The Quirky Moments When Lightning Does Strike Twice

By WILLIAM GRIMES

Correction Appended

A woman in Alabama decided to visit her sister. Her sister, unbeknownst to her, decided the same. They hit each other head-on on a rural highway. Both died. And both drove Jeeps. That counts as a rare coincidence, although not as rare, perhaps, as the case of Roy Cleveland Sullivan, a Virginia forest ranger who was struck by lightning seven times, or the existence of an ice dealer named I. C. Shivers.

The laws of chance operate strangely. This is the main point in Martin Plimmer and Brian King's "Beyond Coincidence," a collection of stranger-than-fiction anecdotes wrapped loosely in colorful intellectual tissue paper. It is a superior example of the genre known as a toilet read, with a few halfhearted excursions into the psychology and mathematics behind the uncanny coincidences that the writer Arthur Koestler called "puns of destiny."

Just as nature abhors a vacuum, human beings resist the idea that events occur in random fashion. They are highly receptive to divine messages that suggest otherwise, as in the strange tale of Mrs. Willard Lowell of Berkeley, Calif., who discovered that she had locked herself out of her house when the postman arrived with a letter. In the letter was her spare front-door key, returned by her brother, who had taken it home with him by mistake after a recent visit.

Events like this send a shiver down the spine, but the math behind strange coincidences shows that most people simply have a poor grasp of statistics. The odds against meeting someone else at a party with your birthday are not 365 to 1. In a room with just 23 people, the chances that two of them will share the same birthday are better than even.

A world without a constant barrage of bizarre coincidences would be much more remarkable than the reverse. It is not all that unusual to have a dream that accurately predicts a future event, or for two golfers to achieve a hole in one on the same hole. On average, everyone should have a prophetic dream once every 19 years, and the odds of a
double hole-in-one, although apparently staggering at 1.85 billion to 1, ensure that this occurs about once a year.

It is a very safe bet that more such coincidences are on the way, as the world becomes more populated, and the volume of information grows. As the authors put it, "The statistician's law of large numbers states that if the sample is very large, even extremely unlikely things become likely." That includes the perfect hand dealt out to the four members of a British whist club in 1998, who each received 13 cards of a single suit.

Something deep in the mind resists the explanations of the statisticians, however. Evolution may be to blame. "We have been so successful as a species precisely because we are good at making connections between events and spotting patterns and regularities in nature," explains Christopher French, a psychologist. "The price we have paid is a tendency to sometimes detect connections and patterns that are not really there."

That tendency would account for the discovery that playing the Pink Floyd album "Dark Side of the Moon" while watching "The Wizard of Oz" generates almost as many startling coincidences as the correspondences detailed in "The Bible Code," a numerological analysis of the Bible that uncovered, among many other things, a prediction of Yitzhak Rabin's assassination.

Mr. Plimmer and Mr. King, who first explored this territory in a series of shows for BBC Radio 4, scramble to fill their allotted pages. They spend far too much time with Richard Wiseman, author of "The Luck Factor," and his training programs designed to turn miserable, unlucky skeptics into lucky winners.

They stuff the book with several anecdotes that sound too good to be true, and even more that are too true to be good. George Frideric Handel and Jimi Hendrix lived at adjacent addresses in London. Nine women at a British supermarket, all working at the same cash register, became pregnant in a 10-month period. A man trying to console his next-door neighbor after a painful breakup put the former couple's favorite record on the turntable. Ooooh.

On the other hand, it is deeply satisfying to know that a Canadian farmer named McDonald has the postal code EIEIO, and there is at least half a screenplay in the tale of a bank robber who, hitting the same bank and the same teller a second time, escaped because the bank guard and the managers were in a back office reviewing videotapes of the first robbery.

The award for the most painful coincidence in recorded history must go to the poet Simon Armitage, who chanced upon a used copy of a book of his poems in a trash bin outside a thrift store. On the title page was the following inscription, in his own handwriting: "To Mum and Dad."

**Correction:** Feb. 4, 2006, Saturday:
The Books of The Times review in Weekend on Jan. 20, about "Beyond Coincidence," by Martin Plimmer and Brian King, referred imprecisely to the odds that two people share a birthday. The odds that a person you meet shares your birthday are 364-1. The odds that two people in a group will share a birthday are much higher. With a group of just 23 people, there is more than a 50 percent likelihood that 2 have the same birthday.