It struck him that this was actually the first time that he'd looked at the main entrance of the building in which he spent almost half his life. He'd seen it before — obviously — but he never paid much attention to the architectural details. The longer Peter stared at the pompous façade, the more it seemed that the building gazed back at him; a huge slick face with the big granite 'ConCERN' characters as an odious grin. A shiver ran down his spine and he quickly looked away and focused on the sculpture in the centre of the square. It was the same emblem as on his own ring, lying on its side in a shallow pond. It was just as if Goliath himself had carefully put it there to protect it from his upcoming battle with David. The rain splashing in the pond created a sense of movement, and, for a short moment Peter was convinced he could see the gigantic ring sinking slowly into the depths.

Apart from their size, the only difference between both

rings was the inscription on the inside of the statue. Peter could not read it from this distance but he knew the words by heart:

If an event with a desirable but unlikely outcome is repeated indefinitely, and each time there is a probability of success, then sooner or later the desired outcome will occur.

Nowadays, it was referred to as Murphy's reverse law, but it was actually postulated by Peter, seemingly centuries ago. The inscription in Peter's ring only mentioned the word CERN and a date; the day when the sculpture was unveiled. On that day, the ring was presented to him as a memento of his discovery of the probability particle, or proton. It was the reward for the decade of hard work that it had taken to prove the existence of this novel elementary particle. Even more, it had been the incentive for another 15-year-long expedition to find applications for their discovery, which eventually resulted in the first teleportation device.

Peter closed his eyes and smiled when he boarded his personal time-machine and travelled back to those days of glory. He remembered the excitement when one of his PhD students discovered a method to generate multiple protons simultaneously

in the LHC-II. He could almost taste the champagne that appeared out of nothingness to celebrate the teleportation of a marble to the other side of the lab. He saw Steven burst into tears when they successfully teleported the first living organisms, albeit only a colony of bacteria. They were at the frontiers of teleportation science, the invincible probability warriors who were on a quest to tame chance and change the world forever. It was a time when scientists at CERN were still doing science, and long, long before CERN turned into ConCERN, the multinational with a larger annual turnover than Microsoft and a budget that made the losses due to the mortgage crisis early in the century look like small change.

"Professor Vangow... Professor Vangow?"

Peter snapped out of his dream and for a moment he was surprised to see Andrea instead of a crying Steven.

"Your check, Professor Vangow," the waitress said, a little embarrassed when she realized that she had woken him. Peter wondered how she knew his name and it took his sleepy brain a few seconds to realize that they probably had portraits of all CERN's Nobel laureates pinned to a wall in a dark corner of the restaurant. Their own scientific hall of fame. He managed to produce a smile and handed her a 5-euro note.

"Keep the change. Do you have a probilivator?"

Andrea nodded, "It's in the back sir, next to the rest rooms.

Bonne chance."

"Thanks."

Peter put on his wet coat and took his briefcase. Still a bit disorientated, he manoeuvred between the tables to the back of the diner. He took his ConCERN travel card from the inside pocket and pushed on the card's short-key to select his home address. He held it in front of the card-reader and when the glass doors opened he could vaguely hear the humming noise of the circulating protons. At least we don't have to get wet anymore. That's one less concern, he thought, and stepped into the bluish light. ■

Victor Thijssen is a Dutch research scientist in the area of tumour angiogenesis. The publication of this short story is the first proof of Murphy's reverse law.



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