

COINCIDENCES – R – US

(by Robert Bee)

The bell above the door tinkled as George Gamblin stepped across the threshold into a small but cheerfully decorated shop. Apart from the tidy service and display counter opposite the entry door, all the walls were lined with shelves and the shelves were stacked with colourful boxes, much like those in a computer software or games shop.

George casually glanced at the titles on the boxes, vaguely noting that they made no sense to him whatsoever. But that, he admitted, was consistent as he had no idea why he was in the shop. In fact he was almost certain that the last time he walked down this street in Lower Upper Pochin, this shop wasn't there.

His puzzling was interrupted by a polite 'may I help you?' from the counter. George turned and saw an elderly looking man, with Einstein like hair, a neat three piece white suit over a mauve shirt and a pink bow tie with yellow polka dots.

"Um..." said George as he stared at the man's tie. The salesman gave a broad toothy smile. "You've noticed my tie," he said. "Like it?"

"I'd have to, wouldn't I," George said. "It's an exact match to my shirt." George looked down at his shirt, then the tie again. "Now, isn't that..."

"A coincidence?" the salesman said. "Not surprising really when you consider where we are."

George did another quick survey of the shop's shelves. "I confess I'm not sure what type of shop this is, or even why I came in," he said.

The salesman laughed. "The second part is easy. Just a moment ago I was in the back room and the thought just popped into my head – my, it's been quite, I must be getting a customer soon – and, hey presto, the door bell rings and in you came, a customer. A Class 1 coincidence."

"A what?" said George.

"A Class 1 coincidence, and that answers the first part of your question. This is a Coincidence Shop," and the salesman pointed to the sign above his head. "SERENDIPITY INC. COINCIDENCES-R-US".

George stared at the sign, wondering if now might be a good time to leave. A Class 1 coincidence? Is this guy for real? But curiosity won the day. "Serendipity? Isn't that..."

"Yes, commonly referred to as a happy accident, though we in the trade call it a HC, or Happy Coincidence. By the way, my name's Sackoff, Bruno Sackoff, the owner of this establishment." He extended his hand across the counter towards George.

George hesitantly stepped forward and quickly shook the offered hand, then stepped back. "You said 'we in the trade'. What trade would that be exactly?"

Sackoff visibly straightened, flicked a mote of dust from his shirt sleeve. "That would be the ancient guild of Serendipitarians." He stared at George expectantly but on receiving no hint of recognition, more a startled look, he went on. "We trade in – that is, buy and sell – coincidences." He made a grand sweeping motion to indicate the contents of all the wall shelves, then pointed down to the display below the glass counter. "Coincidences of all classes 1 through to 4 are for sale. All come with a three month guarantee, but for a small fee, I can extend that guarantee to twelve months." He smiled at George again. "Can I interest you in a special that's going this week? Only half price."

"Coincidences for sale? You are kidding aren't you?". George wasn't sure if he was having his leg pulled or this man was a sincere but deluded crank.

"Not at all," Sackoff replied. "Some people sell insurance where customers pay for something they hope will never happen. Some sell futures in the market when nobody is certain there will be a future. Some sell apartments off the plan when the first sod hasn't been turned or council approval obtained. Some sell forgiveness for sins that are yet to be committed. Why is selling coincidences any different, I ask you, mister...?"

"Gamblin, George Gamblin," George said, then wished he hadn't. Too late now, he thought, then decided to answer Sackoff's question. "Coincidences are when two totally unrelated unconnected events come together at an unlikely time. How can you sell that? What is there to sell?"

Sackoff nodded. "You mean like when you are reading a book and come across an obscure word you've never heard before, then hear that word on the TV that same night? Or, when you travel across the world and bump into a relative you haven't seen for decades while entering your hotel?"

"Exactly," said George.

"Typical class 1 coincidences," Sackoff smiled. "Very common. We sell lots of those. Very popular with novice collectors."

“Collectors? Coincidence collectors?” George’s head was beginning to spin.

“Of course. We call them Serendipilists, exponents of the Serendipilly hobby.”

“Look, suppose I believe you...” George said.

“You don’t believe me?”

“I said, suppose I did, how does it work? I mean, you mention class 1. What type of coincidences are there, and how on earth can you sell one?” George shrugged. “You never know, I might want to buy one.”

Sackoff rubbed his hands. “Well firstly we categorise coincidences in terms of who or what they have an impact on. For example, an AC is an auto-coincidence where the event involves and only has an impact on you. DC is a delegated coincidence which involves and impacts on another party. Obviously, an AC/DC is where it is a combination of yourself and another party. Now these are all single event coincidences and obviously are cheaper to buy than MECs.”

“MECs?” George said.

“Yes, Multi-Event Coincidences where one coincidence leads to another in an apparently unrelated way. These can be quite expensive, as I’m sure you’ll understand.”

“Yes, obviously” George nodded. “Is that it?”

“Yes, except that there are four subcategories for each. Depending on the complexity of the coincidence to be caused, they are rated Class 1 to 4, with 1 being the simplest and 4 the most difficult. Obviously our prices reflect those classes.”

“For example?” George prompted.

“Well, a typical Class 1 AC, like this one here” Sackoff handed a small box to George with the description ‘Golf game and passing seagull’, “costs just \$59.95, while this Class 4 AC here would set you back \$795.95.”

George looked at the indicated Class 4 AC box, with the title ‘Old Flame and Sales Conference’. Then he strolled over to a shelf displaying Class 2 AC/DC products. He pulled one down at random and read it. ‘Office Rival and falling piano.’ With shaking hands he returned it to the shelf and returned to the counter. “Um, you still haven’t explained how it works.”

“Well, it’s all based on very complicated science and... are you all right George? Do you need your back slapped?”

George shook his head, waving the offered help away as he waited for his choking fit to subside. Scientific? He has to be joking. Still, he thought, it might be interesting. “No, go ahead. Scientific you said?”

“Well, the complicated explanation is similar to that for quantum mechanics. In the case of coincidences, the universe is permeated with a field called the Coincidence Occurrence Probability Field or COP Field. The equations that describe this field are called in the trade the Sackoff Wave Function.” Sackoff smiled and shrugged. “Yes, guilty as charged. Anyhow, in simpler terms, the weaker the COP field for a certain coincidence, they less likely it will occur. Just like in quantum physics.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” said George. “”But forget the science, how does it work? If coincidences happen or not simply from this natural background COP field, how can you sell them?”

“Ah,” said Mr Sackoff, bringing a toaster sized box out from under the counter, “that’s where this comes in.” He opened the box and extracted from the packing a cube shaped metallic object adorned with a small keypad, some input slots and a simple power lead.

George looked closely at the device, noticing the engraved description across the top. He read it out. ‘Sackoff Coincidence Amplification Module’.

Sackoff was beaming proudly. “As you can probably guess from the name, what you do is plug your coincidence card into this device and it amplifies the local COP field to enhance the probability of the desired coincidence occurring. With the appropriate power setting, one can achieve up to 95% confidence that the coincidence you purchased, no matter how improbable, will occur on cue.”

George weighed the device in his hands. “And how much would this set me back?”

Sackoff smiled as if he already had a sale. “As you appreciate, this is the power house of the whole system. With this, you can run any and all of the coincidence modules you buy here. I can do a deal with you and let you have it, today only mind, for twenty five.”

George blinked. “Only twenty five dollars?”

Sackoff stopped smiling. “No, twenty five thousand dollars. That includes GST.”

“That’s a lot of money,” George said. However, he was actually tempted. He had a certain office rival in mind.

As George sat in the coffee shop around the corner thirty minutes later, he imagined his new executive position in the firm. Something that will soon be his after a coincidental but sudden landing of a certain Steinway piano, he mused. Worth the twenty five grand he had transferred to Serendipity Inc. Old Sackoff had thrown in his first Coincidence package - AC/DC #2135 for free as good will.

“Let’s look at the instructions,” he said to himself in his corner booth. “No time like the present to start coincidences rolling.” He broke the seal of the Instruction Manual to the Sackoff Coincidence Amplification Module and turned the cover page over. Blank. All blank pages.

One minute later George was standing inside the door of the COINCIDENCES-R-US shop. His heart pumping dangerously, he looked again at the device he had just emptied his savings account to buy. Through blurring eyes he couldn’t read all the lettering but he could make out the bold initials: S...C...A...M.

Then he looked again at the bare shelves and counter and missing sign.

Now that couldn’t be a coincidence.