Letters from Alumni
life after the PhD thesis defense

A lot less remote
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When University of Chicago professor Roger Myerson was awarded the Nobel Prize in October 2007, I had just entered my final year as a PhD student at the VU University Amsterdam. Although I was more familiar with his work than with the work of his co-winners, I did not know much about him. Chicago seemed like a remote place.

Around the same time I had to start thinking about my future. My advisor, Pieter Gautier, encouraged me to go to the international job market. I applied to several places and decided to go to the meetings in New Orleans. It was definitely a fascinating experience: the desperate attempts around mid-December to find a hotel room (still many thanks to the unknown person who suddenly cancelled his online reservation); the four days in a city invaded by 9000 economists; the interviews with four people around a bed, while the fifth one tries to convince the cleaning lady that they will really need only two more minutes to kick me out.

In the end, I got a fantastic offer: a two-year postdoc position at the University of Chicago. The Windy City suddenly seemed a lot less remote. I’ve been here for a bit more than a year now, and have enjoyed every second. The academic environment is truly amazing, with seminars at virtually any moment of the day and opportunities to speak with an impressive number of prominent economists. Of course it is typically harder to arrange a meeting with somebody here than it was in Amsterdam, but often the intensity of the discussion is compensation enough for this drawback.

The main lesson that I have learned in Chicago is that the research question and the motivation are crucial. Everybody here can do IV, solve Bellman equations and program complicated models. What distinguishes the best from the rest is the question they answer and the way they sell it in their paper and presentation. Hopefully, I am slowly developing some intuition for that as well.

What’s up next? I’ve come full circle now, and find myself again on the job market. Although many things now are quite different than they were two years ago (this year the meetings are in Atlanta), some things have hardly changed. As before, I seem to be endlessly polishing my paper and presentation—and again I have no idea where I will end up next year. One thing I know for sure, though: if the cleaning lady comes again, she will have to wait at least another 15 minutes this time!