



Observer Effect

L. N. Hunter

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Ten-year-old science whizz Bradley Robinson pulled the backing paper off a pea-sized electrode and poked it at Jack's cheek. Jack flinched.

"Sit still, you idiot!" Bradley hissed as he pressed the electrode onto the skin below his brother's left eye. He gently tugged the wire leading from it, then stepped back. "Right, give it a test."

Jack let his head drop forward and started to close his eyes, then snapped them wide open. He leapt from his chair. "Ow!"

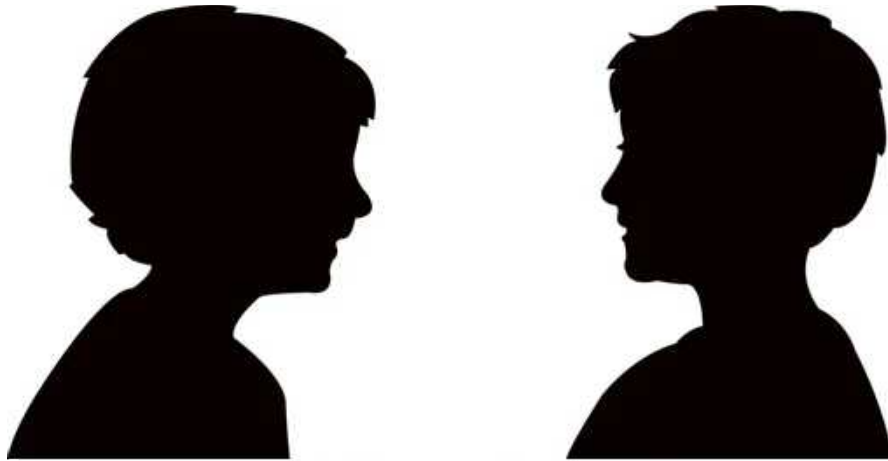
"Shhh!" Bradley whispered. "We don't want to wake Mum and Dad. It worked, didn't it? Your eyes stayed open."

"You didn't say it would hurt," Jack muttered as he sat back down. He turned to gaze at the fireplace. "Why are we doing this?"

Bradley frowned. He couldn't possibly have been that dumb when he was eight, could he? "I told you already. Father Christmas has to visit every kid in the world during only one

night—everybody knows that, right? But there’s no way he can do that under the laws of Newtonian Physics, so—”

“Newt *what?*”



Bradley shook his head. “Never mind. Anyway, as I was saying, he must be using Quantum Mechanics, harnessing quantum probabilities to distribute himself across all of space at once.”

“You do know I haven’t a clue what you’re talking about?” Jack was more interested in sports than science, much to Bradley’s despair.

Bradley sighed. “OK, the point of all this is that Santa can only get around if no one’s looking—that’s why our parents tell us we should go to bed early on Christmas Eve. Seeing Santa will make him freeze, unable to get to the

next house. It's as if your favourite footballer—Ronald, or whatever his name is—could be anywhere on the pitch, but you can't tell where until you look.”

Jack stared back blankly.

Bradley continued, “It's all to do with the Observer Effect.” He paused for a small snort of laughter—he really did enjoy showing off his knowledge. “Did you know that a lot of people, even expert physicists, get that confused with the Uncertainty Principle? How stupid is that? They're totally different things.”

Jack looked askance at his brother. “So what? And, what do you need me for?”

Bradley put his fists on his hips, wincing as he snagged one of the leads attached to the electrodes firmly stuck to his own face. “You want loads of presents, don't you? Having you here doubles the chance of catching Santa.”



“But what’s the point of this?” Jack whined, pointing at the electrode. “It hurts.”

“The Observer Effect says we change things when we observe—”

Jack opened his mouth, but Bradley held up a hand before he could interrupt.



“When we *look* at them. Santa zooms around at a bazillion miles an hour when nobody’s looking. If people catch a glimpse of him, he freezes—that’s the Observer Effect.” He scowled. “Actually, it’s a lot more complicated than that, but I wouldn’t expect a dimblebrain like you to understand. Anyway, as soon as someone who spots Santa blinks, he can escape, and all they’re left with is a story that no one’ll believe. And—”

Jack screwed his face up “But—”

“And if we *don’t* blink, he doesn’t get away. All we have to do is not close our eyes. Santa’s no match for my superior intellect.” Bradley rubbed his hands together. “We’ll demand more toys before we agree to let him go. Don’t you want that?”

“But Mum says there are people who have nothing and we should be grateful for what we’ve got.”

Bradley started to blow out his cheeks in exasperation, but remembered the electrodes just in time to avoid being shocked. “Well, you can be a goody-goody if you like, but *I* want more toys, and you’re going to help me.”

“OK, I suppose. Ow!” Jack had let his eyelids droop again. “It’d be nicer if it didn’t hurt so much.”

“Don’t be a baby!” Bradley snapped. “You can put up with it for a few hours. Just think about meeting Santa. We’ve only got one night to do this, or we’ll have to wait another whole year. Now, sit back and watch the fireplace.”

The brothers had checked that the chimney wasn’t blocked—rather, Bradley had persuaded his smaller sibling to climb into the fireplace while he supervised, and stretch as high as he could up the chimney. Jack reappeared with a dusting of soot and cobwebs in his hair, and he sneezed, shocking himself again. Bradley wasn’t completely certain that chimneys were an essential part of Father Christmas’s quantum mode of travel, but he was taking no chances and made sure there was plenty of clear space between the fireplace and the tree for Santa to appear in.

Both boys had been on their best behaviour for the past four weeks—well, to be honest, three and a bit; there had been that incident with Sally’s schoolbag and the rubber spider—to increase the likelihood of being on the nice list. Santa’s criteria seemed fairly lax, as he came every year regardless, but Bradley figured a boost wouldn’t hurt.



They’d prepared well for their vigil. Jack did what his older brother told him to, raiding the kitchen cupboards and spending his pocket money on supplies, while Bradley constructed the shock device. Between their two chairs were a large pot of thick, black coffee, a six-pack of ultra-caffeinated energy drinks, several bars of bitter dark

chocolate, also high in caffeine, and—as a final reserve—a packet of ground coffee and a spoon. And a large empty bottle each, so that they wouldn't have to leave their posts.

The two sat back, eyes glued to the space between fireplace and tree, and munched chocolate. Bradley drank lip-puckering coffee and talked about all the presents he'd demand. Jack sipped at chemical-tasting energy drinks and had no option but to listen to his brother. Occasionally, one or other boy would jerk as the electrodes shocked his eyes fully open again.

Hours passed, and the coffee pot was empty. Soon, the energy drinks were all gone as well, and the other bottles were full. Bradley's hand jittered as he reached for another piece of chocolate, and his heart was erratically smashing against his ribs.

Jack struggled to speak under the influence of all the caffeine, "H-he'd b-better c-come s-soon. I th-think I'm g-going to th-throw up."

Bradley checked the clock on the mantelpiece, requiring several seconds to bring it into focus. “It’s al-almost d-dawn. N-not much l-longer n-now.”



He clenched his jaw to stop his teeth chattering. What if his calculations were wrong? He let out a long breath. What if Santa had discovered their plans and moved them to the naughty list? No, Bradley was sure his plan was foolproof. He was going to *win* Christmas!

When he moved his gaze down from the clock, he saw a blurry figure blocking his view of the fireplace.

Bradley instinctively blinked. Zap—his eyes sprang wide open so quickly he felt a click inside his skull.

“S-Santa,” he whispered.



“No, not quite,” said a deep voice emanating from a thick hood—a black hood, not the expected red. Christmas tree lights twinkled off the blade of a long scythe.

The tall figure leaned towards Bradley, poking him in the chest with a bony finger. “Too much caffeine’s bad for you, you know? Extremely bad, especially for greedy little boys.”

As Bradley forced his eyes to focus on the pale face grinning at him, he heard a faint jingle followed by a thud.

A cheerful voice boomed from the cloud of soot billowing from the fireplace. “Ho, ho, h— What do you think you’re doing?”

There came the sound of angry teeth clacking together. “This one’s mine.”

“You can’t do that! It’s Christm—” the new voice said.

“I’ve got a quota to fill,” the first voice snapped.



“Well, fill it somewhere else. You don’t get to take kiddies on my day or the Easter Bunny’s—we all agreed.”

The first voice whined, “But look what he’s doing. He must be so high on your naughty list that he needs to be taught a lesson.”

The second voice sighed. “Yes, he deserves punishment, but not that.”

Paper rustled—someone was rummaging through what could only be a large sack of wrapped packages.

“Look, Death old boy, I was going to give him just one present this year, but how about we cut a deal and you can have it instead?” More rustling. “And one of his brother’s.”

After a burst of paper tearing noises, the first voice said, “Wow! Batman and Darth Vader limited edition action figures—look at the cloaks on those dudes. And the masks. OK, you have a deal, fat boy.”

As the soot cloud dissipated, Bradley saw Father Christmas reach into his sack again, before handing Death another brightly-wrapped package.

“I was saving this for later,” Santa said, “but since you’re here, you might as well have it now. Happy Christmas, old feller.”

Death ripped the package open, then his jaw dropped. He gasped, “A Batman mask.”

“Yep, from the movie. Look, it’s even signed.”

Death’s blank eye sockets glistened. “That’s the nicest present anyone’s ever given me.”

He put the mask on and gave Santa a hug. “Batman thanks you,” he said in a gravelly voice before vanishing.

Bradley blinked, then jerked upright and yelped as he got zapped again.

Santa turned at the sound. “Now, you, m’boy... No presents for you, unless you count living another day.” He eased the electrodes off Bradley’s face, then did the same for his brother, who was fast asleep, eyes wide open. Santa gently closed Jack’s eyes.

Waving the bundle of wires, he said, “This was never going to work, you know. I use the chimney precisely for that cloud of soot. Nobody sees me on the way in and out. Today was a bit different, obviously.”

He dropped the electrodes and picked up a handful of soot.

“Normally, I’d vacuum this all up before I go, but I’ll leave it as a present for you.” He held the soot up. “This is what I leave naughty girls and boys with, not a lump of coal.”

Santa blew the soot in Bradley’s face, obscuring his vision, then vanished leaving behind nothing more than the echo of a “Ho, ho, ho.”



THE END

About the Author

Aside from a recently-published debut novel, the comic fantasy [The Feather and the Lamp](#), L.N. Hunter's work has appeared in Short Édition's [Short Circuit](#) and the [Horriifying Tales of Wonder](#) podcast, as well as anthologies [Wimbledon Common](#) and [Trickster's Treats 3](#), among others.

There have also been papers in the *IEEE Transactions on Neural Networks*, which are probably somewhat less relevant and definitely less fun.

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