

FICTION

Our publication of “physics fiction” in the October, 2000 issue of this journal brought only one negative comment and a number of positive ones. Thus we try another, this from one of my undergraduate students in an introductory course for non-science students on twentieth-century physics (“Physics for Poets”). Again, comments are welcome.

Boxed In

Kelly Bennett

Erwin had found the key to immortality. Waves. Possibility waves would give him eternal life. And to think that all it took was an introductory course in quantum physics to reveal it to him. All his life he had described things differently. When he was a child, his mother had gotten him glasses because he said “fuzzy” whenever she asked him what things looked like. Now he knew, he was just seeing things quantumly. With his new understanding, he began to see more clearly. To be exact, he saw the waves collapsing all around him. All the possibilities of events coalesced into one definite actuality. The collapses flashed all around him, frightening him more every moment.

His drive home from school was agonizing. The flashes of definiteness blinded him. Flying up his driveway, he nearly hit his garage door as it was opening to let him in. He threw it in park and shut off the key. Erwin struggled with the strangling seat belt and the heavy car door before freeing himself to run for his house.

Jamming the key into the lock and turning it furiously, Erwin burst into the house. He slammed the door shut behind him and leaned against it for a moment while he panted. With his eyes shut, he couldn't see the actualities pop into existence. After a moment of dark peace, he opened his eyes slowly. The waves were back, they were more full here in his small home. He turned around to look at the door. Right at the window, he saw his possibilities shrink into points of concreteness. He jumped back in horror. *Gotta free the waves.* Locking the door and then bounding down the stairs, Erwin began.

He ran to the corner of the dank basement where he had put everything he needed to start. Boards, nails, a hammer, glue, and tape were stacked haphazardly on an old weight bench. He grabbed some boards under one thin arm and the hammer, nails and glue with the other. Slowed down by the extra weight but not any less adamant, Erwin trudged up the stairs to the landing where the offending window was. He stared at it in horror, afraid to touch it. He shook his head to clear the fear and picked up the boards. He nailed them over the small window in the door, effectively covering the portal to the outside. Breathing heavy, he watched with satisfaction and relief as the waves passed through the wood and kept undulating through space far into the house. *I knew it would work.*

Erwin walked into his living room only to stumble backwards out of it. There were three windows in this all too bright room. There was hardly a wave present in there. He flew up and down the stairs five times to bring all of his materials onto the safe landing. With planks and hammer, Erwin bravely walked into the living room. He nailed the wood over the bay window he had paid so much for two years ago and the two small windows on the wall next to it. There were cracks of light between the boards, so he ran beads of glue all along them until they were sealed. Satisfaction flowed through him as the imprisoned waves flowed out into his living room, filling it with possibility.

Erwin sat down on the couch in his pulsing room and sighed. He watched possibility live all around him. Everything was attainable here, nothing could decide the reality that would exist. He looked all around him and realized that he was sitting on a couch of actuality. It barely pulsed. All of the furniture seemed solid. He hoisted himself off the couch and cowered against the wall. Then reason took over and he began tugging on the arm of the couch, pulling it toward the stairs. He pushed it through the kitchen, scratching the cabinets and tearing upholstery off of the couch. Panting and sweating, Erwin finally managed to kick the couch down the stairs. The rest of the living room furniture soon followed. Exhausted, he looked down the stairs and saw no pulsing waves, only solid darkness. A shiver passed through him and he pulled the sliding door to seal the basement off.

Back in his empty living room, Erwin sat on the carpet and basked in floor to ceiling waves. He felt more alive than ever. All the possibilities still existed, he couldn't die if they all remained. He laid back on the floor and looked around, thinking of what to do for the rest of eternity. The television caught his eye. *I wonder what's on.* Erwin got up to turn it on but thought better of it. It wasn't completely solid, but if it were turned on, it could be disaster. News from the outside would seep into his protected home. He paused there a moment and then wrapped his arms around the set and walked away from where it had been sitting. The cord was still plugged in. Erwin kept walking until the cord flew out of the socket, trailing him like a tail. He opened the basement door awkwardly with one hand and let the TV tumble down the steps. Standing there smiling and trying to catch his breath, Erwin thought of the other things that might endanger his immortality. *The radio!* Music and talk radio would have the same devastating result as the television. He gathered all the radios from the house and threw them like Frisbees into the void.

Weary but pleased, he sat back down on the floor of his empty room. He watched the dazzling waves spell eternity for him. It was hard work but if he could live forever, it would be worth it. A content smile had just appeared on his lips when the unthinkable happened; the phone rang. Erwin's heart nearly stopped. He gasped aloud. Paralyzed, he stared in the direction of the phone, seconds erasing the oscillating pattern. Then he snapped out of his inaction from more intense fear. *The answering machine!* If the answering machine picked up, he would hear who was on the other end; destroying millions of possibilities. He ran to the kitchen where the phone sat on the countertop and yanked on the cord attaching it to the wall. It popped free of the socket. His breathing heavy, Erwin stared at the white princess phone that had almost ruined everything and then chucked it and the answering machine into the basement.

It had been a close call with the phone, but all seemed safe again. Erwin silently wondered what time it was, and was immediately shocked. Time was an outside force, too. He whipped his watch off his wrist and gave it to the greedy cellar. Thinking about the watch, he winced. It had been a gift from his brother for going back to school.

He was finding it increasingly difficult to relax, even with his new life. He was antsy and nervous. *Maybe I just need to eat something.* He glided over to the fridge and opened it. Solid food stood there in the fridge, taunting him. Bologna and cheese stood there, only bought yesterday, in preparation for this day. Milk and orange juice were throbbing a bit, but not enough to justify keeping them. Angry for the first time today, he slammed the door shut and laid his head against the cold front. Fighting to rationalize it, he thought *I will be immortal even if I don't eat, if I do everything right.* Not trusting himself, Erwin grabbed the tape and wrapped it around the fridge until the roll ran out.

He stood and looked at his life giving waves and cheered up a little. He sat on the counter, zoned out and tired. He ran his hands over his face and realized he needed a shave. *How long has it been?* Licking his lips, he found them cracked and split. *A glass of water shouldn't hurt me.* He turned on the tap and recoiled when the liquid seemed more solid than the food in the fridge had. He pushed the handle down hard.

The sink has to go. With fear and adrenaline running high, Erwin began pulling the cabinetry from around the sink with the claw hammer. He smashed and clawed at it until only the stainless steel sink was left bare. He wrapped his arms around the sink and pulled until the joints on the pipes snapped. He fell to the floor with the sink on his chest. Then he heard it. The water gushing from the broken pipes. A puddle was headed toward him. He crawled backwards with the sink still on him and aimed for the stairs. The puddle expanded like molten lava, a solid flow of actuality. He threw the sink down the steps ahead of him and then ran down them to find the water main. When he turned on the light, he saw the solid, real basement in full color. Closing his eyes, he climbed over his broken belongings to the pipes at the end of the basement. He tripped and stumbled over his couch and television, but finally reached his destination. Opening his eyes a crack, Erwin saw the shut off valve and began turning it. His hands red from effort, he stopped when it refused to budge any more.

He once more navigated the furniture graveyard blindly and made it up the stairs to see that the pipes weren't gushing water anymore. The puddle of water throbbed a little, but he just stepped over it and made his way back into the safety of his living room. He panted as he lay on the carpet with his eyes closed. *Now I'm safe.* He slept and dreamt.

All around him waves flowed. Water waves, music, and light. Erwin swam in them and exulted in their beauty. Coming up from the wavy water, he saw a dark mass on the horizon.

Erwin woke with a start as his cat walked on his chest. She was solid and heavy on him. The poor cat had no idea of her master's plans. He picked her up from off his chest, touching her as little as possible and brought her to the stairs. *Why couldn't she be outside?* He looked at her green eyes and quivering whiskers, and then closed his eyes. Without looking, Erwin pitched his cat down the stairs and shut the door. Tears stung his eyes as he shuffled back to his spot in the living room. They fell freely when he sat down. *I'm sorry Boots.* Now he really was alone. It couldn't be helped though. She would understand; she would have done it, too.

Tears dried on his face, Erwin thought that he had finally done it. Finally eliminated all wave collapses from around him. It would be worth it, to live forever. There couldn't be anything else here that could collapse his immortality. As he thought this, he saw several gaps in the pulsing waves. The heat vents were exposing him to the outside. Electrical outlets peered at him like unblinking eyes. He jumped to retrieve the tape. There on the floor near the refrigerator lay the empty cardboard roll.

The glue caught his eye. The bottle was half full; enough to do the outlets in the house. Erwin went through the house squirting Elmer's glue into electrical sockets. As the glue filled the evil eyes, the waves increased. The living room was filled with a fog of them. Erwin could hardly move through them.

The heat vents were next. Erwin took what planks he had left and nailed them over the vents. As he was doing this he could feel the heat come out; he worked more desperately to keep it from leaking in. Finished, he took

his place on the floor once more. He looked at the mist surrounding him and smiled. Perhaps it was because he was tired or that he really had achieved it, but he felt peace. *Now I can enjoy my immortality.* He let thoughts drift and dwell in his mind. He contemplated the meaning of all this science that had allowed him to achieve what everyone sought. Religion gave people hope for the afterlife, but quantum physics had given Erwin what all religions could only guess about and hope for. *What an achievement...that I can share with no one.* After his thoughts had carried him for a while, a new frightening one came into his malnourished mind. *What if my thoughts collapse the waves?* With horror, he looked around his ravaged and empty house and thought about the implications of his realization. He couldn't destroy his mind that way. Frustration made him beat the floor around him with his fists. The mist was thick around him and his fists so loud that he didn't hear the banging on the door.

When the sound did finally reach his ear, he couldn't be sure of how to act. If he drew attention to himself, then whoever was on the other side of the door would know he was inside. This experiment was still too precious to obliterate by getting up to see who was banging on his door. He decided to wait it out on the floor. Each pound on the door seemed to cause his beloved waves to fuse into sizeless points. Fear quickened his heart and breath. Now the person was calling inside.

"Erwin! Are you in there?" the voice yelled. It was filled with panic. Erwin put his shaky fingers in his ears. The voice pushed through in muffled tones.

"Erwin!"

He saw the door shaking in its frame, ready to fly open at any second. Erwin could not close his eyes. Something inside him was keeping them open, to see, to observe.

A new noise pervaded the house. The clicking of metal on metal. The lock was being picked. *Soon it will all be over. Soon the door will open, destroying them all.* A louder click resounded even through Erwin's sweating fingers. His eyes opened wide with horror.

The door swung open wildly. The fog of waves was reduced to a shower of sparkling points. The wind of reality swept over Erwin, stealing his breath. He slumped over just as his mother's eyes passed over his body, realizing it was dead. She stood in shock, taking in the frantic destruction of her son's home. Behind her, a police officer stood with his gun in hand. Out of the corner of her eye, Erwin's mother saw something move. She turned toward it, and saw Boots walk out the gaping front door and meow.

*Kelly Bennett
stomper4x4@mw.mediaone.net*