

The Professor Nutkins Chronicles
2. The Science of Ageing
By David Silver

It had been several months since the episode with the time machine and I had more or less forgiven Professor Nutkins, despite the fact that I now cannot bear my gin and tonic with lemon, lime or any other sort of citrus additive. But he was stimulating company and I owed him a lot in friendship for the various inventions he'd passed my way and which doubtless made my daily chores significantly more bearable. For instance, the pressure cooker constructed from a motor car hubcap, a set of kettle drum tensioners and a Victorian chamber pot produces exquisite soups and stews. The lawn trimmer based on a recycled circular saw blade really does cut the mustard. Well, it cuts other things too but fortunately reconstructive surgery is quite advanced these days and who needs ten toes anyway?

So I resumed my Thursday afternoon visits and called round looking forward to a steaming cup of a wonderful beverage he says is filtered through a 'sieve-it' or perhaps it's spelled 'civet'. Apparently coffee beans can be similarly processed. I wouldn't normally sieve my drinks but it seems to work. It seems he's planning to market it in France under the name 'Civet Oui!' He's so resourceful!

He answered the door in his usual nonchalant and rather absent minded way, hair wild and standing almost vertically on end. I think his latest invention, a self-heating overcoat fashioned from a discarded electric blanket, which still appeared to be plugged in, may have had something to do with that. Still, the cleverly shaded circular and slightly crusty yellowish patches across the blanket gave him something of a soldier-in-camouflage appearance. Quite dashing actually.

"Well", I said, by way of a conversation opener, "it's been a while since we last spoke. Time flies doesn't it?" That was a mistake. It was his cue to take me through into his laboratory to show me something he described as 'my answer to the atomic clock – the Fly Clock'. I became aware of a sort of sizzling sound and a rather unpleasant odour. Under a large glass dome were hundreds of bluebottles buzzing around and on the floor of the dome was a piece of festering meat crawling with maggots. Attached to the dome was a contact microphone connected by a lead to a computer. (I shan't bore you with the details of the 'computer' now, that's for another time, but suffice it to say that webs, bugs, mice, phish and spiced ham were involved in its construction).

The professor explained: he'd calculated the average lifespan of a fly and measured the sound frequency emitted by its wing-beat. He had then performed a statistical analysis of the wing-speed variations in fly populations of various sizes then arrived at the optimum volume, food supply, oxygen input and stench output to produce a

self-contained bio-system whose oscillation frequency would excel in accuracy over the best atomic clocks known to man. Feed that frequency into a computer, et voilà!

“Well, it’ll soon be Friday” I said sipping my Civet Oui and trying to keep the conversation neutral as I was still feeling a little queasy from the Fly Clock. “Is it me or do weekends get shorter the older you get?”

“It’s Relativity” he said. I began to relax. “The faster you go, the slower your subjective time passes. Conversely the slower you go, the faster time passes”. This was great stuff. “As you get older you move slower than when you were younger, hence time goes more quickly when you are older. If time goes more quickly weekends pass more quickly and therefore seem shorter”.

My head started reeling at this unexpected concept. The Prof really is quite brilliant, with an enormous capacity to think laterally.

“And as we know space, time and gravitation are all interlinked hence gravity increases as you get older” he continued. “That’s why everything sags further toward the ground as you age”.

I pondered my abdomen at this. It certainly had been quite some time since I’d seen my little Willy.

“There’s also Hooke’s Law which describes how elasticity changes with distance”. I relaxed yet again as I knew something about Robert Hooke’s work. “That’s why old folks’ knickers often fall down around their ankles. It’s because the elastic has further to stretch and weakens over time”. Damn. Wrong Hooke.

“And finally” he continued “there is the Conservation of mass-energy”. I kept quiet, wondering what was coming next. “The fatter someone gets the less energy they have and the more energy they expend the less their mass”.

“Err, is that concept influenced by a person’s religion in any way?” I ventured.

“No, orbital mass perturbation applies to everyone” he replied.

“My God, look at the time” I said observing several bluebottles buzzing around the lampshade. “I’m due at my brother’s to take my nephew to the pictures” I said. I thanked him for the refreshment and left, wondering how I was going to tell little Willy that I couldn’t possibly take him to see Lord of the Flies now.

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