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The Ideal Order

Christoph Bartneck

Second Edition



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CHRISTOPH BARTNECK

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*“To be highly organized is, I should fancy,
the object of man’s existence.”*

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture Of Dorian Gray*

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Part One

Sunday

“No, you can’t buy any more LEGO!” Maki groused. “Why don’t you build your old sets first?”

“But these new Arctic sets are so cool and the children will love them,” I protested.

I looked again at the toy brochure that had come with the mail this morning. The girls and I had studied every page carefully. Studying the new offerings and discounts of the local toy shop was our weekly ritual. Little Poppy loved the 60062 set with the huskies and Camellia had her eyes on the 60036 Home Base. Camellia would usually favour the largest set since she knew dad’s weak spot and had a better understanding of money than her younger sister.

“You are a grown man, Robert,” Maki said. “Do not waste all this money on toys. You already have more than enough bricks.”

The annoyance in her voice tinted my heart with sadness. I looked down on the breakfast table, trying to evade Maki’s gaze and trying to hide my melancholy. Maki didn’t share my naive pleasure of playing with LEGO. She hadn’t grown up with it and couldn’t feel the distant memory of a happy childhood. Now that I had children myself my own fascination with the brick had returned. Maki’s emphasis on me being a grown-up only meant the opposite. We had been married for far too long for me not to pick up on these subtle jibes.

But there was another reason why sadness slipped into my heart. I enjoyed playing with LEGO with my daughters. It had been difficult for me to engage with the girls by playing with dolls or role-playing school. I truly loved the two, but dressing dolls and participating in tea parties challenged my

patience, and even though the girls could not yet articulate their frustration, they certainly sensed my disinterest. It was no fun playing dolls with Daddy, but when the bricks were out, the table turned, Daddy was full of enthusiasm and the girls were sometimes more happy about being able to play with me than the actual LEGO models. I enjoyed connecting with the girls but Maki's criticism was as effective as a 630 Brick Separator in separating them.

I shook my head and tried to put my feelings aside. Maki was right. I did have a lot of bricks and I could indeed build all of my old models with the girls before buying new ones. I had kept the building instructions and all the bricks were in the big plastic container.

I swallowed my pride, looked up and said, "You're right, Maki. I could build those models."

"Maybe you can help me first, cleaning up the table?"

"Of course."

We cleared the table and brought all the dishes to the kitchen. The children had already left the table and were playing in the living room. Maki opened the dishwasher and randomly put cups and plates inside. I observed the scene and sighed. When Maki returned to the table to pick up the remaining plates I stepped forward and reordered the dishes, putting all the large plates in the bottom right rack, the pots in the bottom back and the small plates in the bottom left rack. The cups went into the top left, the bowls right next to them, glasses on the right and the large knives in the gaps. Everything went into the optimal spot, maximising the number of items in the machine while ensuring that the water jets would reach them all. Maki returned to the kitchen and observed my actions without words. But her face spoke volumes.

Here she goes again. She will probably give me the "Is anything I do ever good enough for you?" scene. This isn't a big thing. Nothing to make a big fuss about. I'm not trying to humiliate you.

Maki's shoulder tightened and her face relaxed. She put the last plates down on the kitchen counter with a marginally but distinctly louder clang than necessary.

You might think that I didn't notice the clang, but I did. And I know what it means. I just didn't dare to react.

She left the kitchen, walked by the girls who were playing in the living room and entered her bedroom. I could hear her falling onto the double bed. She is probably going to escape into her Facebook feed.

I put the remaining dishes into the machine, cleaned the counter, wiped the table, washed the cloth and hung it over the tap to dry. Then I dried my hands with the kitchen towel and hung it back onto the oven's handle bar.

Is Maki still on Facebook? She left me with all the kitchen work.

I walked through the living room. Poppy and Camellia were role-playing school. Camellia was, of course, the teacher and little Poppy the student. A smile flashed over my face as I passed into the entrance corridor. The door to the bedroom stood ajar and I peaked into the room. Maki laid with her back on the bed, holding her phone into the air, using her thumb to scroll through eternity.

"Are you finished reading the interweb?" I joked.

"Hmmm."

"Is everything okay?"

"Hmmm."

Silence. I didn't know what to do. How could I make the reality of our relationship more appealing than her Facebook universe?

My shoulders fell down. I slowly put my right foot across the left, turned around my body and my left foot followed my intended path. I returned to the living room, but the smile would not reappear on my face.

Camellia looked at me and asked, "Can you play with us? You can be the teacher."

"I'm not sure if I would be a good teacher."

"You can also be a student," Poppy offered.

"Maybe we could play something else?"

"Like what?" Camellia asked.

"I do have some great LEGO models we could build."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, just let me get the box and the instructions."

I walked to the garage and picked up the large plastic box that contained all my bricks. The unique sounds of the bricks rattling in the box filled me with anticipation. I put the box

down in the middle of the living room and returned to the garage for the binder with the instructions. They were in the shelf right next to the binder containing the instructions for the various machines and devices in the house.

In a tidy house nothing gets lost.

I walked back to the living room, sat down in front of the plastic box and opened the binder on top of it. The girls made their way over to me and looked curiously at all the illustrations that I unfolded in front of them.

“Camellia, Poppy, what do you want to build?”

“I’m not sure, that’s all boys’ stuff,” Camellia complained.

“These are Star Wars sets. We watched the movies before and you liked it. Look at this cool 7140 X-Wing Fighter. I bought them when they were just released,” I explained.

“Hmm, okay Daddy,” Poppy agreed.

“We can try, Daddy,” Camellia conceded.

“It is going to be fun girls! Here’s page one, what bricks do we need?”

My eyes filled with nostalgia. I had bought this model back in 1999. George Lucas had just released Star Wars Episode I and the LEGO company, for the first time in their history, had caved in and bought a license from another franchise. I had been on a vacation when I first noticed the new LEGO Star Wars sets in the shelves of a toy store and I simply could not resist this unholy marriage that would deplete my wallet for many years to come. But that was a long time ago and all those models had been built, admired, disintegrated and stored. I looked at the open box full of bricks. Somewhere in there was a complete X-Wing Fighter. I only had to find the bricks.

“All right, first we need the Minifigures. Camellia, can you look for Luke Skywalker and Poppy, can you find R2-D2?”

Their hands dived into the box, swirling around, enjoying the loud rattle they produced. For a while the noise was the main attraction for the girls and I had to remind them to look for the Minifigures. Poppy dug up a handful of bricks from the bottom of the box.

“Stop it Poppy!” Camellia exclaimed, “You’re messing up my spot. I can’t find anything this way.”

“You stop it! I have to get to my bricks, I think I saw the robot down there.”

“Poppy! Take your hands out of there, that’s my area!”

“Girls, wait! I have an idea.”

I got up and returned with a large, white bed sheet. I spread it out on the floor, took the box and emptied it on top.

Maki may not like a middle aged man, still with full hair, but certainly with too much padding around his waist, spending all this money on expensive plastic toys. I always explained that I bought the LEGO sets for the girls, but to her it was clear that I only served myself. I knew that she wants to fly to Sydney for all of her shopping needs. And she would drag us to the museums, the opera and every restaurant in the city centre.

As we dug through the mountain of bricks, the initial peak slowly eroded into a lake of colours and shapes.

“I found him, I found him!” Camellia yelled.

“Great job! Let me have a look,” I said, taking the Minifigure and turning it around in my hand.

“Whoa, this is Biggs Darklighter, not Luke Skywalker, but we need him too.”

“Why can’t I find the robot?” Poppy complained.

“Just keep looking. You’ll find him.”

They continued to plough through the bricks until I discovered Luke in his bright orange jacket and gave it to Camellia. Poppy continued to search, but got increasingly distracted by other bricks.

“Look Daddy, this brick has a face on it.”

“That’s great Poppy.”

“How long do we have to search?”

“Until we found it.”

“Hmmm.”

I finally noticed the robot and pointed towards it.

“Look Poppy, what’s over there?”

“R2-D2! Daddy, you found it!”

“No, you found it!”

“What do we do with them?”

“We need to build the X-Wing and put them into it. Here, step one, we need a grey 4x6 plate. Can you help me find it?”

They started searching again and after a short while I fished the plate out.

“Here, maybe I search for the parts and you put them together? What’s next?”

Step two required four black, round 2x2 plates with rounded bottoms. I hunted right away while the girls patiently waited with the grey plate in their hands. It took me more than a minute to find the first one and even longer to find the remaining three. Finding black bricks was difficult because I could barely make out their shape in the pile. The girls put the bricks together but their patience with me finding the right bricks wore thin.

They started to browse aimlessly around the bricks. At times a brick would catch their attention for a little while, but they would quickly throw it back into the pile. I noticed that the girls were starting to get bored and hurried to find the parts.

This isn't working. Surprising how long it takes me to find anything. Either I underestimated the number of bricks I own or I overestimated my searching ability.

"I'm going to see what Mummy is doing," Camellia said eventually.

"I'm going to join you," Poppy said.

"But we're not ready."

"Well, you keep on searching for the bricks and we'll be back. Is that okay Daddy?"

"Okay."

The girls got up and left the living room. I remained hunched over the building instructions and the partly assembled model.

Why is it so difficult to find those damn parts? I'll never be able to put my old models back together. It'll take forever. It's so much easier to buy a new model since all the parts I need are right there in neatly separated bags. Maybe I can ask Maki to buy some more sets. No, she would certainly not agree to that. But why would I have to ask her?

I tried to stand up, but a wave of pain washed over my knees.

"Ohhh," I exclaimed while stretching my legs.

How long did I sit crossed legged?

I got on all fours before lifting myself up, stumbling a bit before I was able to walk safely to the kitchen.

Time for some tea!

I put water in the kettle and switched it on, filled loose green tea into a tea bag and placed it into the pot. I stared out of the

kitchen window while my mind drifted off.

If I ever want to build anything, then I will need to reduce the time it takes to find those damn bricks. The girls won't have enough endurance to search for them and not enough patience with me finding the bricks for them. The only way to reduce the retrieval time would be to sort them up front. But that would also take forever.

The water started to boil and the kettle's switch clanked into the off position. I poured the water into the pot, holding the tea bag in my other hand, then jammed the bag between the pot and its lid.

I would only have to sort the bricks once and from thereon we could build all the models. What alternative is there? It's Sunday anyway and I have no other plans. Unless Maki intends to go somewhere.

I took a cup from the shelf and filled it with the light green tea. The scented steam fogged my glasses as I put the cup to my lips. The hot pleasure of the grassy taste filled my mouth. It was an excellent Sencha tea that Maki's mother had sent from Japan. The tea lifted my spirits and I decided to give it a try.

I walked back to the garage, passing by the master bedroom. The children had cuddled up to Maki and all three stared through a tiny window into the internet. I found four empty boxes, two made of plastic with a lid and two cardboard boxes. I took them back to the living room and sat down.

What now? How am I going to sort them? There are far too many shapes. I could sort them by colour but I only have five boxes in total. Maybe I could put all the reds into one? I seem to have a lot of those.

My hands started to fly over the LEGO lake, quickly picking up red bricks. When I picked one up, I first stored it in my palm before I threw the whole handful into one of the plastic boxes. With the speed of a woodpecker I collected the red bricks as they were easy to spot.

Attracted by the noise, Camellia poked her head through the living room door.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm sorting the bricks."

"Why?"

"So that we can find them easily."

“Can I help?”

“Sure, just grab a box and put all the green bricks in it.”

Camellia sat down and started to throw green bricks into a box. It wasn't long before Poppy walked in and joined the hunt. I asked her to sort out all the blue bricks. For a while we were absorbed by the task and the girls made it a game of who could collect bricks the fastest. Then Poppy picked up big blueish green 4x6 plate.

“Poppy,” Camellia screamed, “you're cheating! That's a green brick and it belongs in my box!”

“No! That's blue! It's mine!”

“That's not true. That's green and it's mine. You're cheating!”

“I am not cheating, don't say that!”

“Daddy, that's green, isn't it?”

“Well, I'm not certain.”

“Daddy, that's blue!”

“No, green!”

“Girls! Calm down. Maybe we can put it aside for a little while until we figure this out.”

With angry grimaces the girls put aside the plate and the sorting went on, but the good spirit was gone. Maki eventually emerged from her bed.

“What are you doing?”

“We're sorting the bricks,” Camellia answered.

“I'm not cheating,” Poppy insisted.

“Why are you doing this? It will take all day?”

“So that we can find bricks easily,” I replied. “Otherwise it takes far too long to search. I made some fresh tea if you want some.”

“Yes, thanks,” she said without gratitude in her voice.

We continued all morning and I had to find more boxes for all the major colours. Only occasionally a discussion broke out whether a certain colour should go into one box or another. They were added to a special miscellaneous box. It surprised me that there was a discussion at all. Most toys, including LEGO, used primary colours, so it should have been clear cut. But even with LEGO colours every now and then a dispute could erupt.

Maki remained absent and I heard her starting to cook

lunch around midday. I could hear the pouring of the rice into the rice cooker, the cutting of vegetables, and the stir frying. An irresistible smell of Japanese Curry started to float into the living room. Maki was a good cook. She had inherited this skill from her mother, but she only really started cooking once she had moved out from her parents. She called us to the table once the rice was cooked. We all sat down and started to eat.

“The chicken tastes funny,” Poppy bleated.

“This is beef and you have to eat it,” Maki insisted. “I spend a lot of time in the kitchen cooking, so you have to eat it.”

“But I don’t like it.”

“Maybe she could eat the veggies?” I suggested.

“No, she needs to eat the whole dish!”

Maki glared at me and I looked down timidly. We continued to eat in silence. Poppy focused on the rice, the vegetables and the sauce. Carefully inspecting every spoon before putting it into her mouth. Camellia nervously moved around on her chair. She sensed the tension in the air.

“Daddy, can we build some LEGO after lunch?”

I knew that Camellia probably only asked to cheer me up, but I was grateful for the opportunity to steer the conversation away from the smouldering conflict.

“Yes, that would be fun. Poppy, would you like to join us?”

“Okay, but Camellia is not allowed to cheat!”

“Nobody will be cheating.”

We finished our meal and the children took off while Maki and I cleared the table. Maki placed the dishes on top of the dishwasher. I didn’t think twice about it and started to put them in, continuing my rigid pattern from before.

“You go and build your LEGO with the girls. I will finish the kitchen.”

I looked up.

“Okay, thanks!”

Our gazes met. She was much smaller than me with beautiful shiny black hair, a cute smile and lips that stirred up a desire in me. When we hugged my chin would comfortably rest on the top of her head. I enjoyed such moments, but they were far too rare. I took another long look at her before leaving for the living room.

I sat down with the girls and we continued with step ten.

They needed two black 2x2 plates with towballs. I started to search in the box with the black parts but finding the right bricks was now even worse than before. It was practically impossible to find a specific black shape in the whirling black chaos of the box. I stared at the box.

“Girls, I think this is not working. I still can’t find the pieces.”

“But we sorted them!”

“I know, but I just can’t see the right pieces.”

We all paused and looked at the box for a while.

“Maybe you can play something else for a little while? I need to think this through.”

“Can you play with us?”

I looked at the hopeful eyes of my daughters. I did not want to disappoint them, but this sorting issue had completely frustrated me. I had wasted a lot of time on sorting the bricks, which had turned out to be useless. The frustration felt like a heavy weight around my neck, dragging me to the floor. I could not lift myself up.

“No girls, I think I need to rest for a little while.”

“But it’s much more fun with you.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t play right now.”

The girls turned away while Maki entered the room.

“You are not going to leave all that LEGO there, are you?”

“No, I will clean it up,” I replied irritated.

What the heck? The boxes are in the middle of the room, in the way of everybody. Of course I will put them away eventually. Why do you even think that you have to point that out?”

I closed the plastic boxes and stacked all of them up against the wall. Then, feeling completely depleted, I went into the guest bedroom. I had become the permanent guest in this room. We had stopped sleeping in the same bed a long time ago. I fell onto the bed, closing my eyes. I felt a weight on my chest that pushed my lungs into my stomach. I desired Maki, but our relationship had become like a Whittaker’s 72% cocoa dark chocolate block. The taste of the cocoa beans triggers memories of sweet milk chocolate, but the strong bitter taste dominates the tongue. I remembered the playful and affectionate days with Maki, but the bitter blocks weighing on our relationship

dragged us down.

It had become almost too bitter to bare, but even a very dark chocolate is still chocolate.

Making our relationship work seemed at least as difficult as sorting every last LEGO brick. The mountain of work in front of me filled me with despair. I wanted to feel good again, any kind of positive sensation. I walked back to the fridge in the kitchen and broke off four pieces of the Whittaker's White Macadamia Chocolate. I knew that I would come back for more but I had to at least try to limit my consumption. The sweetness filled my mouth and calmed me down. Chocolate had become one of the few pure moments of joy in my life.

I had tried pure cocoa beans in a chocolate museum once and I was surprised how incredible bitter they were. I could understand why cocoa beans were not particularly popular at the beginning of the 16th century. It did require a considerable amount of sugar to compose the delightful taste of chocolate. This necessary sweetness had nearly disappeared from my connection to Maki.

The afternoon continued in its melancholic Sunday mood. I answered an email or two, Maki went grocery shopping and the girls watched some Suite PreCure on TV until the afternoon sky started to darken. Poppy walked to the kitchen.

"I'm hungry! Can I eat something?"

"Why don't you eat a snack?" Maki replied.

"I want one too!"

"Yes, Camellia, you can have one too."

I heard the conversation from the guest room and strode to the kitchen.

"I'm hungry too, what are you going to cook?"

Maki frowned.

"Why don't you eat a snack as well?"

"If I eat a snack now I won't be hungry for dinner."

"Then cook your own dinner!" Maki snapped.

"I would like to, but you consider my dishes to be prison food."

"Because that is what they are. Potatoes, overcooked vegetables and a lump of meat."

"Look, we are all hungry, why don't you cook now and we will all eat well once it's ready."

“I do not feel like cooking. I will order some take-out food.”

“Fine!” I retorted, “Can we order now?”

“No, first the children will get a snack!”

Maki took out a pack of chips and a cookie from the pantry and gave it to the girls. Fear was written on their faces as they sneaked out of the kitchen.

“Order whatever you want,” I muttered and left.

“ばか!”

I returned to the guest room, closed the door with utmost control. Without words I picked up a pillow and shot it across the room. I stopped, but the heat in my chest had not yet evaporated. I knelt in front of the bed.

“Argghhhh!” I howled as my rage took shape in the violent beats of my fist on the blanket. Over and over I raised my arms into the air and slammed them down, and with every punch I exchanged a handful of anger with despair. I felt like a rope tightened around my neck and the pain forced me to gasp for air. I tried to keep the pain contained but the onslaught of cold heat that flowed from my chest, through my neck into the back of my mouth was overpowering. Tears appeared in my eyes as my howling turned into weeping. I didn’t want the girls to hear me cry so I pressed my face deep into a pillow.

When the food arrived they all sat at the table. Maki tried to lighten the mood by cheerfully talking to the children, but I only spoke when necessary. My dark mood could not be turned. Maki undressed the children while I cleaned the table and the kitchen before returning to the guest room. I listened to the joyous sounds of Poppy and Camellia playing in the bathtub as I stared into the vacuum above my bed. Then I heard the water rushing out from the tub, the hairdryer and Poppy asking for her pyjamas. I closed my eyes. The doorknob turned insecurely.

“Daddy, are you okay?”

“I’m just tired.”

Camellia crossed the room and snuggled close to me. She saw the red around my eyes and I could make out the concern in the depth of her dark brown eyes.

“I’m okay,” I lied. “And I love you.”

“I love you too.”

I didn’t want to let go of the steady hug that followed.

“Come, I will tuck you in,” I said.

We walked across the corridor into the children’s room where Poppy was already arranging her stuffed animals on the top bunk. Maki cleared the floor of the dirty clothes and took them to the laundry basket. Once she had left the room I knelt and gently covered Camellia with the blanket.

“Keep your legs and arms inside, otherwise you will get cold during the night.”

“I will.”

“Sleep tight my big girl, have a wonderful dream.”

“Daddy, can you stop fighting with Mummy?”

I paused.

“I will try.”

I stood up and tugged in Poppy.

“I love you, Princess Bunny Hop!”

“I love you too,” Poppy smiled.

“Daddy, I wished we could play more LEGO.”

“Me too. Maybe tomorrow. Now you need to sleep.”

Maki entered the room and kissed the girls good night while I waited at the light switch. Maki passed me and escaped straight to her room. I turned off the light, and left the door slightly ajar. I stood in the corridor for a moment, waiting for any chatter from the girls but they remained silent. I started to notice the pain that pulsed up from my shoulders into my neck. I tried to relax my shoulders and walked into the bathroom. I hung the two wet towels back onto the hooks at the door and opened the cabinet. The box of Paracetamol was already half empty. I washed down two with water from the cup that tasted like toothpaste.

I am done.

I brushed my teeth, changed into my pyjamas and closed my door. Maki would probably be up late and she could turn off the lights in the house. I felt completely exhausted but sleep would not come easy. The thoughts in my mind rotated like a grinding stone. I picked up my phone from the table. 9:12pm. The red badge on the mail icon threatened me with 23 new email messages. No, opening them now would just make it worse. Maki is probably watching some Japanese drama episodes on the iPad. In the past we had watched English TV shows together, but these days she preferred to watch her very

own shows. She justified her preference for watching the shows by herself by claiming that this was the only time during the day that she had for herself. No more cooking, preparing lunch boxes, doing homework and, most of all, no more grumpy husband.

I selected my favourite audio book and the story demanded my attention. It denied me thoughts of my own while the monotonous narrator lulled me to sleep.

Monday

Dim light radiated through the curtains. The house was still saturated with silence. The wooden beams creaked occasionally, expanding along the raising temperature of the morning. I looked at the phone next to my pillow. 6:30 a.m. I had no motivation to get up, but I could no longer find a comfortable position to lie in either. I groaned as my feet searched for my slippers on the carpet. I put on a fleece jacket, switched the kettle on in the kitchen and visited the bathroom. Still no sound from any of my girls. I sat down in front of the computer in the living room, rudely awakening it from its slumber. 46 new email messages. My mind felt fresh and unhampered.

To sort my bricks I need to know what bricks I own already. It would take too long to count them, but maybe somebody had already made some sort of list of what bricks are in the sets I own. I did not feel lucky, but my query was answered with a wealth of results anyway.

Brickset. That could do it.

I clicked on the first link and then searched for 'X-Wing fighter' which resulted in fourteen hits. Two of them looked identical to the set I owned, but had different numbers. Apparently the 7140 set had been re-released as 7142 in 2002 after its original launch in 1999. Brickset had precise inventories of the set and allowed me to mark the set I owned. Moreover, the website provided me with summaries of my collection, which was currently exactly the one set I had marked.

I stared at the screen for a while before I got up and brought the binder with the instructions to the computer table. I started entering the set numbers printed on the instructions. Brickset

knew all of them and listed their content. When I had entered a third of them I walked into the girls' room and opened the curtains. Camellia reluctantly turned around in her bed.

"Good morning," I spoke softly and walked into the kitchen. I prepared the tea and returned to the computer. Before I sat down again I examined the door that lead to Maki's room. No sign of life yet. The house had fallen back into its soundlessness. I entered another third of my sets into Brickset before I got up again, walked to the door and listened carefully. Nothing.

It will be a big hassle again if she does not wake up soon.

I walked to my own room and dressed before entering the girls' room again.

"Wake up Camellia," I whispered into her ear. Her eyes were shut, but I could tell that she was already awake. I gently pulled back the blanket. While I repeated the same procedure with Poppy, Camellia pulled her blanket back up using her legs.

"You really need to get up now or you will be late for school," I asserted. "Seriously, please get up now."

I left the room again hoping to enter the last set numbers into Brickset when Maki entered, still wearing her pyjamas and with her eyes only half open.

"Are you still doing your LEGO thing?"

"I found a website that will tell me exactly what parts I own based on the sets I purchased. That way I can find a better sorting system."

"Hmmm."

The contrast between my eager enthusiasm and the weary expression in Maki's morning face could not have been bigger.

"How long were you up last night?"

"A little while."

"You need to get more sleep."

"Don't tell me what I need."

I looked down on the keyboard. After a short moment of silence Maki continued to the kitchen. She poured herself a cup of tea, looked around the corner into the girls' room and returned to the living room.

"Why don't you help the children get dressed?"

"Yes, I'm just going to finish this."

"You can do that later, we are late."

Oh really? What a surprise!

"I've been up since 6:30."

"What have you been doing since then?" she snarled.

"Well, I have..."

Maki walked off before I could finish my sentence, and with her departure my gumption started to leak onto the floor. I remained as an empty and dried up shell. I could not lift a finger to enter another number into the website. Instead I stared at the pixels and hoped they would look back.

"I can't find my shirt," Poppy exclaimed in her room.

"Daddy, can you help me find it?"

The shirt. Yes. Go and find it yourself.

"Daddy! Can you help me find it?"

"Yes, I'm coming," I yelled louder than necessary.

I helped the children to dress; Camellia in her school uniform and Poppy in her normal clothes. I then sneaked back to the computer to enter just a few more set numbers. As soon as Maki returned, this time fully dressed, I quickly rose and followed her to the kitchen. Poppy and Camellia had started to draw pictures sitting at the dining table.

"What do you want for breakfast?" I asked.

"I want a bread with salami."

"And what do you want Poppy? Poppy? Poppy, I am talking to you!"

"What?"

"What do you want for breakfast?"

"Pancakes."

"Okay."

I prepared the food while Maki prepared the lunch boxes for the children. I also prepared my own sandwich and sat down with the children to eat. Maki was still working on the lunch boxes when we finished and I commanded the girls to comb their hair and brush their teeth. Camellia left for the bathroom right away, but Poppy remained at the table, continuing her drawing from before.

"Poppy, go and get ready!"

"I just need to finish the drawing."

"No, Poppy, you must get ready now or we will be late."

"Just let me finish."

"Poppy, I had enough of this, go and get ready now!"

"Leave her alone!" Maki interjected. "She will do it in a

minute.”

I glared at Maki, stood up and stormed out of the kitchen.

Screw this. If she knows how to get the girls ready in time then please be my guest.

I sat down at the computer again. Resignation settled in. I finished entering the sets and Brickset reported that I owned 120 sets of which 117 were unique which resulted in a total of 40927 parts. Whoa, I own more than I thought.

“Poppy, you really need to get ready now!” I heard Maki urge Poppy in the kitchen.

“I’m busy.”

“I understand how you feel, but we will be late.”

“I want to finish the picture!” Poppy cried with tears in her eyes.

Maki comforted her for a while and Poppy’s tears eventually subsided.

“Rob, can you take Poppy to the bathroom. I need to get ready as well and I didn’t have any breakfast!”

You need to go to sleep earlier! I knew what such a comment would lead to and remained silent.

“I am talking to you!”

“Yes, I will help her!”

Maki stormed back to her room to prepare herself for the day and once the girls and I were ready to go, Maki was still running around the house. She grabbed a bowl of rice, added some furikake on top and chased Camellia into the car. She slammed the rice bowl on top of the one from yesterday. The rice spread across the floor of the car, revealing that this was not the most stable position, if there ever was one. I put Poppy in the child’s seat on the back of my bicycle and left shortly before Maki.

The traffic was heavy but I could easily pass the queued up cars. On the way to Poppy’s day care centre I passed Camellia’s school. Most parents seem to drop off their kids with their car, resulting in thick chaos of running children, worried mothers and far too many parallel parking attempts. I had both of my hands on the breaks, expecting a car door to open at any time while I manoeuvred in the small gap between the parked cars and the slowly moving traffic. A yellow Toyota that had parked on the side of the road cut into the bicycle path right in front of

me. It was still unable to join the flow on the street.

“You are blocking the way,” I yelled, while rapidly breaking to avoid the obstacle on the bike path. No response could be heard but a driver on the road took mercy on the impossible situation and allowed the car to cut into the traffic. I accelerated again and a few metres down the road I passed the Toyota. I slowed down, bending my head down to get a view on the driver.

“Please don’t kill me!” I yelled but the middle-aged Asian mother did not turn her head. Her expression remained empty and ignorant.

“Jesus!” I roared while continuing along the busy road. A traffic light turned red and, while I stopped, I noticed the extra weight of Poppy in the back. I turned around and asked, “Are you okay?”

“Yes, Daddy. Why did you yell?”

“That lady cut into the bicycle path without looking. That’s very dangerous. I don’t want us to crash.”

“That’s not happening. You are steering.”

“If only everything was in my control.”

We biked on and when we arrived at the day-care centre I carefully unbuckled Poppy and lifted her out from her seat. Together we walked into the centre and Poppy dashed off into the play area as soon as I had taken off her jacket.

“Have fun,” I said and only the caretaker replied, “Good bye, Daddy!”

On the way out I observed a young Asian boy clinging to the leg of his mother who desperately tried to persuade him to let go. It filled my chest with pride that Poppy was so independent. She had never cried when I dropped her off. I walked back to my bike and in only a few minutes I was in my office.

I fell into my office chair and closed my eyes. I enjoyed the silence that was broken only by the fans of the four computers that continuously ran in this office.

Only two of them were mine; Hao Liu called the other two his own. He was not yet in and I tried to enjoy this moment of solitude with a nice cup of tea, but my mind had already started spinning.

I have to give a lecture at 11 a.m., I have to answer my

emails, I have to finish the paper before the deadline, I have to prepare my material for my promotion. There is a group meeting at 10a.m.

I could not help myself and pressed a key on my keyboard. It took the screens a few moments to leave their power-safe mode. My computer had remained on all night, like it did every day. 53 new email messages. In the back of my mind I knew that I had to continue writing my paper. The deadline was only two weeks away. I started up my word processor and stared at the screen for a little while, sipping from my cup of tea. I moved to the introduction section and typed a few words. 54 new email messages. My mouse started to hover towards the icon of the email program.

Focus, Rob, focus.

I wrote another sentence, looked up a reference and inserted it at the end of the sentence.

That should be sufficient backup for this claim.

55 new email messages.

Damn it!

I switched to my email client and glimpsed at the messages, quickly looking at all of them in sequence. Alumni newsletter. Delete. Invitation to submit paper for a useless conference. Delete. Invitation to review a paper. Click on the refuse link. Invitation to link to colleague via LinkedIn. Hit the accept button. Invitation to submit a paper. Delete. Invitation for world business man's directory. Only \$150. Hmmm. Delete. Reminder to return book to library. Flag. Department of Business Innovation joins our department. What?

"We are happy to announce that Prof. Dr. Adam Hummer and his research groups on Business Processes and Innovation has joined our department..."

Interesting. Flag. Next message.

"You have exceeded your email quota. Your account will be disabled if you do not delete or archive 471 MB of messages."

Yes, please! Disable my account! I am sick of this anyway! Does this annoying reminder also count into the 471MB? Delete. Next message. Next message. Next message.

The door to my office swung open and Hao Liu walked in.

"Morning."

"Good morning Hao," I replied as I swivelled my chair

towards the newcomer.

“Hmmm,” Hao grumbled.

“A new research group will join our department.”

“Who is it?”

“Adam Hummer and his Business and Innovation group.”

“What do they research?”

“I have no idea. We might find out in our group meeting.”

“I need a coffee.”

Hao trudged out while I refocused on my screen and my tea. 31 new email messages left. Damn it. Read, flag, read, delete, read, delete, delete, read, flag, read, answer, read, answer.

Hao returned with a coffee in his hand and we both immersed ourselves in the daily virtual discourse until we walked together over to the meeting where we joined the other 14 members of the group.

“Can we please start the meeting?” Matthew Berg requested and the room fell silent.

“Did you have a chance to review the minutes of our last meeting?”

Everybody looked down to avoid Matthew’s gaze.

“Maybe you want to read them now?”

Soft murmurs from the group indicated their approval and after a few minutes Matthew continued.

“Any corrections? None? Then I approve the minutes. Let’s have a look at the agenda. Do we have any additions? Any? Okay, then let’s get going. Announcements. Professor Adam Hummer and his Innovative Business group are going to join our department. They have been assigned offices on the third floor. There will be an official welcome ceremony later in the week. Any questions?”

“What’s their research about?” Ben Bayley asked.

“Well, business matters around innovation and its improvement for the agile market.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know, maybe you can ask Adam?”

The meeting moved on with its weekly routine of announcements, discussions, talks about funding opportunities and the promotion of the group. The number of attendees who started to more or less secretly stare at their mobile devices increased steadily. The usual appeals to apply for funding and

to publish papers were met with the routine lip services. I fled this weekly ritual of insufficiencies to give my lecture on the fourth floor. Not much preparation was necessary since this was not the first time I talked about the topics, but I still made an effort to engage the students in the content. The more pressing problem during the lecture was my bladder. I was tempted to give the students a group discussion task just for the opportunity to let go of all the tea I had drunk. Towards the end of the lecture it was not the students with the strongest urge to leave, but me. I dashed towards the toilets. Being cleaned! Damn it. Down to the third floor. I rushed through the toilet door with my hand already on my zipper.

“What the...?” I exclaimed as I came to a full stop in front of an office desk. It stood in the middle of the room, cutting through my path to the urinals. I looked around. The toilet cubicles were filled with books shelves and moving boxes.

“Can I help you?”

“Why is this desk in the toilet, why are you at this desk? Who are you?”

“I am Professor Mark Smith. You can call me Professor Smith. I am with the Innovation and Business Science group.”

“Pleased to meet you,” I replied, still with my hand on my crotch.

“Maybe you have some more urgent business to attend to?”

“Yes, well, I was looking for, but then... I will be back!”

I stormed down to the second floor, already pinching my penis from within the right pocket of my trousers. When I stood in front of the urinal I used my left hand to unzip the trousers. I pinched my penis with my left hand from the outside of my trousers just above my right hand. I removed my right hand from my pocket before I released a torrent that would have breached even the strongest erection.

“Uhhmmmm,” I groaned.

I flushed, zipped my trousers and when I looked in the mirror above the sink I remembered Professor Smith. For a moment I thought about just returning to my own room, but my curiosity got the better of me. I returned to the third floor and placed my hand on the door handle. I hesitated and raised my hands to the height of my chest, my knuckles facing outwards. I insecurely knocked on the toilet door and was

rewarded with a clear 'Come in'.

"It's me again, I'm sorry to have stormed in here before. Well, I am Robert Park from the Intelligent Design group."

"Pleased to meet you Robert. Are you sure you're not a Kim or a Lee?"

"Please do not make me even more common than I already am."

"I'm sorry for the confusion about the room. Facility management hasn't been able to attach my name plaque to the door yet. I wish I would always receive as many visitors as today, but for most of them I haven't been the highest priority."

"Well, that might have something to do with the nature of this room."

"Yes, it is a great room, isn't it? All of you poor academics have to share toilets and sinks. I only wish I had a window as well."

"If you see it from that perspective," I said.

"So what questions are you trying to answer?"

"My research is about how people interact with technology..."

"No," Professor Smith interjected, "what questions are bothering you right now?"

I hesitated. There was the paper I was currently writing, but those questions had been defined a long time ago and it was just a matter of expanding on them. I scratched my forehead and looked at Professor Smith who looked mildly back at me. His full grey hair, his white beard and his wrinkles radiated confidence and compassion. His wool sweater confined his belly and his gentle smile encouraged me to speak.

"Well, just yesterday I ran into this weird little problem, I revealed. "It's nothing really, but I was trying to build some LEGO with my two daughters and we simply couldn't do it. First I couldn't find the bricks quickly enough. We then sorted them by colour into a couple of bins but I still couldn't find them easily. I was able to create a rough estimation of how many bricks I own but I have no idea how I can sort them. Also, I'm concerned that I don't have enough bins to sort them into. It's silly. It has nothing really to do with research and I am just annoyed that it might take forever only to be able to build my old models."

“So you are an AFOL?”

“No, I am not awful. Maybe just a bit crazy.”

“I mean Adult Fan Of LEGO.”

“Oh.”

“I have a good friend, Francis Taylor, who is also deeply involved in LEGO and he told me about this acronym. Maybe I should introduce you to him.”

“That might be nice,” I said.

“But coming back to your question. I don’t think that it’s trivial. It’s one of the biggest questions in the world.”

“I was not aware of that.”

“Ask yourself, how could we function if we did not have categories for things. How could we talk about rivers if we didn’t have a shared definition of what a river is? Moreover, our definition of what makes a river a creek might change over time and across cultures.”

“But if we cannot clearly define what is a river and what is a creek, how can we ever talk about or know about it?”

“Exactly! The most precise definition of the world is the world itself. And to make things worse, Heraclitus already pointed out that you cannot step into the same river twice. Even your own legs will change how the river flows. The world is dynamic and your investigation is changing its course.”

“How does that relate to my LEGO problem?”

“How did you decide which colours share a bin and what was this definition based on?” Professor Smith asked.

“For most cases it was obvious, the girls only really fought about some weird blueish-green colour.”

“Blueish-green, what a name for a colour! Was is blue or green?”

“I don’t know, it was somewhere in between.”

“There you go. You didn’t have clear definitions and hence you couldn’t sort the bricks. You are not alone with this problem. Many cultures in the world use the same word for both blue and green. In the Lakota Sioux language, for example, *thó* is used for both.”

“How could I have distinguished between them? I haven’t got a spectrophotometer at home.”

“And even if you did, it might not have helped, since there is no clear definition where one colour starts and another ends.

Plus, you would still have to convince your daughters.”

“That could’ve indeed been a problem. Language is a surprisingly dynamic phenomenon. New words enter our dictionary, change their meaning or fall out of usage. Still people have to agree to some degree for communication to work at all. This would not only concern me and my girls, but all the LEGO fans,” I explained.

“You might want to look into the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein.”

“What relevant thoughts did he fail to conceal?”

“He first published a book entitled ‘Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus’ in which he elaborated on the logic of language¹. He tried to clean up the language so that philosophers could more clearly define what problems actually are true problems and which are only language games. One of his famous recommendations has been, ‘what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence’.”

“I wish more people would follow his recommendation. But what does this have to do with my sorting problem?”

“We use words to classify the world we live in. Our language then defines the boundaries of what is thinkable.”

“You mean we are limited in our understanding of the world by the language we use?”

“Yes. But don’t worry. Philosophers did not accept such constraints and started to define their own words and grammars. Martin Heidegger is an example of a philosopher who ended up defining his own terminology to express his thoughts.”

“The point being?”

“The terms you may decide to use to describe your classification system are embedded into the larger framework of language. Or to put it into the words of Wittgenstein’s later work, ‘the meaning of a word is its use in the language’.”

“I don’t expect that much ambiguity in the terms for colours,” I said.

“And what would you do if the LEGO company released a huge number of bricks in a new colour. Your system of sorting your bricks might have to get adjusted, assuming you would purchase those bricks.”

“You’re right, but his discussion is still useless, since I’ve

already discovered that sorting the bricks by their colour is impractical. I still can't find a piece amongst similar coloured bricks. I need to find another way of sorting."

"I'm afraid that no matter what feature you use to distinguish the bricks, colour or otherwise, you could still face the ambiguity problem. I'm not a LEGO expert, but I bet that Francis might be able to help you with it. I will send him an email and put you in the CC. You can then talk directly to each other."

"Thank you, that would be wonderful."

"Well then, I'd better get back to my business."

"What is your research about?"

"You should ask Adam."

"Hmm. Well, I had better get going then."

I left Professor Smith, walking down one flight of stairs to the second floor where I returned to my office. Hao Liu was answering emails as I walked around his back to get to my own desk.

"I've just met Professor Smith from the Science of Innovation Business group."

"What is his research about?"

"We are supposed to ask Adam. Smith's office could be very useful in case of emergencies."

"Okay."

I turned my attention to my emails. 42 unread messages. Professor Smith had already sent his introduction email to Francis who replied immediately.

Hey Mark, nice to hear from you. Yes, I am more than happy to meet with Robert. It is always nice to meet another AFOL. How can I help?

I replied,

Dear Francis,

I had all my bricks in one big box and I wanted to rebuild my old models together with my daughters. It took forever to find the right bricks so I decided to sort them by their colour. It took a long time but in the end I still could not find the right bricks quickly. Do you have any better ideas on how to sort the bricks? It looks like the more time I spend on sorting them, the

less time I will need to find them and vice versa. But what is the optimal system? Any help is welcome.

Robert.

It was not long before I received a reply.

Dear Robert, it looks like you are on your way to become a true AFOL. It might be easier if you visited me and I can show you my system. How would Wednesday at 8 p.m. suit you? I live at 63 Harbour Road. Hope you can make it. Francis.

Francis, I would be delighted to visit you. Thank you for your invitation. See you on Wednesday! Rob.

—∞—

When I opened the door to the living room back home I found the girls playing with the bricks. They had opened all the boxes and were happily building an abstract pattern on a baseplate. Poppy was carefully putting the bricks into the right colour sequence.

“What are you building?” I asked with a warm smile on my face.

“I’m making a pattern. I take one from this box and then one from this box and then one from the green box.”

“That is so cool. And what are you building Camellia?”

“This is a farm house. Look, this is where all the animals will sleep and that is where they play.”

“Whoa, that is such a good idea!”

I sat on the sofa for a little while, observing the children and an inner glow filled my heart. Sorting the bricks had paid off after all. My stomach growled and I got up to walk to the kitchen. Maki was not there so I walked to the master bedroom where I found her lying on the bed, focusing on her phone.

“Hi there. Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

“What are you going to cook?”

“I don’t know!”

“I’m hungry.”

“Then eat a snack.”

“Could you please cook now?”

“Don’t push me!”

“Hmmm.”

My stomach no longer just growled, it burned. I knew this feeling well enough and I knew the remedy. I walked to the bathroom to take an antacid pill and a paracetamol for good measure. The minty taste calmed me down a little. The girls passed me by when I returned to the corridor. They ran to their room, arguing who would get which stuffed animal.

I sat down on the sofa again feeling like I could never get up again. My stomach was still having a BBQ party and my shoulders endured a ripping pain that slowly crawled up towards my neck. I took out my phone. 26 new email messages. Six Facebook notifications. I quickly scrolled through the stream of other people’s happiness until my eye caught the mess on the floor.

“Girls!”

Silence.

I don’t want to sort the bricks every night. The more I sort them, the easier it will be for the girls to play with them, but the harder it will be for them to sort them back correctly. If I force them to sort them every night then they might not want to play with LEGO at all. Which means that I will end up having to sort them.

I looked at the clutter on the floor, accepted my fate and sat down on the floor. I picked up the bricks and threw them back into their boxes. This task had the right amount of complexity to prevent my mind from having any other thoughts and the progress I made calmed me down. A sense of satisfaction and tranquillity emerged from every brick that I threw into the right box.

The burning in my stomach was slowly replaced with an increase in pressure in my lower bowels. The intensity grew rapidly, leaving me no choice but to press my buttocks firmly together while firmly walking across the room. Camellia confronted me in the door towards the corridor.

“Daddy, look at what Pinky has done.”

“I can’t look at it right now,” I declared and gently pushed Camellia aside. I stormed to the toilet and when I sat down I

had to give up the tension in my buttocks which resulted in an immediate discharge. This time everything flowed where it should.

When will you ever be able to control this? This is so embarrassing! Damn you tethered spinal cord! Why can't you just float? I will have my M.R.I scan soon. Hopefully that will bring some clarity.

I had to flush the toilet twice before the water cleared. I used the brush to clean the last marks and flushed again. Then I sprayed the toilet deodorant high into the air and left quickly before the mist could settle on me.

I heard the voice of Camellia in her room and I felt guilty for having pushed her aside. The door was wide open.

"What did Pinky do?" I asked.

"I'm playing something else now," Camellia replied.

"Don't you want to tell me?"

"Not anymore, I already told mommy."

Sadness filled my heart as I walked into the kitchen. Maki cooked vegetables and rice. She prepared teriyaki salmon for the children and a steak for me. Once the meal was ready Maki called everybody to the dinner room. We sat together at the table and had a casual conversation about what had happened to us during the day. The stories from pre-school and school lightened my mood and when we cleared the table I stood behind Maki and gave her a strong hug. We stood together for a while and Maki seemed to relax into the enclosure of my tall and warm body. When my hand slowly began making its way up from her belly, her back quickly stiffened and she escaped from my embrace.

"I have to prepare the lunch for the children."

"Can I help?"

"Can you bath the children?"

"They already bathed yesterday."

"Can you please bath them anyway?"

"But that is bad for their skin."

"Can you please just do it?" she said with a sour voice.

"All right, all right."

While Maki worked in the kitchen, I put the children into the bathtub. While they played in the water I returned to the kitchen.

“I could go shopping, the supermarkets are conveniently empty at this time of the day,” I offered.

“Do whatever you want.”

“Shall we make a list? What are you planning to cook this week?”

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe you could think about it? Makes sense to go shopping just once.”

I took out my smartphone.

“I have this new app that allows you to quickly create shopping list.”

“What?”

“You can even synchronize the list with others. Where is your phone? I could install it and then we could share a shopping list. Check this out, it’s so cool, when you start typing it auto completes based on previous items.”

“Maybe another time, I still have to prepare my lunch.”

“But this would save so much time. You could list all the items you need and I could get them on the way home. This is extremely efficient.”

“I’m busy.”

“You can even shake the phone to clear the items you’ve already got.”

The kids’ screaming interrupted my demonstration.

“You need to check on the kids!”

I sprinted to the bathroom only to find Camellia standing upright in the bath tub, rubbing her eyes and crying.

“What’s wrong?”

“I got soap in my eyes! It hurts!”

“All right all right,” I said while soaking a small towel under cold clear water from the sink.

“Here, wash your eyes with this towel.”

I took her hands away from her eyes and softly rubbed her eyes.”

Maki entered the room.

“What is going on?”

“She got some soap in her eyes.”

“どうしたんですか？”, she asked Camellia.

“目に石鹸が入りました。”

“Everything is under control. I’ve got this,” I interjected.

“Why didn’t you help them with the shampoo?”

“They are old enough to do it themselves. I’ve got this.”

“浴槽から出て行け,” Maki continued

“I said I’ve got this.”

Camellia stepped out of the bathtub and Maki put a large towel around here.

“服を着てください。”

The two left the bathroom, leaving me behind. My tired eyes fell on Poppy.

“Don’t be angry Daddy. I have already washed my hair.”

“Thank you Poppy,” I replied, forcing a smile on my face.

We all followed our evening routine and once the children were in bed I also collapsed onto my bed. I heard Maki in the adjacent bathroom preparing to shower and the image of her naked body occupied my thoughts. I imagined how the water would flow along her body and I could not find inner peace. A few minutes after the noise of the water had stopped, I walked over to her room. She had already put on her underwear and applied one of her many creams on her face. Again I hugged her from behind, looking through the bathroom mirror at her face. I kissed her on her neck. She stood motionless as she felt the pressure of my erection against her hips.

“I am tired.”

“Me too, but I can’t sleep.”

“We have to get up early tomorrow.”

“I know.”

“I am not in the mood.”

“Maybe we can work on that?”

“I don’t think so.”

“But it has been weeks. I am ready to explode.”

“I want to watch my drama episodes. I have so little time.”

Resignation set in and Maki noticed the disappointment in my face. Rejecting my needs seemed to give her an inner glow of satisfaction.

Sadness took over my body and my chin sunk down. No thought could push aside the immediate pain of the rejection. I turned around and left the room without words.

I hope that she regrets her success at least a little bit.

I sat down on my bed, my laptop in my lap. I visited the LEGO website and looked at all the wonderful sets it offered.

The modular buildings looked amazing. They had incredible details and the floors could be separated. The cinema had only two floors, but the lobby had two counters and a popcorn machine. The upper floor was the cinema hall with six seats, a projector and a large screen. The set also had a movie star that would arrive in a limousine. I had bought one of the modular buildings already and it was fun building it, with or without the girls. I put two of the buildings I was missing into the shopping basket and within a few minutes I had something to look forward to.

There is nothing better than anticipating the arrival of a large parcel at your front door.

Tuesday

I sat down on my office chair and opened the paper I was writing in my word editor. I searched for the section where I had left it, but I could not focus. Whenever I wanted to extend an argument, my mind drifted to Maki. I did not feel at ease.

Why can I no longer connect with Maki? Why does she not want to have sex with me anymore?

It was no use. I got up and made some tea in the staff kitchen. When I returned I checked my email. 62 unread messages. I went through them quickly, deleting the ones that did not require any attention from me. Some emails did not require any action, but I had to keep them for future reference. I moved them into my elaborate folder structure. There was a place for every email. I was down to 38 messages that were really more like a to do list. But where to start? An email from the American Computing Association demanded my attention. 'Your ACM membership is about to expire. Please renew today.'

I surfed to the ACM web page, logged into their system and paid for my annual membership with my university credit card. I saved the receipt as a PDF document and forwarded it to the secretary.

This should not require much explanation, she should know what this is about.

My bladder gave me a clear indication what I should do next. When I left the toilet I thought about Professor Smith.

It's not like I am getting anything else done.

I stood in front of Professor Smith's office door and, with a bit more confidence than last time, I knocked.

"Come in!"

I entered the room and found Professor Smith with his feet on his desk, a book in his lap.

“How are you?”

“All good, how about yourself?”

“Emails, emails, emails. All I do is answer emails and move them into folders.”

“Oh, you sort them?”

“Yes, of course. After I have completed the associated task, I move them into my folder archive. How else would I ever be able to find them again?”

“Just use the search box. Why waste time on sorting them? Are you still using Yahoo’s web directory?” Professor Smith asked.

“That’s gone.”

“But only last year. Its closure attracted more media attention than its operation in the last ten years combined.”

“Are you mocking my technical skills?”

“I’m not sure. I have to look it up for you on these 35mm slides. Could we use your projector?”

“Sure, it’s right next to my 78 r.p.m. record player. Do your slides also have an answer for how else I should keep track of my tasks? The sender usually wants something to be done. Worst of all, from me.”

“So you are using your inbox as a to do list? Let me guess, you also use it as a file storage system?”

“What?”

“Whenever you ask somebody these days if they have a certain file they usually reply ‘it’s somewhere in my email’. The folders on your hard drive are supposed to be your file storage system,” Professor Smith explained.

“I’m not that bad. I still have a folder structure in my documents. But you’re right, I don’t move all the email attachments into it. Which leads to my inbox getting bigger and bigger. I regularly get threats from our IT group that I exceed my quota.”

“And what do you do about that?”

“Nothing! I would be grateful if they closed my account. I wouldn’t have to answer emails. Besides, why should I pay any attention to such minuscule quotas when even free email services provide practically endless email storage? Aren’t

universities supposed to be leaders in science and technology?”

“Who wrote the book of should?” Professor Smith asked.

“Oh, don’t let me continue with my rant or you may regret it. Let’s focus on issues on which we have at least some control. I’m still fighting with the sorting problem. I’ve been thinking about it for a while now and I am confused how it is possible to have a very clear definition of the colours blue and green in our heads, but we are unable to define the exact borderline? Shouldn’t we have clear definitions for everything.”

“That’s what Aristotle tried. He gave names to everything and organised them into a hierarchical tree structure. Such taxonomies are still the most common organisation tool in western societies.”

“You mean the tree of life?”

“Aristotle didn’t only name animals and plants. He ordered pretty much every aspect of human life, including language and government.”

“What was the name again of that Swedish fellow who created the tree structure of all living things?” I asked.

“That would have been Carl Linnaeus.”

“He named and sorted them all, didn’t he?”

“He wasn’t the first to name and sort animals. Every culture started to name animals and plants². In particular the useful ones³. Next, common names had to be negotiated so that people from neighbouring villages could be sure to talk about the same things. This was particularly necessary for organisms that could provide nutrition and medicines. Knowledge and stories were then collected. It’s part of what makes us human. It typically starts with a more general term, such as ‘ant’. Once many different ants were identified a prefix might be added, such as ‘red ant’.”

“But how would that work if you had 100 different types of ants? You would have to keep adding descriptive terms to the name, making it too long for anybody to remember.”

“That is true. It became very difficult to make a decision on whether a newly found animal was truly new, and to what other animals it might be related,” Professor Smith explained.

“So there were two challenges for dealing with animals and plants. First they had to be named and second, the name had to be shared with others. Then it was necessary to find

relationships so that it was easier to check whether a species was actually new.”

“Correct.”

“And what kinds of relationships did they consider?”

“In the beginning they considered a one dimensional line of animals based on Aristotle’s idea of a scale. The highest animal on the scale was the human and all others had to be sorted by their complexity below it. Aquinas then extended the scale by putting angels and God on top of humans as the highest form of existence. It was supposed to be like a chain, but it proved to be too difficult to define a complexity criterion that would be useful to sort all the animals and plants.”

“So they started to use multiple criteria?” I asked.

“That is true, but there was no agreement on what features to use. Linnaeus used, for example, the sex organs and leaves of plants to identify them. By looking at the jaws and teeth he could recognise animals. The natives in Bolivia, on the other hand, looked at the bark and insects on the tree to establish their type.”

“So they didn’t only have to agree on the names of organisms, they also had to find common ground for the features they used to identify them. And all of that before the arrival of modern communication technology?”

“Yes, and in a time where researchers would prefer a certain taxonomy over another not because it was more practical, but simply because it was created by one of their countrymen⁴. Linnaeus didn’t make any particular effort to seek consent for the naming and organising of organisms. Only he, himself, had the right to name them. Even his students who collected the original samples were not given this privilege, although several species were given names that referred back to the person who discovered it.”

“But if he was such a dictator, why was his taxonomy adopted by so many so quickly? He clearly didn’t seem to care much about the opinions of others,” I said.

“He considered it his holy task to name all organisms. Others may or may not have empathised with his religious mission but in the end, pure pragmatism won. Linnaeus’s taxonomy was useful and extensive. It was easy to see the features necessary for the identification of an organism.”

“But what organisational principle did he use? A single chain doesn’t seem to be possible with using multiple features,” I said.

“Linnaeus developed a hierarchical tree structure. In his eminent book ‘Systema Naturae’ he printed the complete tree in the form of a big table across several pages⁵. These pages could be unfolded from the book so that the complete animal kingdom was visible.”

“If the complete animal kingdom fitted on a few pages, then he couldn’t have named all living things.”

“Yes and no. He had a fairly good coverage of the plants and animals that were accessible to him. During his lifetime he and his students collected many of them in Europe. He eventually also sent students out on expeditions to the newly-discovered countries around the globe. They brought back samples from around the world and Linnaeus named and sorted them personally.”

“So what did he not name?” I asked.

“He was not aware of anything that you could not observe with your eyes.”

“Such as bacteria?”

“Yes, that’s a good example. He also completely underestimated the variety of insects.”

“But he made a tree and, as you said before, we are still using tree-like structures. So what’s wrong with it?”

“Occasionally it becomes impossible to classify a new specimen since it breaks the taxonomy,” Professor Smith explained.

“That could hardly be the fault of the animal.”

“Of course not. A popular example is the platypus.”

“What was the issue with it?”

“When the naturalists discovered the flora and fauna of the new worlds, such as Australia, they discovered many species that seemed to defy the rules of the taxonomy. The definition of mammals at that time was that they give birth to live young and produce milk to nurture them. Birds were warm-blooded egg-laying animals. Reptiles were cold-blooded egg-laying animals. The platypus laid eggs and suckled its young. It, therefore, did not fit into any of the categories⁶.”

“Then the taxonomy was wrong. It could hardly be expected

of any researcher to get it perfectly right immediately,” I said.

“The crisis was deeper than that. Carl Linnaeus and his fellows were deeply religious. They wanted to discover the hidden structure of God’s work. A challenge to a wonderfully developed system also cast doubt on God’s design.”

“So they assumed that there is a hidden structure beyond all the appearances. A divine principle that is stable over time. But since Darwin’s discovery of evolution, we know that nature is not stable. It changes all the time.”

“Linnaeus was born more than a century before Darwin. For Linnaeus and his students the slow evolutionary change provided a sufficiently stable phenomenon to study. If evolution was much faster, then the whole project to classify all living things would become a Sisyphean task. Once you classified all butterflies, they would have evolved and you would have to start all over again.”

“Now you make me worry. If developing a taxonomy is only practical for stable or slowly changing systems, what chance would I have to classify LEGO bricks. The LEGO company may decide to change them at any time, so trying to classify the bricks could be a never-ending story,” I said.

“Not necessarily. The phenomenon of the LEGO system is pretty stable. The basic concepts remained unchanged. Today you can still put a 50 year old brick onto the latest model and it will fit.”

“I agree with that, but when we investigate nature we try to understand the features of the animals and plants. We start with a blank slate and eventually we may know everything that is to be known about a certain species. With LEGO bricks, or any other human-made artefact, it’s different. The LEGO company knows everything about their bricks since they produced them.”

“Is this knowledge publicly available?” Professor Smith asked.

“Barely. But it doesn’t take much effort to derive the LEGO principles from sample bricks. There are already many toy producers, in particular in China, who shamelessly copy LEGO bricks.”

“And has the LEGO company done anything about it?”

“They had several lawsuits with the Canadian Mega

Bloks company. They lost. Their patent expired and the brick principle can no longer be protected," I said.

"So you would be able to find the LEGO principles as a stable phenomenon. This is what your ideal order should be based on. Coming back to the divine principles that the platypus disrupted, even for the agnostic naturalists it caused a considerable stir. Linnaeus's taxonomy had been widely adopted. A fundamental change in the criteria for a mammal would require the approval and adoption of the whole community. It took more than 85 years to accomplish this."

"It seems that building a consent is harder than making the actual discovery."

"That could very well be the case."

"But coming back to my original problem. Colour is a continuum with no clear borders. Still we both can easily agree on what 'red' is," I said.

"Eleanor Rosch asked herself the same question."

"Who is she?"

"She's a professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley. In the 1970's she worked on the problem of how people categorise colours. It was a popular topic at that time. Brent Berlin and Paul Kay had already shown in the 1960's that only eleven basic colours exist across 110 different languages³. There was disagreement amongst some cultures as to what a 'basic' colour was, but they were always drawn from the pool of the eleven. Eleanor visited the Dani in New Guinea and, despite the fact that their language had names for only two colours, they were still able to identify 'basic' colours better than non-basic colours."

"What were the two categories of colours the Dani had in their language?"

"'Light, bright' and 'dark, cool'. Let's do a little experiment, shall we?"

"Sure," I replied.

Professor Smith took out a small piece of paper, wrote words on it and turned the paper around.

"I will ask you several questions and it is important that you answer quickly. Just shout out the first answer that comes to your mind. Okay?"

"Yes."

“What is between ten and twelve?”

“Eleven.”

“On which side of the road do they drive in England?”

“Left.”

“Name a tool.”

“Hammer.”

“Name a colour.”

“Red.”

Professor Smith turned the paper around and gave it to me. It read ‘Hammer, Red’.

“You see, we have prototypical ideas of categories in our mind. A hammer is more a tool than an allen key is. Eleanor introduced the concept of centrality⁷. A central example of a category has the most features in common with the members of its own group and the least features in common with members of a contrasting group. Features are then organised in a matrix where the vertical dimension is the level of abstraction. The greater the inclusiveness, the higher the level of abstraction. Each category is completely included in at least one other category.”

“Can you give me an example?” I asked.

“Sure. The category ‘animal’ completely includes the category of ‘dog’. Every dog is an animal, but not every animal is a dog. The category ‘animal’ is therefore more abstract than the category ‘dog’. Rosch wrote that there are commonly three levels of abstraction used. A superordinate level, such as ‘animal’, a basic level, such as ‘dog’, and a subordinate level, such as ‘golden retriever’.”

“And what is the horizontal dimension then?” I asked.

“The horizontal dimension segments objects at the same level of abstraction. It is concerned with how a dog is different from a cat. It really means how many features they share and on how many features they differ. This is where the clusters of objects that belong together are formed with the help of central examples. Prototypes. To know what tools are, it is sufficient to give you a few examples, such as a hammer.”

“What’s the advantage of these prototypes for us?”

“The main benefit of thinking in categories is that it is cognitively efficient. All the objects in a category are considered equivalent. If you have never seen an allen key but I tell you

that it is a tool, then you will already have some ideas about the allen key in your mind. Such as that it is likely to be an object to manipulate other objects in order to transform the world into a desired state.”

“So when I ask you to give me a red LEGO brick, I roughly know what colour to expect?” I asked?

“Exactly!”

“And that also means that I will have to create my own taxonomy of bricks. But what features should I use to distinguish between them?”

“I’m not an expert on LEGO. Did you manage to meet with Francis?”

“I am visiting him tomorrow.”

“Please give him my regards.”

“Sure. Well, back to my research.”

Wednesday

“Thank you for helping me. It’s really raining cats and dogs,” I said as I drove our car down the road. Maki sat in the passenger’s seat while the children quarrelled in their seats in the back.

“It would have been much easier if you had picked another time. Now I have to put the kids to bed all by myself. Can you not meet him in the afternoon?”

“We are both working.”

“Or maybe on the weekend?”

“This is the time Francis suggested and I am keen to meet him.”

“You and your silly hobby.”

“That’s my pen!” Poppy cried in the back.

“No, I had it first.” Camellia replied.

The traffic light ahead changed to red. I stopped and turned around to the children.

“Girls! Stop fighting. If you fight over something then Daddy gets it. Camellia, give me the pen!”

“But I had it first!”

“It doesn’t matter who had it first. If you two do not agree then I get it. Hand me the pen.”

“The traffic light is blue.” Maki commented.

“What?”

“The traffic light is blue. Drive!”

I took the pen and looked out of the front window.

“It’s green, not blue. What are you talking about?” I replied as I pushed the accelerator.

“That is what you say in Japanese.”

“But your traffic lights are green.”

“I know, but we call it blue.”

“That’s interesting. That might be a good example of prototype theory. You know, there are eleven basic colours from which most languages take their definitions of colour. In particular the difference between blue and green is not present in many languages.”

“Japanese has a word for green, midori, but it is a new word.”

“How new?”

“I do not know. Traffic lights are ‘Ao’, which means blue and green.”

“That is exactly what I mean. Eleanor Rosch discovered that...”

“Stop lecturing me and pay attention to the road!”

“I just wanted to share some ideas with you.”

“I don’t care about prototypes. Just drive so that I can get back home with the kids.”

I remained silent for the rest of the trip and once we arrived at Francis’s address I stepped out and Maki took over the steering wheel. I opened the trunk and took out my bicycle.

“See you later, girls.”

“Bye, dad.”

“Thank you, Maki.”

“Hmmm.”

I ran to the entrance door with my bike while Maki drove off. I placed the bike next to the wall and locked it. The house was on a corner with large windows on the ground floor. Across from the house there seemed to be a school. I rang the bell then heard footsteps. An elderly man with a round belly and a thick grey beard opened the door.

“Good evening, Robert. Come in. It’s raining.”

“Thank you, Francis.”

“I hope you didn’t get too wet?”

“My wife drove me in the car. It’s all good.”

“You can hang your jacket here and then let’s move to the living room. It’s much nicer and warmer there.”

I put my jacket on a hanger and followed Francis into the living room. The room was straight from the 70’s with dark wooden panels across the walls and a spiral staircase that had a thick rope as a handle. A few LEGO models were spread

across the room.

“Can I offer you anything?”

“I’m fine thank you.”

“Please have a seat, how can I help?”

“Well, Mark Smith suggested that I could talk to you about LEGO,” I said as I sat down.

“Yes, he mentioned that. I do indeed have a little collection.”

“Well, it doesn’t look to be too extensive,” I commented while looking around the room.

“Oh, no. The collection is upstairs. My wife doesn’t allow too much LEGO down here.”

“My wife would prefer me to have no LEGO at all. How does yours deal with it.”

“She fully supports it. She says it keeps me busy and out of her way. When you’ve been married for as many years as we have, you start to appreciate time apart.”

A flash of jealousy flashed through my heart but I could not share my sorrow.

“Yes, well, I had all my LEGO bricks in a box but that didn’t work. I then sorted them according to their colours, and I still couldn’t find the right parts easily. Mark mentioned that you have a system for sorting them. I would be curious to understand what features you use to distinguish between them and simply to have a look at how it’s done.”

“That’s easily done. How much LEGO do you currently have?”

“Around forty one thousand bricks.”

“That’s not bad. Shouldn’t take you too long to sort. Some of my AFOL friends have several million.”

“How many do you have?”

“Several million.”

“Seriously?”

“I’ve collected LEGO for forty years. It does add up. And the bricks don’t turn bad. When did you overcome your dark age?”

“My what?”

“The period between when you stopped playing with LEGO, typically with the onset of your puberty, and the time you started buying LEGO again. That often happens when you have your own children.”

“In that case, let me think. Too long I suppose. It never really stopped being fun, but parties, girls and impressing your friends became just so much more important. You couldn’t openly admit that you still played with LEGO when you were sixteen.”

“So what brought you back? Your children?”

“No, way before them. I couldn’t resist the first LEGO Star Wars sets. But it became much less embarrassing to browse through a toy store when you’re with your children.”

“I know. My daughter has already moved out. She studies in Auckland.”

“Good on her. Does she play with LEGO too?”

“Yeah, we still have daddy and daughter builds.”

“I can’t wait for that to happen with my kids.”

“Just keep on buying bricks.”

“I wish it was that easy. I also have to deal with a grumpy wife.”

“I am sorry to hear that.”

“Well, you can’t have it all. Is there any chance I could maybe have a look at your brick collection?”

“Of course, follow me.”

Francis got up and walked up the spiral staircase. It was an old house and the wooden stairs screeched under his weight. I followed him at a comfortable distance, so that Francis’s feet would not end up in my face. We ended up in a corridor with four doors. Francis opened the door on the far left and we entered a large room. All the walls were covered with industrial metal shelves, each shelf containing clearly-labelled plastic containers. Towards the back, a wall of stacked cardboard boxes claimed their space. A few of them were open, revealing a stadium terrace on which hundreds of LEGO figures were standing. Across the middle of the room were large drawers forming a working bench. A small desk in the corner hosted a computer.

“This is my project room where I work on larger models.”

“Amazing.”

“And over here...”

Francis continued through a door into the adjacent room.

“I have my train assembly lab.”

“Your what?”

“You see, I sell custom-made trains and wagons made of LEGO. I bulk order the parts, sort them into bags, add instructions and put everything into a nicely printed box.”

“And LEGO lets you get away with it?”

“As long as I don’t claim that this is a product from the LEGO company, it’s fine. They know me, since I order many parts from them directly.”

“How many do you sell?”

“I’m limited by the time it takes to sort the bricks. I really should hire a student for this. Shall we move on?”

“There’s more?”

“Just a little.”

Francis exited through another door that led into a small corridor with a ladder. We climbed up into an attic, well lit and fully renovated. It was filled with hundreds of LEGO boxes stacked in shelves.

“This is where I keep most of my sets.”

“Don’t you open them?”

“Not these ones. They’re too valuable.”

“Like what?”

“Let’s have a look.”

Francis picked up a box of a little LEGO truck. The box looked worn but had no tears. It read ‘Maersk Line Truck 1651’. He took it to table where a laptop was placed. He sat down, opened a web page and typed the set number into the search field.

“This set was produced in 1980 and it was only given to the Maersk company who in turn gave them to their best customers. It is not clear how many were ever produced, but five sets are currently on sale. Only one of them is in mint condition and the Japanese seller wants 400,000 Yen for it. That’s around \$NZ4557. My set is not new so I guess it’s worth much less.”

“You have a fortune up here! You should insure it!”

“I did, although the insurance agent had difficulties understanding the concept of collectable LEGO.”

“I can imagine. What website did you use?”

“It’s called Bricklink. It is the largest LEGO trading platform in the world. You can buy pretty much any brick in any quantity. Sets are also being offered. But be careful with

this site, it's highly addictive."

"Francis, you have a lot of LEGO!"

"That is all relative."

"Can you show me how you organised your bricks?"

"Sure can, let's climb down again."

We made our way back to the large project room. All the shelves with their drawers and little boxes gave me the shivers. In particular the labelling. It was neat. Every brick had its place.

"This is amazing. There are so many different bricks. How do you ever find them?"

"Over here are the basic bricks. 1x1 at the bottom up to the 1x16. Next to it are the 2x2 bricks down there to the 2x10 on top. The cheese slopes are on this side."

"Cheese slopes?"

"Those little 1x1 slopes look like wedges of cheese. It's their common name. The official part ID is 50746."

"How do you know that?"

"The IDs are usually visible inside the bricks. They're part of the moulds. Here, have a look at the inside of this brick with this magnifying glass."

I took a 2x4 brick and stared through it.

"I see two numbers. 3001 and 13-250. And the LEGO logo. I never noticed this before."

"The first number is the ID that you can use on Bricklink, Pick-a-Brick and other websites. It identifies the shape but not the colour. I believe the second number is the ID of the mould. The LEGO company can trace any imperfections this way."

"So that is the system. You can just sort all the bricks by their numbers!" I exclaimed.

"You could, but that would not be practical. The IDs are rather random. You would want to have similar bricks together and the bricks that you need most often within easy reach."

"Oh, you're right. So how did you do it?"

"The basic bricks are in this shelf, slopes and inverted slopes next to it. For the basic bricks I sort them further by their colour as I have so many of them. For most other bricks I leave the different colours of the same part in the same bin. It's easy to see the difference."

A considerable amount of pride was visible on Francis's face.

My appreciation for his sorting system was a true compliment. Not many would be able to understand and cherish a well-sorted LEGO collection. We browsed around for a little while longer, opening drawers, looking at unique and rare parts, and reminiscing about the sets we owned when we were children. Eventually we climbed back down the spiral staircase and sat down on the sofas in the living room.

“You know Francis, you have all these great LEGO sets. We should organise an exhibition and show them to the children.”

“I’m not sure if my collection is good enough for it.”

“It sure is. And if we can find a few more AFOLs then we could probably put together a pretty good show.”

“Are you sure you want to showcase your LEGO? Remember, you are a grown man.”

“Every grown man has the right to make a complete monkey of himself every once in a while.”

“Maybe. I could ask some of my friends. Maybe they would join.”

“Yeah, we should really do this. Maybe I should get going. It’s getting late.”

“No worries, it has been a pleasure to share my passion with another AFOL.”

“Thank you Francis. It’s been very inspiring. I have a much better idea of how to sort my bricks now.”

We got up, I put on my jacket and stepped outside. The clouds had cleared and it was a dark, starry night.

“Good night, Francis.”

“Have a safe trip home.”

I pushed into the pedals and flew through the night. My thoughts were up there in the night sky full of stars. The roads were abandoned and I started to sing. I tried to identify some of the star signs and the major planets. I could make out Venus and Mars.

What did happen to Pluto? It used to be a planet and now it is not. None of the planets changed so why did it no longer fit into the planet category. Another example of taxonomies gone wrong?

—∞—

Maki was still awake when I returned home. She was sitting on

the sofa watching an episode of her favourite drama series.

“How are the kids?”

“Poppy threw a tantrum.”

“What about?”

“Why does that matter? She wanted to finish her drawing before going to bed.”

Maki got up and brought a plate back to the kitchen. I sat down on the sofa.

“I think it would be much better if we could draw a clear line. Bedtime is bedtime. That way we only need to fight with her once,” I said once she reappeared from the kitchen.

“Oh shut up! You were not here!”

“But I know what Poppy is like. She needs clear rules. It would make it much easier for all of us.”

“Oh you and your rules. Everything has to be fixed. That is not how life works. You just don’t know what it means to be a mother. I have to be with them every day. You can escape to your job.”

Maki turned her back to me and slowly moved towards the kitchen. Her shoulders tightened and the tension in her body could barely contain her anger.

“I am their father and I do know a thing or two. And why do I have to be sorry for earning the money for this family. If we had to rely on your income we would be screwed. No more holidays and yearly trips to Japan,” I continued from the sofa.

“Fuck off!” she said without turning her back.

“Don’t use that language on me!”

“Fuck off, fuck off, fuck off!”

Her hands cramped into a fist.

“I am your husband and you should be nice to me. Why do you treat me worse than everybody else?”

Maki dashed across the room, lifted her leg and kicked me in the chest. I had only just enough time to get my hands up to protect myself. I fell backwards while Maki regained her balance. The kick was not particularly strong, but Maki’s intention to hurt me cut a deep wound.

“You’re crazy! I’m going to bed now.” I said with a firm and emotionless voice while I sat back up.

“Just run away, bastard!” she screamed.

I got up and the potential for physical intimidation shifted.

Now her head only reached to my chest. Maki took two steps back, expecting retaliation.

I am not going to go down to your level. That way I will maintain the moral high ground.

“Good night,” I said in an ice cold tone of voice.

I passed the heavily breathing Maki, denying her any acknowledgement of existence. I closed the living room door behind me and walked into my room. I sat down on my bed but I could not feel a thing.

I need to look up that LEGO spaceship I used to own.

I took my tablet computer, and visited the Bricklink web page.

There, there. Everything is in order.

I browsed to the catalogue, sets, space, classic space. Set number 928: Galaxy Explorer. There was also a U.S. version with the number 497. Interesting. The set was released in 1979. I was six years old back then. 322 parts. 4 Minifigures. 1250 grams. 46x29x6 cm box size. 22 lots available. A used model is available for \$NZ178. A new sealed set is available for \$NZ2591.

Yeah, that’s what I should buy. That would really piss off Maki.

I registered on the website and completed the purchase of the used model.

Should be here in two or three weeks. What else is there to buy? How about some cool LEGO Batman. Weird, there are two categories. Batman I and Batman II. What’s the difference?

I continued to fantasy shop some more items before putting down the tablet.

So where was I? Pluto! Why is Pluto no longer a planet?

My mind kept spinning in endless loops like the planets around the sun. No beginning, no end.

Damn it. I have to work tomorrow! It’s late. I must get some sleep.

I got up and searched through my toiletry bag in the bathroom, found the small pack of sleeping pills and took one.

Only five left. I have another business trip coming up. I need to visit the doctor and ask for some more. Next week.

I returned to my bed and continued my favourite audio

book. I had listened to it a hundred times already, but it still had the power to immobilise my thoughts.

Thursday

I woke up at 6:24 a.m. My mind felt fresh again, but the wound in my chest was there.

Why do I let her hurt me? It is not okay to kick your partner. I can't tolerate this anymore. I could hit her back but then I would be just as bad as she is. No, I am going to constrain her and throw her out of the house. That's what she deserves.

I quickly dressed, brushed my teeth and left the house before anybody woke up. It was still dark when I arrived at the university. I made myself a cup of tea and focused on writing that damn paper. I did not even open the email client or the web browser.

I have to get this paper done. Now.

My fingers transformed the flow of my consciousness into a meaningful sequence of roman characters. The sequences of arguments formed clear lines of reasoning, references to previous work and interpretation of data. I kept at it for two hours and the bulk of the writing was done when Hao Liu entered the office.

"Good morning, Rob."

"Good morning, Hao Liu. How are you today."

"All right. Need a coffee though."

"That does not surprise me."

Hao Liu returned to the office with a big mug of brown thinking liquid. He woke up his screens and starred at the email client.

"106 new messages. They are trying to kill me. I am serious."

"I know, we have become email monkeys. The worst thing is that for every email you answer you get 1.3 emails back. The

exchange of emails follows Richardson's Law of an arms race."

"Are you serious?"

"I am always serious. The only way to survive the system is not to participate."

"I wish I could."

"You could declare email bankruptcy."

"What on earth is that?"

"You reply to all the emails in your inbox with a declaration of email bankruptcy. You are no longer able to adequately respond to the messages and that you have deleted all the messages. If something is still super important then they should contact you again in a month or two. Optionally you can appoint a liquidator, such as our research group's secretary. That will most certainly make her day."

"Sweet, I will go right ahead with this extremely useful and ingenious suggestion."

"For you, only the best."

"I know that I can always count on you."

We turned towards our screens with grins on our faces.

"A completely unrelated question. Do you remember why Pluto is no longer a planet?" I asked.

"Should there be a gap in your general education, Doctor Park?"

"How dare you to question my expertise Doctor Hui! But please, enlighten me."

"Sit down properly and pay attention!"

"Yes Professor Hui."

"Pluto was discovered in 1930 by Clyde Tombaugh. It was the first planet discovered by an American astronomer."

"I assume the Chinese already knew about Pluto for 2000 years?"

"Of course, grand master Lik Mi Dik already reported on Pluto even before you nailed a man to a tree for saying how great it would be to be nice to people for a change."

"You copied that line from Douglas Adams⁸."

"I'm Chinese, what do you expect?"

"Ministers already lost their positions because of the plagiarism in their Ph.D. thesis. I cannot tolerate this academic misconduct. I am sorry Doctor Hui, I will have to call you Mister Hui from now on."

“Are you finished?”

“Yes, please continue.”

“Pluto became an icon, in particular in the U.S. People often sympathise with an outsider, and Pluto was as far out as you could be in the solar system. It is important to notice that until then the definition of a planet was its appearance on a list. Since your brain capacity is utterly limited, you might want to use a mnemonic, such as ‘My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Nine Pizzas’ to remember the sequence of Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto.”

“I’d rather not do that. Pluto is no longer a planet. But thanks for trying to trick me into memorising yet more useless facts.”

“Suit yourself. Originally it was assumed that Pluto had a mass similar to earth, but over the years more precise estimations were made and Pluto turned out to be only a fraction of earth’s mass. To make things worse, many objects were found in the orbital area, which was eventually named the Kuiper Belt. The crisis emerged in 2005, when an astronomer discovered an object in the Kuiper Belt that was more massive than Pluto⁹. Logically this new Kuiper Belt Object should also be considered a planet, but then the list of planets could potentially grow rapidly. But already in 2000 the American Museum of Natural History’s planetarium in New York had reopened and Neil deGrasse Tyson had rearranged the objects of the solar system in a way that indicated that Pluto was not a planet. The media caught onto this discovery and it sparked a very furious discussion between traditionalists and rationalists.”

“Could they not come up with a set of criteria that defines what a planet is? Ideally one that included Pluto but excluded all those Kuiper Belt Objects?”

“They did what every proper academic would do: start a committee.”

“I am so much looking forward to its name.”

“It was called the Planetary Definition Committee of the International Astronomical Union.”

“Beautiful.”

“I was unaware of your appreciation of bureaucratic poetry. You fail to disappoint me yet again, Doctor Park.”

“My pleasure, Mister Hui.”

“The union convened in 2006 in Prague and one of the items on the agenda was to vote on the committee’s proposal for a definition of planets. The proposal defined a planet as objects that were round and dominated their orbital paths. Because K.B.O.s swarm around Pluto, Pluto did not satisfy the second criterion. A counter committee was formed on the spot and the dispute continued until the last day when a general vote was held. To save Pluto’s face, a new category of dwarf planets was introduced to which Pluto and a few others were assigned.”

“So they voted Pluto out?”

“Yep.”

“It’s not surprising that a room full of scientists would vote for an Aristotelian definition rather than for a cultural one. What does surprise me is that they had such a big social process at all. Moreover, I doubt that all the members of the union were able to attend a meeting in Prague.”

“Would you like to know the exact proportion?”

“How could I continue to exist without it?”

“Four percent, my dear Doctor Park. Four percent of the total members of the union were in Prague.”

“That can hardly be considered a quorum. They really should learn from the Chinese. In their national assemblies no seat is empty.”

“That is true, the bigger question is, however, who is on those chairs.”

“Touché.”

My phone interrupted with an undeniable ‘new message’ sound. I noticed Maki as the sender and picked it up to read.

“Can you at least leave a note that you are already gone? The kids were looking for you this morning,” it read.

Deep wrinkles appeared on my forehead as I replied.

“I could not sleep anymore and have a lot to do at work.”

No reply.

“Is everything okay?” Hao asked.

“Maki.”

“Hmmm.”

We continued to direct our attention to our computers and later in the day I stopped at Professor Smith’s office. When I entered I immediately noticed the sofa that was now placed

against one of the walls.

“Where did you get this from?”

“I bought it second hand.”

“May I?”

“Of course, it doesn’t take a genius to be uncomfortable.”

“Nice, I would love to have one of these in my office to be able to take a nap.”

“Be my guest at any time.”

I looked up at Smith’s face and from his calm, honest and open expression I concluded that he actually meant it.

“Thank you, Mark, I appreciate it.”

“I require a nap every once in a while myself. What’s keeping you up?”

“Oh, that is a long story,” I evaded.

Professor Smith paused, probably hoping I would continue.

“In any case, how did you ever end up in this ‘office’?”

“That is a long story too.”

“I’m curious.”

“You might not like it.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

“I used to be a young academic like yourself. Full of ideas and energy.”

“Then you should be a full professor by now.”

“Who wrote the book of should? I made a few fatal mistakes. The biggest one was to be too honest. This university, like any large organisation, is full of nonsense, particularly when it comes to its administration. The only reason why this university still exists is that all other universities are managed just as badly.”

“That sounds rather bitter.”

“I would say it sounds realistic.”

“But what does that have to do with you?”

“I wasted a lot of time battling nonsense and made myself rather unpopular in the process.”

“Give me an example.”

“Are you aware of the promotion criteria?”

“Of course, that’s what is guiding my work. I want to become an associate professor eventually.”

“Stop wasting time. The criteria were brought about by the full professors. They cooked up a list of criteria that academics

have to fulfil in this department to move on to the next level.”

“Yes, I read the announcement. Why do you know so much about it? You’re pretty new to the department.”

“I was part of a hiring committee.”

“Are they going to hire more people?”

“You’ve heard nothing from me.”

“Okay. So what’s up with the criteria?”

“When you look at the CVs of our full professors then you will notice that pretty much none of them fulfils the criteria for an associate professor. Even better, some criteria are, by definition, impossible.”

“Such as?”

“To become an associate professor you are expected to have spent at least six months at another university, ideally abroad.”

“That’s what our sabbatical is for.”

“Yes, but you are only allowed to use your own vacation days. You only have six years to make it to associate professor under the new tenure track career model. Even better, you are not supposed to carry over your vacation days to the next year.”

“So you mean that the department allows you to work at another university during your vacation period, but you can never spend enough time there to fulfil the promotion criteria?”

“You got it.”

“But then how can you ever get promoted?”

“Ah, now I have your attention. You should spend as much time as you can being helpful and nice to your group leader and the dean.”

“But I have my research to do,” I exclaimed.

“Doing research will only help you to find a job at other universities. They will look at the papers you’ve published. But if you want to have a career here then you need to put your fist as deep as you can in the ass of the dean.”

“All right, all right, I get it. Don’t make me imagine that. But what happened to you?”

“I pointed out such nonsense in meetings. I have a pretty bad reputation amongst senior management. I even dared to visualise the social structure of my research group.”

“How did you do that? Should it not just be a tree structure?”

“That would be an ordinary organigram. Another example

of the ever so popular structure. It is worthwhile noting, however, that it is not only professors who like to be on top. In general the nodes on top of the tree are considered more important.”

“I understand why professors consider themselves to be on top, but who else cares?”

“Well, let’s take the example of religions.”

“They are all equally irrelevant.”

“They all claim the opposite.”

“Who is to judge?”

“Taxonomists! Melvil Dewey, a Christian, created his decimal system to classify books in a library. While he blessed Christianity with the highest level within the religion class, Islam was demoted to a low subclass within ‘Other & comparative religions’.”

“How did the Muslims take that?”

“There have been frequent complaints about it. Not only from Muslims, but from all non-Christians. But it was never changed.”

“Why.”

“They realised that no matter what system they would come up with, there would always be somebody that would be dissatisfied. Changing the taxonomy is very costly since all the libraries would have to move their books around.”

“So you played the role of the taxonomist and decided on the tree structure of your group?”

“We received so much pressure from our group leader to collaborate with each other and to publish as many papers as we could, that I volunteered to do an analysis of the publications of our group for a discussion at a group strategy day. Imagine circles representing the researchers. The size of the circles indicated the number of publications each researcher published in the last five years.”

“But researchers collaborate and hence co-author papers.”

“Correct. So I drew lines between the researchers. The thickness of the lines indicated how many papers these two authored together.”

“And what was the conclusion?”

“The full professors had large circles because every Ph.D. student has to be supervised by one of them. Those students

write papers on which the full professors are co-authors.”

“But the full professors don’t really work with the students. It’s the assistant and associate professors who do the ground work with the students.”

“That’s why this type of authorship is also called ‘trophy authorship’.”

“So did the researchers collaborate a lot?”

“Once in a blue moon. There were some teams, but the strongest links mirrored the hierarchical structure of the group. The full professors on top get everything, the assistant and associate professors get the publications of the Ph.D. student they co-supervise and just sometimes two assistant professors collaborated, keeping in mind that the assistant professors compete against each other for their promotion.”

“How did the researchers react in the meeting to these revelations?”

“They were furious! In particular those whose circles were small or who were more isolated in the network.”

“I guess you put a finger in an open wound. In public.”

“Now you start to understand why I am in this room.”

“That was my actual question,” I said.

“It is a gentle reminder from the senior management team for me to consider a career option elsewhere.”

“They want to get rid of you?”

“That depends on whom you ask.”

“And are you going to leave?”

“Not just yet. There are too many interesting things to do.”

“Yes, I was wondering what your research is actually about.”

“Oh, that is a story for another day.”

“I will have to come back then.”

“It would be my pleasure.”

I paused and Professor Smith gave me the time to gather my courage.

“I am also in a bit of trouble right now.”

“Here at the university?”

“No, more at home. With my wife.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“My wife does not seem to have much sympathy for me anymore. She is stressed out all the time with the children and

with her life. And most of all she is angry with me all the time. I don't want to hurt her in any way, but she feels criticised whenever I explain anything to her. I am not allowed to have an opinion at all."

"Is she happy living here with you?"

"She hates this country and she thinks that she has given up her career and her life to be with me and the children."

"A husband can be very convenient for being angry at. That way she does not need to be angry at herself."

"That might be the case. I'm sorry to bother you with this."

"You're not alone, Rob. Many of us went through similar troubles. Promise me that you will continue to come back and we will talk about it."

"Thanks. I guess I should get going. I am planning to buy some boxes today for the LEGO bricks."

"The boxes are only the beginning. You also need to have a structure for random access."

"What?"

"A shelf."

"I get it. Sorry, I'm bit slow today. I got up early and Hao Lui gave me a private lecture."

"I hope you enjoyed it."

"I'm afraid that I have to sit his exam now. Good bye then."

"Take care Rob."

—∞—

I could barely keep my eyes open. It was only 3 p.m., at least two more hours to go.

This is useless. Whatever I will write now I will have to rewrite tomorrow. I might as well just leave. I started early enough.

I bicycled home and Maki was surprised to see me back so early.

"What are you doing here?"

"I was tired and couldn't concentrate any longer. I will use the car for a little while."

"What are you going to do?"

"I need to buy something from the D.I.Y. store," I dodged.

"Do you have a shopping list?" she asked provocatively.

"Why? Do you want to synchronize?"

“Just leave.”

I walked into the garage, opened the car, sat down in the driving seat and connected my phone to the car's stereo. I browsed through my vast music collection, first using the artist's name, then by album, but I could not make up my mind. I switched to browsing by genre. The absence of any song or album entitled 'unknown' filled me with pride. A music collection is only useful if you tag every song. Maybe some Saint Etienne would be nice for the drive.

The traffic was not too bad, but on the way back I would most certainly get into the rush hour. Driving to the hypnotic beats and sugar sweet voice of Sarah Cracknell was just wonderful and no red traffic light could corrupt my good mood. Even parking was easy and, full of hope, I entered the shop of good resolutions. Too many of my purchases here had ended up on the shelf in the garden shed, never opened and consistently giving me a bad conscience. Not this time.

The immense variety of sizes, concepts and stacking options of plastic boxes in aisle 17 made my heart beat faster. The cheapest option was stackable, nearly square boxes.

Almost like LEGO bricks. But what did Mark say about random access? He is so right. If I wanted the bricks in the bottom box then I would have to first take all the boxes on top away. I would be busier rearranging boxes than finding bricks. I actually need drawers.

Some stackable plastic drawers that were intended for office supplies were at the end of the aisle but \$39 seemed rather expensive. A distinct increase in the pressure in my colon alerted me. Not now! Maybe other options are available at the furniture section.

When I returned to the central aisle that spanned from one end of the hall to the other, I noticed a glow from a large box that was stacked on top of a pallet in the middle of the aisle. With a humility not unlike a roman catholic approaching an altar I advanced towards the chrome promise of ultimate systematisation. A seven tier bin rack with 22 organisational bins. Three distinct bin sizes and a six piece bin divider included. Even bin labels were included. 'Easy slide-out bins that tilt for convenient access'. The shelf even had wheels, so I could easily roll it into the garage and back. This is it. THIS is

it! This is the true O.C.D. porn. Yeah baby. Sort me baby, sort me good.

I walked back to entrance to pick up a trundler. When I returned there was no more ignoring the pressures in my bowel.

Damn it. I have an emergency kit in the car, but I might not be able to make it.

I parked the trundler and raced towards the sign that indicated the direction of the toilets. I kept my buttocks tightly pressed together. Around a corner and down an aisle I reached the white oasis of relief. I entered the male toilet only to find both cubicles occupied. Damn it, damn it, damn it. Sweat appeared on my forehead. Both cubicles remained silent. No ripping of toilet paper or flushing. I could feel how number two turned into a pressure of ten to the power of two.

Hold it Rob, hold it! Oh no, I can't!

I stormed out through the door and right across to the ladies' bathroom. I was about to yell 'Sorry, emergency!' but luckily nobody was in the room. A short dash into the cubicle and I was safe for the moment. The belt, the trousers, the underpants, off, off you go, keep it in! Then rapidly sit down, release. A moment of relaxation passed.

Oh dear, this will take a lot of paper. I started to clean myself. Half way I flushed to get rid of the mountain of paper, hoping that it would not cause a blockage. More paper, more cleaning. One thing at a time. I flushed again and after the water tank had refilled I listened carefully. Nobody appeared to be in the room. I dressed and dashed out of the cubicle, right back into the male toilet to wash my hands.

Okay Rob, you survived this one. You damn baby. You should wear diapers.

Slowly I relaxed, smelled my hands, washed them again and walked back to the trundler.

The box was huge and heavy. My back was rather unforgiving towards such heavy loads, but this was a place of kiwi masculinity, so I lifted the box onto the trundler by myself. Any D.I.Y. endeavour would result in at least some blood loss, but so far the gods of home improvement were on my side. I forced the trundler to the cashier and the \$199 convinced me of the quality of my choice. My plastic money was accepted and

the receipt was stored. Getting the trundler to the car was easy, but getting the box into the trunk was another story entirely. I flipped the back seats over and my attempts to manoeuvre the box into the car eventually caused a bare-feet-shorts-and-t-shirt-mate to have mercy on me.

“Need some help?”

“Ahem, well, I actually could.”

“Let me give you a hand.”

I grabbed the box on its side as hard as I could but my newly found savour hardly needed any assistance. He swiftly pushed the box into the back of the car.”

“Sweet as.”

“Cheers, mate!”

“No worries.”

The mate went on his way, probably to a rugby match, and I returned the trundler before driving off. My phone selected ‘Nothing can stop us now’ as the next track and I could not agree more. The cars in front of me merged into the exact right spaces. I felt like receiving the 1x4 Tetris brick after I had painstakingly built a 9x4 cliff. I would clear those four rows in a single stroke.

“I’ve never felt so good,

I’ve never felt so strong,

Nothing can stop us now!”

I parked the car in the driveway and it turned out that getting the shelf out of the car was much easier than getting it in. I slid the box onto a moving dolly and manoeuvred the box into the garage. There, I opened the cardboard box and started the assembly. The unusual noises attracted the attention of the girls and they poked their heads into the garage.

“What are you doing?” Camellia asked.

“I’m building a shelf.”

“Why?”

“Because then we can sort all the bricks into the bins.”

“That’s going to take forever.”

“It won’t be that bad. It will be fun.”

“I’m not sure.”

Maki joined the gathering.

“What is that?”

“A shelf.”

“Why do we need that?”

“I will sort all the LEGO bricks.”

“Don’t you have more important things to do?”

“It’s my hobby.”

“Where are you going to put it?”

“In the living room.”

“I don’t think so.”

“The shelf has wheels, so I will bring it into the living room to sort the bricks. We can then wheel it to wherever we want.”

“It will not stay in the living room.”

“That’s okay.”

“Maybe you can fold the laundry?”

“I want to assemble the shelf first.”

“Whatever.”

Maki turned around and Camellia looked concerned. Poppy just followed Maki back into the living room, while Camellia said, “Can I help you?”

“No worries, I will quickly put it together.”

“Are you all right?”

“I am okay.”

I wished I could have said this more convincingly. Camellia approached me and gave me a hug.

“I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you too. Everything is okay. I will just build this shelf and then I will join you in the living room.”

“Okay.”

The instructions did leave considerable room for interpretation, but the logic of the assembly was easy enough to understand. After an hour the shelf and all its bins were ready for operation. I wheeled it into the living room and placed it against one of the walls. The laundry basket on the sofa caught my attention. Before I could get started on it, Maki yelled, “Dinner is ready!”

After the dinner was eaten, and after the children were bathed and put in their beds, I could barely keep my eyes open as I sat on the sofa. It was only 8:15 p.m., but it had been a long day. I did not even notice Maki entering the room.

“We need to talk.”

A sudden flash of panic flew across my face. This can’t be good. Why does she want to talk now? I’m tired!

“About what?”

“Last night.”

“Yes, that is probably a good idea, but I’m extremely tired and I’m not sure if my arguments will make any sense.”

“That is okay.”

“What do you want to tell me?”

“Well, you really did drive me crazy last night.”

“I noticed. You wanted to physically hurt me. That’s a behaviour that I can’t tolerate.”

“Not tolerate? Why don’t you start caring about me? Then I wouldn’t have to freak out like that!”

“I’m sorry, it appears to me that you keep on increasing your level of aggression towards me. First you started swearing and now you hit me. I don’t mean any harm to you. And I think that partners shouldn’t want to hurt each other.”

“If I don’t keep complaining then you don’t listen to me at all.”

“Maki, that is…”

“Don’t ‘Maki’ me! I am not your student!”

“Okay, okay. If you want my attention then you can have it. If you feel bad or lonely, just ask for a hug! You can always get a hug from me. If you attack me then I feel the need to defend myself. I’m not able to handle it otherwise.”

“Very nice lecture, Professor Park!”

“I am not trying to lecture you. I am just explaining my point of view. I am not trying to fight with you.”

“But you always have such great arguments. You are always right, aren’t you?”

“No, I am always wrong. One way or the other I find a way to annoy you and you have the need to complain about it. I am always the bad guy. I am tired of being the bad guy.”

“And I am tired of getting lectured by you. I am not a little child.”

“I know that and I never thought otherwise. I really don’t know why you feel that way. I didn’t mean to harm you and I am usually only trying to help. If I tell you that there is a better way of doing something then I only tell you this because I want to make it easier for you.”

“I already know how to do it. You don’t need to tell me. And your ‘better way’ is usually much worse. You just don’t

understand me. I am trying so hard to run this household and this family and it is never good enough for you.”

“I never said that!”

“But that is how I feel. And you don’t care about how I feel.”

“We are going in circles now. I already told you that if you feel lonely or need a hug then you can just come to me.”

“No I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because then you win.”

“This is not about winning or losing. Where does that come from?”

“Never mind.”

Silence.

“I am really at my end. Shall we call it a night?” I asked.

“I am not done.”

“I am.”

Both of us sat on the sofa for a while, staring into the emptiness between us.

“Is it okay if I go to bed now?” I asked again.

“I don’t care.”

“Do you want a hug?”

Maki hesitated.

“Just leave me alone. I am going to watch some drama.”

I almost said ‘Don’t stay up too late’, but I caught my tongue before my ‘lecture’ escaped into the night. Back in my room, I made a resolution. If she ever attacks me again, then I will throw her out of the house. I will not let her hit me again.

Friday

Back from work, I sat in front of the computer. 37 new email messages. 8 Facebook notifications. 872 new RSS posts. This is endless. I opened a couple of emails but was unable to gather enough energy to act upon them. Only the quick delete or the move into my folder structure seemed possible.

This is just too much. Why can't they leave me alone? I can't get any work done if all I do is responding to emails.

"Daddy!"

"Whoa, Poppy, don't surprise me like that."

"Daddy, can we watch TV?"

"Why don't you play a little bit more? Maybe you can draw me a nice picture?"

"But I want to watch TV!"

"Poppy, playing is more fun and it's also much better for you. Maybe you could cook a little meal for your pets? You could set up a restaurant."

"No, I don't want to. I want TV." Poppy insisted.

"Poppy, not in that tone of voice."

"I want TV!"

Her voice started to tremble.

"No Poppy, go and play."

"いいんだよポピー、テレビを見ておいで," Maki interrupted.

"うん!"

Poppy ran off leaving me in a bewildered state of shock.

"Maki, you can't do that."

"Do what?"

"I was having a discussion with Poppy and I made a decision. If you contradict me then the kids will soon figure out

whom they have to ask for what. It is okay for you to disagree and we can certainly talk about it, but that needs to be between the two of us and not in front of the kids.”

“But I don’t want to discuss this with you.”

“Why is that?”

“Because you are always right.”

“That is not true. I make a lot of mistakes. But you can’t cut me out like that. How am I supposed to raise the kids if you don’t work with me?”

“You are not raising the kids, I am.”

“Yes, you spend more time at home with the kids, but I am still their father and I want to raise them as well.”

“You wouldn’t be able to spend a single day with them.”

“Of course I could.”

“I’d like to see that,” Maki said.

“You just need to give me the opportunity. But you can’t accept me in my role as a father. You want to be in control of everything concerning the kids. Even if I don’t agree with your ways you still want me to go along. But why can’t you do the same the for me?”

“I am their mother!”

“And I am their father,” I responded.

“Oh here we go again, see, you are always right.”

“That is hardly an argument for anything.”

“Fuck you!”

“Don’t you dare swear at me!”

Maki raised her fists but the cold look in my face changed the direction of her anger.

Make my day Maki, just make my day! I will not allow you to hurt me again!

She grabbed a small dustbin and threw it with all her might across the room and into the window. The glass shattered and the shards scattered on floor and the garden terrace.

The bang of the impact and the jangle of the glass could be heard across the house. If the girls were already concerned about their parents shouting then this disruption caused them to panic. Both ran into the dining room.

“Stop!” I shouted, “There are shards everywhere. You will cut your feet. Leave! Put on some slippers and wait in the living room!”

Fear was written all over their faces and they obeyed my commands. Maki still clenched her fists and her breathing was harsh and abrupt.

"I'm not going to deal with this. You broke it, you fix it!" I said.

"Whatever."

I left for my room and threw myself on the bed. An enormous wave of anger swept across my chest, filling every cell of my body with an unbearable tension. My stomach turned inside out, releasing a gush of acid into the back of my throat. A deep, black loneliness set in, limiting my field of view. Unable to think or to move, I heard Maki making a phone call.

And even now I will still have to pay for this. We really should have separate accounts. She always gets away with these things. All the shards are scattered on the terrace and on the grass. The kids run around there without shoes often enough.

I got up, crossed through the house and stepped into the open. I bent down and started to collect the shards. They were everywhere and a single one could make the life of the children a misery.

The glazier arrived shortly afterwards, replacing the broken window. I avoided the man who tried to strike a casual conversation with me. I focused on grooming the grass, looking for the sparkly reflection of the sun.

After the glazier left, I sat down on the floor in front of the LEGO boxes. I did not look at, or talk to, Maki. Instead, I picked a colour and spread the bricks out across the floor. The monochrome ocean of shapes was intimidating.

How will I ever be able to decide on the categories? How can I define what bricks will go together? Maybe I just start with bricks that I am certain that I have a lot of. That way I will be able to fill a whole bin. I have a limited number of bins.

I picked the most basic 2x4 bricks and threw them into a large bin. Each clack of a brick hitting the plastic enclosure of the bin was an affirmation. My mind focused on this one task and all other thoughts were pushed out of my consciousness. No more broken glass, not more dispute and no more Maki.

"Can I help you?" Camellia asked.

"No, I have to do this by myself."

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, Camellia, but thank you for wanting to help. Just watch some more TV.”

Maki crossed the room to get to her room and the disdain in her eyes cut me into pieces.

It seems like I have a lot of 2x2 bricks as well. That could be another bin. And while I am at it, let's get the 2x3 out as well.

Three bins started to fill with Danish delights. The order that started to emerge from the chaos in front of me calmed me, soothed me, gave me purpose. The basic bricks started to approach the same fate as the Moa, they became extinct.

Time to move on to the next task. Let's pick basic bricks that are bigger than 2x4, so 2x6 and 2x8. That shouldn't take long.

There were fewer of these larger bricks and they were easy to spot. For now I put them all in the same bin.

I already used up four bins, I hope I have enough of them.

During the sorting I experienced a deep satisfaction from working on a task that was neither hard nor trivial and that I could master with excellence. The work flew. No, I floated through it.

Monday

The children kept Maki and me busy on the weekend and both of us avoided another conflict as well as we could. The freedom from disturbance should have allowed me to gather my strength, but in reality it continued to drain my energy. Keeping up the appearance of a tranquil family life was exhausting.

As the weekend continued I sorted most of the bricks of the first colour, leaving only a pile of weird bricks that I decided to collect into a miscellaneous bin. Whenever Maki complained about this or that I could calm down by sitting and sorting some more bricks. The initial chaos in the living room also subsided gradually. The weekend was as relaxing as any working day. I didn't return to work on Monday with any more enthusiasm than I had left it on Friday.

"Hey Profess..., I mean Mark, can I come in for a second?" I asked.

"Sure Professor Doctor Park. It is always a pleasure. How have you been?"

"Well you know, sometimes you loose and sometimes the other team wins."

"I hope you at least enjoyed the game."

"Well, some of it. See, I had this strange sensation on the weekend."

"What drugs did you take? Can I have some?"

"I'm sorry, I sold my stash to Hao. No, seriously, I started sorting the bricks and while I was working on this rather tedious task, time just passed. Before I knew it hours had passed and the chaos in front of me was turned into a tranquility of order. A perfect order."

"Seems like you experienced 'flow'."

“As in?”

“As in ‘flow theory’. It is one of the two seminal contributions of Mihaly.”

“What’s the other one?” I asked.

“To have the most unpronounceable family name in science: Csikszentmihalyi.”

“Chick sent me high?”

“That’s him.”

“And what is so important about his flow theory?”

“It explains the influence of task difficulty and your skill level on your mental state.”

“As in?”

“If you’re not very good at a task and the task is very easy then you probably experience apathy. When you are very skilled and the task is very easy then you feel relaxation.”

“That’s what I experienced when I sorted the bricks by their colour. It was easy to do and I guess I was pretty good at it.”

“If you hadn’t been then your I.Q. would have been below that of a pigeon.”

“I feel better already.”

“When the task is difficult and you have no skills, like when you were writing your Ph.D. thesis...”

“Wait a minute!”

“... then you may experience anxiety.”

“Touché.”

“And when you have a high skill level and the task is challenging then you can experience flow. Does that sound about right?”

“I’m not sure if it was actually flow that I experienced, but I certainly felt in control when I sorted the bricks. Finally something that was.”

“What do you mean?”

“I wouldn’t dare to suggest that my wife is under my control. She is hardly under her own control.”

“Remember what Oscar Wilde said: ‘woman are to be loved, not to be understood’.”

“Yes, but what if your woman has no love for you?”

“Then you are married.”

“Aren’t you supposed to help me?”

“I’m trying. How is it working out for you?”

“I am starting to understand why you deserve this office.”

“In that case, I recommend that you return to your own cave,” Professor Smith replied with a smile on his face.

“Will do!” I said as I cheerfully left the room.

When I sat down on my office chair my email client threw a glaring 27 new message notifications at me. One message looked as unattractive as the next until I found Francis’s name in the list of senders.

Dear Rob, I have talked to a couple of friends and thought that it might be fun to meet up. Could I invite you for Wednesday evening at 8 p.m.? - Francis

Francis, I am looking forward to meet you and the others on Wednesday. I started my sorting project and it is going okay. The first colour is sorted and it is actually fun to do. I am just concerned that the children will ruin it within a day. Oh well.

Maki and the children were not home when I returned after work. My heart jumped when I noticed the large cardboard box at my front door. I parked the bike in the garage, and took off my helmet and jacket before picking up a cutter from the middle right compartment of my toolbox. I hurried through the internal door into the hall to the front door. My hand shook full of anticipation when I opened the front door and carried the parcel back to the garage. I put it down on the floor and cut it open with the swiftness of a caesarean. The smell of pine needles, beeswax and cinnamon resonated in my nose and gave birth to set 10224 ‘Town Hall’ and set 10232 ‘Palace Cinema’. I lifted the Town Hall box to feel its weight, shook it to hear the bricks rattle and put my nose to the box to smell the fresh print.

The noise of our Toyota entering the driveway vibrated through the garage door. Quickly I closed the box and put it up on the shelves, covering it with some packing material. I double checked that the boxes were not visible from Maki’s height. I carried the Palace Cinema into the living room where I put it onto the table. The girls rushed inside.

“Daaadddyyyy!”

“Poooppppyy!”

Poppy jumped into my arms and I swung her around.

“What is that?” Camellia asked pointing at the large box.

"That is a cinema. Would you like to build it?"

"I'm not sure. It's huge."

"We can build it step by step, and we don't have to search for the bricks since they're all in the box."

"I want to!" Poppy declared.

"Maybe you can help me with the groceries?" Maki requested while putting down two plastic bags in the entrance hall.

"Of course," I replied.

"Can we open the box?" Poppy asked.

"Yes, get some scissors to cut the tape."

I carried some bags into the kitchen while Maki continued to bring more from the car into the house. Eventually the stream of goods ended and, after she took off her jacket, she entered the living room. The children were on the floor, already opening the first plastic bags of LEGO."

"What is this?"

"It's a cinema." Camellia replied.

"Rob, what is this?"

"Oh, I'm going to build this with the children."

"You haven't even built any of your old models! Why did you buy new ones?"

"It's going to take some time to sort the bricks and I wanted to build something with the kids until then."

"How much was it?"

"A certain amount."

"How much?"

"I think I earn enough money to have a little bit of a treat for me and the kids occasionally."

"You mean a treat for yourself."

"No, I mean a treat for me and the girls. Right, girls?"

"Yes." Camellia responded nervously.

"The living room is a mess, bricks everywhere."

"That will change soon, I'm sorting it as quickly as I can."

"Whatever."

Maki dashed off to her room with her phone in her hand.

Here we go again. Let me guess what she is going to post on her Japanese Facebook page. `Why do I have to live with a husband that spends all his money on plastic toys when our girls have already more than enough toys? Why can't he play

with the toys they already have?’

Maki completely underestimating the power of Google Translate. As soon as one of our shared friends like her post I can see her rant and translate it.

I sat down on the sofa and took out my phone. See, didn’t take more than a few minutes. Copy and paste into Google Translate and here we go.

‘It is difficult is a mother. My husband gets to be a fun dad again generous now. I can they hear build a large Lego set. I that they are, so clean up and wear the clothes their homework, you have to fight the girls and all the time. They are grateful, it must be a help to me.’

Close enough. Yes, I am trying to be a fun dad.

I sat down on the floor with the kids and continued to build the great cinema. This time we could find all the bricks quickly and while Camellia was quicker in finding the right places to put the bricks, Poppy was much more careful. She spotted errors easily.

It only took another thirty minutes before I got hungry. I stood up and poked my head through Maki’s door and our daily dinner script unfolded. The tension between us remained but we did not explode.

After dinner Maki sat down with Camellia to catch up on her Japanese homework while I cleaned the kitchen. She took out the various folders and booklets and put some on the kitchen table.

“Today we are going to learn about counting words.”

“Like one, two, and three?”

“No, more like counting things. Such as apples.”

“Mummy, I know how to do that. Ichi ga lingo, ni ga lingo, san ga lingo...”

“I am sorry Camellia, that is not correct. You need to use ko for apples. So ikko, niko, sanko.”

“So lingo ga ikko, lingo ga niko, lingo ga sanko?”

“Yes, let’s count sheets of papers. That would be mai. So one sheet of paper would be kami ga ichi mai. Kami ga ni mai, kami ga san mai and so forth.”

“Why do I need to use mai and not ko?”

“Because ko is only used for small compact objects and mai is used for flat objects.”

“But how do I count a small sheets of paper?”

“Well, that would still be mai.”

“And how to I count bunnies?”

“Hiki.”

“And people?”

“Nin.”

“That’s funny.” Camellia said.

“How do you know which counter word to use?” I asked.

“You just have to know the categories,” Maki replied.

“How many categories are there?”

“Lots.”

“How many?”

“I don’t know. Maybe more than a hundred.”

“Seriously?”

“Well, that includes all the special cases. The most common add up to around 30.”

“How did you come up with the categories? You must have categorised all the objects in the world. And how do you make sure that there is no overlap? How would you count very flat animals?”

“Rob, I am doing homework with Camellia.”

“I’m sorry, I find this very interesting.”

“This is not science, this is Japanese.”

I returned to the dishes and Maki continued with the homework. After the children were in bed Maki immediately retreated to her room and I put some ambient music on in the living room.

Let’s get to it. I certainly do not have enough bins so that every shape would get its own bin. I have to merge similar bricks into a single bin. So I have to find features that they share and that defines that category. This category is then on a higher abstraction level than each of the individual bricks. But when a bin overflows, then I will have to separate its contents into two.

The dividers allow me to split a bin into three compartments. The bricks in these three compartments should then still be more similar to each other than to the bricks in another bin. And the bins adjacent to each other should be more similar to each other than the bins further apart. This is very much like the matrix that Eleanor Rosch described. The subordinate level

is the individual brick, let's say a green 1x3 slope. The basic level is equivalent to all 1x3 slopes and the superordinate level is all slopes.

How on earth am I ever going to solve this? It almost looks like a mathematical problem. I wonder if it's possible to calculate the best solution. There must be a better way of doing this. It can't be just a social consent.

Tuesday

The morning had been filled with giving lectures and answering emails. A desktop lunch was followed by an afternoon of numbing tiredness. No more information could flow from the computer screen into my brain and actually remain there for more than the instant it took my perception system to receive the stimulus. Everything that was read or looked at disappeared from memory immediately.

In an attempt to regain some mental capacity, I started to walk the corridors of the department. The physical activity felt good and it gave everybody else the impression that I was on my way to some important meeting. I strengthened this illusion by carrying some random papers I had found at the group's printer. Nothing more impressive than a professor hastening to a discussion of highest academic significance.

When I passed through the staircase on the third floor I ran into Mark who looked at me with a devious grin.

"Professor Doctor Smith, I noticed that you carry that very important paper I had suggested to you earlier today. You must be on your way to an important meeting."

"Yes Doctor Park, and I notice the seminal work of Professor Doctor Marco Alberto Pantani-Contador in your hands. I assume you have read his previous work?"

"Haven't you?"

"I would very much like to discuss their results with you in the confidence of my toilet."

"After you Professor Smith."

"Right this way."

Right before the office door Mark opened the lid of a recycle bin and, in passing, I swivelled my paper into it with the

elegance of an Italian chef handling pizza dough. Mark imitated the deposit.

“For later research.” Mark commented.

We entered the office and took our established seats.

“How is your sorting coming along?”

“Steady progress. Certain structures seem to emerge. A bin can be subdivided into three compartments and I have to come up with a label for the whole bin.”

“So you’re looking for a more abstract term to describe the content of the whole bin?”

“Yes, it’s a bit like going into a library and browsing through their catalogue.”

“Do you still walk to the library?” Professor Smith asked.

“Not really, but when I pick up a book I at least browse around that particular shelf. Sometimes I discover relevant books this way. I think it will be similar for the LEGO shelf. When I am looking for something like a slope I will see all sorts of slopes in the direct vicinity.”

“But you will have to stand in front of the shelf to browse the bricks. For the library you have an online catalogue and can search it from the discomfort of your workplace.”

“If I wanted to search for my bricks with the help of a computer then I would have to know exactly what bricks I have and where they are stored.” I said.

“I hope you start to appreciate the labour of librarians a bit more.”

“Good point. How did they come up with the idea to catalogue books? There were index cards B.C., weren’t there?”

“B.C.? Before Christ?”

“Before Computers!” I replied.

“Oh. Not just index cards. They came much later. Before those there were inventory lists. How else would you keep track of the thousands of manuscripts archived in the Royal Library of Alexandria?”

“Having a list is a very primitive form of organising. Similar to defining planets by naming all its members. You want to have an organisational principle that goes beyond that. In the case of books you may want to sort the list alphabetically,” I said.

“Or you could sort books by their physical properties. Many

libraries used to sort their books by their sizes. If you want to sort the books by their content then maybe its title could be a good summary, but that assumes that every manuscript has a title and that it is using a single alphabet. You may also have to sort books in languages that do not use your alphabet. The title of a book might not be the best description of its content, in particular when we are considering novels.” Professor Smith explained.

“So you need to have a system for describing the content of books.”

“Welcome to the world of taxonomies.”

“Am I going to get lectured again?” I asked.

“That depends on whether you are willing to listen?”

“Will there be an exam?”

“Only an intramuscular one.”

“What kind of an exam is that?”

“You will have to walk out of this office using your own legs.”

“I can handle that. Proceed, doctor!”

“There are two main questions about taxonomies. What is a good structure and what is a good way to develop them,” Professor Smith said.

“Can we start with the latter because that is the exact problem I am working on right now? I had no idea about how I could come up with a good sorting system for the bricks.”

“So what did you do?”

“I just started with some obvious examples and then the whole thing developed from there.”

“Your approach could be described as the bottom-up approach. You start with concrete examples and then create higher-level terms based on your initial order¹⁰.”

“What do you mean by terms?” I asked.

“Good question. For the description of books, taxonomies assign terms to books. They’re similar to the features you may use for your bricks, such as their colour. You may use the term ‘blue’ to describe a brick and a taxonomist may use the term ‘history’ to describe a book.”

“But ‘blue’ is not a feature, it’s an attribute of the feature ‘colour’. My bricks could have many different colours, but the feature to distinguish them by remains their colour.”

“And there you have a difference between a taxonomy for describing the content of books and a taxonomy for describing objects. You need to think of ‘terms’ as a feature that can be present or absent, but I know that this is inefficient for bricks.”

“Very much so. If I applied the book taxonomy system to my bricks then instead of having one feature ‘colour’ with multiple attributes, I would need to have a large tree structure such as: is it red? Yes or no? In case of no, is it blue? And so forth,” I said.

“You’ve got it. What you’re describing is called a binary tree, since it has exactly two choices at every node. But there is another difference as well. In some trees the branches carry names. Let’s consider the tree of life.”

“You mean the work influenced by Linnaeus?” I asked.

“Correct. There are features that define the branches of the tree, but the branches are also given names, such as mammal. This is similar to finding a name for your bins and tiers.”

“That’s nifty. It looks to me as if all the taxonomies for books consist of such named branches.”

“That could be the case. Let’s take the example of the Library of Congress Subject Headings. Care to have a look?”

I walked around Professor Smith’s desk and looked at his screen.

“Let’s search for ‘LEGO’. There we have it. It has one narrower term ‘LEGO Mindstorms toys’ and one broader term ‘toys’. Let’s click on that one.”

“That’s a huge list. Amish toys, baby rattles, bathtub toys, benbros toys, blocks (toys)... That’s just a list of different types of toys. LEGO are blocks from one specific company. Should they not be under the ‘blocks’ term?” I asked.

“Good point. There is supposed to be a clear level of inclusiveness. Remember what Rosch said? Every LEGO brick is a toy but not every toy is a LEGO Brick. Let’s have a look at the ‘blocks’ term.”

“Oh, it has no narrower terms and only the variant ‘building blocks (toys)’.”

“It is useful to list variations of the same term.” Professor Smith explained.

“I’ve seen a similar tree structure on Bricklink recently. I was looking for an old Space set that I used to own.”

“When you say ‘looking for’ you mean ‘shopping for’?”

“Yes, but that’s another point entirely. The LEGO themes were also organised using a tree. ‘Classic Space’ was a sub category of ‘Space’. Even worse, there were two ‘Batman’ themes. I couldn’t tell the difference.”

“Let’s have a look,” Professor Smith said.

“Here, Batman I is on the top level and Batman II is under the Super Heroes category.”

“Hmm, looks like Batman I was sold before the Super Heroes theme existed.”

“That would explain it. Still, it makes no sense to have two Batman categories,” I said.

“What you’re struggling with is a fundamental issue in taxonomies. It would require very specific criteria to give every object its one place in the hierarchy. Only experts would be able to navigate through the tree.”

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Indeed. In the tree of life the branches are defined by features. Mammals are defined as ‘animals that have hair, three middle ear bones, mammary glands, and a neocortex’. Notice that it is not a single feature that distinguishes them from birds or reptiles but four of them.” Professor Smith explained.

“What’s your point?”

“Are you certain that a platypus has a neocortex?”

“No.”

“Do you know what exactly a neocortex is and where you would find it in an animal?”

“Somewhere in the brain,” I replied.

“So you see, it would take an expert to determine if a certain animal has a neocortex.”

I walked back to the sofa and relaxed in its softness.

“I don’t want to become an expert librarian to be able to browse their catalogue. I just want to have a look at what books they have on a certain topic.”

“Exactly. So the taxonomy has to take into account what terms their users would use to describe a book. Different people might use different terms and hence it is necessary to not only include variations, but also related terms.”

“But that wouldn’t explain the multiple occurrences of ‘Batman’,” I said.

“Patience my young apprentice. People don’t only use a variety of terms but they also perceive them to have different levels of inclusiveness. Furthermore, it might even be appropriate for a term to occur multiple times. Batman may occur under the terms Publishers > DC Comics > Batman as well as under Fiction > Super Heroes > Batman.”

“But then we no longer have a clean Aristotelian tree structure. We have a mess,” I protested.

“Rosch would have argued that the people are inherently messy in how they organise their world and thinking without it would be like thinking like a computer, which is not thinking at all.”

“So a plane does not fly because it does not flap its wings, as Drew McDermott put it,” I pointed out.

“Don’t shoot the messenger. But the definition of consciousness is a different discussion anyway. What I wanted to say is that what you call a mess is actually a network of connected nodes. It just does not represent a tree anymore. And this network works for the people who use it.”

“Except that you can’t place a book in two places at the same time. Each book still needs its place in the library. We need tree structures.”

“That is why we have index cards and meta data in general. The information about books is typically stored in a computer database and hence the information is not physically constrained. A book can be in multiple categories in a database.” Professor Smith explained.

“I’m sorry Mark, I have to disagree. Even in a database there is exactly one record for each book that is stored in exactly one place on the hard disk. A database can use cross references though. Imagine a library in which not only books are stored, but also little cards are placed in the shelves that point to other books. In a library this would be inconvenient since you would have to walk over to another shelf to have a look at that book. Even index cards would still take you a considerable time to go through. But the enormous look-up speed in a database enables you to follow such pointers and look at the other book without any delays. It may look like the book is in multiple places, but fundamentally it is still in just one.”

“That is a technical point of view. Why would I care about how it is implemented if the consequence for me is that it appears to be in two places?” Professor Smith asked.

“You should care since the power of computers can only be exercised on data, not on the objects themselves. Computers may help us to search through meta data, but they can’t make a shelf longer or a book smaller. You need to understand the limitations of computation if you want to fully harvest its power.” I explained.

“I see your point,” Professor Smith said.

“Luckily books can be perfectly represented through data. The text of a book is nothing but a string of characters that can be stored in a computer...”

“... hence we can actually store a book in two places at once,” Professor Smith interjected.

“The storage is the lesser problem. The presentation is. A book is stored in a computer typically by nothing other than differences in voltage. This representation of data is completely inaccessible for humans. Only once this data is transformed into a visual pattern on a screen does it become useful for us again. You can digitise many objects and store the data in a computer, but it will only be a useful tool for mankind if you are able to present the data in a meaningful way.”

“So man is the measure of all things?” Professor Smith asked.

“I am not certain about that, but would you not want your sorting order to work for you? What’s the point of having an order and not being able to use it anyway? The order is meaningless in itself. You order the bricks so that you can build models. Would you not want to have an order that helps you build, an order in which the bricks that you use most often are easily accessible? You should optimise both, the sorting time and the retrieval time,” I said.

“Hmm. You have a point there. But collectors would probably think differently. I could imagine that they would spend a considerable amount of time contemplating the right order of storing and presenting the items in their collection.”

“Possibly, but they have a different purpose. They would rarely retrieve items and they certainly wouldn’t want to play with them,” I said.

“So the quality of a taxonomy is determined by how useful it is for its users?”

“I think that an ideal order would be inherently useful.”

“The two are not mutually exclusive. You might even be able to sell your LEGO taxonomy.”

“How?”

“There are several companies that create commercial taxonomies, such as ones that describe the different types of businesses. They also have platforms in which you can offer your own taxonomy.”

“So I could get rich with my ideal order?” I asked.

“I would think that the market for LEGO taxonomies is significantly smaller than the market for taxonomies that can be used for libraries,” Professor Smith pointed out.

“Coming back to our discussion about libraries, I actually think that they should be organised differently to start with. I don’t browse much through the shelves any more to search for books, I use the computer for it. The library system could just give me a serial number and the books could be sorted by those numbers. It would be much easier to find a book and, dare I say, store it as well.”

“Then the library itself would be useless without the computer system. The placement of a book right now contains information about its content. This would be lost.”

“If the users of the library predominately use the computer to access its content, then the decrease in deposit and retrieval time would make it worthwhile. Even further, those index cards you mentioned, they make sense in a system where the retrieval time is very high. Instead of walking to the shelf to look up the book, you have a summary on a 4x6 inch card. The taxonomy of topics is also organised on cards that you go through one at a time. But modern databases allow you to compose complex queries, such as all Batman figures from the year 2006. You can search for all the terms directly without them being in any form or structure. It’s like combining two index cards at once to search for a book.”

“Now you are talking about tags.”

“Yes, and these tags can come from librarians as well as from the readers themselves.”

“Those would be called a folksonomy,” Professor Smith

explained.

“Call it whatever you want. But that isn’t the end. Many libraries, publishers and companies are currently transferring their printed books into the digital age. New books start their life in the computer already, only old ones need to be scanned.”

“Is Google not involved in this?”

“Yes, they have several agreements with libraries and they are scanning like crazy. The great advantage is that the books become available online directly. This is particularly valuable for books that are otherwise inaccessible.”

“Yes, I tried once to gain access to an historical book. My request was denied because I was not properly trained in handling ancient documents,” Professor Smith said.

“Scanning these books makes them available for everybody. The British Library, for example, made digital copies of its original Gutenberg Bible available online¹¹.”

“All right, you can scan and publish books on the internet, but how does that change the taxonomies of libraries?” Professor Smith asked.

“Once the books are digital, you can make their content searchable. Instead of searching in the meta data, you can search in the books directly.”

“But then you assume that the algorithm that sorts the results of your query is more powerful than categorising books manually. Have you ever tried the automatic summarise function in Microsoft Word or as a service in Mac OS X?” Professor Smith asked.

“No, I haven’t.”

“Believe me, it is.”

“It is what?”

“Exactly!”

“It doesn’t really matter anyway.” I said.

“Why?”

“Because soon people will stop going to the library all together. With the arrival of good reading devices and the internet there’s no reason to go. Why walk there if I can have the book delivered to me right away. This already happens with the research papers I read. I don’t walk to the library and check a certain issue of a journal, I search the web and get the PDF file directly. I think Amazon already sells more ebooks

than printed books. This is the future Mark, good bye good old paper.”

“I’m not ready for that,” Professor Smith admitted.

“How come you know so much about taxonomies anyway?”

“Because I read books. You should too!”

“You are actually right. Here I stand discussing all these topics when I could just read books about them.”

“You’re a social animal.” Professor Smith said.

“No, seriously, I really should read into this. Do you have any recommendations?”

“You could try ‘The Discipline of Organizing’ by Robert Glushko¹², or ‘Everything Is Miscellaneous’ by David Weinberger¹³ for a start. I have a copy if you want, but you would, of course, want to have the ebook?”

“Well, maybe I could...”

“Don’t get all 20th century on me now. You just proclaimed the end of paper.”

“Maybe just this last time I will use the paper books. What about the famous Eleanor Rosch?”

“Her book chapter ‘Principles of Categorization’ is available for free online⁷. Just google it.”

Wednesday

The wind was cold but at least it wasn't raining. I put my bike against the wall, locked it and rang the bell at Francis's house.

"Welcome Rob, I was a bit concerned that you might not make it."

"I'm sorry for being late. The children and the wind held me back."

"No worries, just come in and warm up. The others are already here."

"Thanks Francis."

I took off my jacket and followed Francis into the living room.

"This is Rob, he works for the Christchurch University of Technology. This is Peter, Lucia, Samuel and Roman."

"Hey Rob," Roman said, "You found it all right?"

Roman was a slender black-haired man with a friendly smile.

"Yes, it was just the wind and the children. Sorry to make you wait."

"Don't sweat it. We were just discussing the latest sets that are going to be released. I have my eye on those new Arctic sets. It's been a while since they had that product line in the stores."

"Must have been in 2000," Samuel remarked, "I still have the whole series from back then."

Samuel was a bit younger and with his brown hair and eyes he gave a very welcoming impression.

"Maybe we should do a quick round of introductions," Francis suggested, "I can make a start. I'm Francis and I have collected LEGO for the last 40 years or so. I have a good

collection and I have a special interest in Technic and trains.”

“Well, I’m Roman and I collect Space, Castle, Pirates and some other things. I also create MOCs.”

Roman noticed the question mark in my face.

“As most of you probably know, MOC stands for My Own Creation. Models that do not come in a box, but that you create yourself.”

“I have a few MOCs as well,” Francis commented.

“Maybe it’s my turn now? I’m Peter and I collect Technic. I have most of the sets.”

Peter’s hair was already grey, but still full. He wore glasses and a full moustache decorated his upper lip.

“Do you really mean all of them?” Francis asked.

“There are the few odd ones, but yes, I should have them all.”

“Whoa,” I noted.

“Hmm. My name is Lucia and I collect Architecture and I also create MOCs.”

Lucia had spoken with a soft voice while her black hair and almond eyes remained mysterious.

“I’m last then. Again. So, I am Rob and I do have some LEGO but not very much. I recently came out of my dark age. I used to like Technic and I bought some Star Wars sets when they came out. Now I’m buying sets for my daughters.”

“All right then,” Francis said, “Have you all seen my LEGO rooms?”

“Not me,” Lucia answered.

“Do you all want a quick tour?”

Everybody nodded and Francis took us around the house. We shared memories of the old sets that were on display and commented on some special parts that the models contained. There was an immediate connection between us and the love for the brick was the easy topic of the evening. I felt accepted and understood and so did the others. Instead of the usual refutation, there was curiosity and a feeling of belonging. We ended the tour back in the living room.

“Ladies and Gentleman,” Francis said, “it’s been wonderful discussing the latest brick developments, but there is something that Rob and I have been thinking about and that we would like to share with you. Rob, would you like to explain?”

“Sure, well, you see, all of you have these wonderful collections and MOCs, would it not be great to share them with a larger audience? We could put a show together.”

“Where would we do that?” Samuel asked.

“Well, the university probably has a couple of large rooms. I could ask around and see what’s available. The university should also have tables and chairs, I assume,” I replied.

“That might be possible, but how will the people know about the event?” Roman inquired.

“There’s a children’s festival all over town in the winter, sponsored by the city council. They print a brochure that’s distributed to all the schools,” Lucia pointed out.

“It would be good to do it in the winter anyway because then we don’t have to compete with the weather. Parents would be thrilled to have something to do with their children during the winter school holidays,” Francis concluded.

“What would you be able to show?” I asked.

“I could easily fill eight tables with my Technic collection,” Peter offered, “but I’m not sure if I would want to display them in public. My colleagues might come by and see me with the collection. They would make fun of me for months to come.”

“Maybe you can think about it. Could you at least allow us to set up your collection at the show?” I asked.

“You wouldn’t know how all the sets came together. If nobody is attending the display then some models might also get broken or taken.”

“I understand your concerns. I don’t have a good answer but I promise to think about a solution. And maybe you might end up enjoying showing your collection.”

“And I could set up my large train layout. Children love watching trains,” Francis elaborated.

“Thank God it is only children that enjoy trains,” I commented, which caused a short chuckle across the room. Even Francis smiled.

“I’m sorry, you’re right Francis. Anything that moves will attract a lot of attention. I could put together my line following R2-D2 robot. It could drive around the floor,” I said.

“I have a few good Space scenes. It might cover two or three tables,” Roman offered.

“I am so looking forward to seeing that,” I admitted, “I love

the Classic Space. I recently ordered the Galaxy Explorer on Bricklink.”

“I have one too,” Francis confessed.

“Me too,” Peter revealed.

“Lucia, what would you like to exhibit?” Francis asked.

“I could probably fill a table or two with my Architecture sets and a few MOCs,” she replied.

“That would be awesome,” Roman exclaimed.

“We probably still need to find more AFOLs,” Francis said. “Maybe you know of a couple more?”

Samuel replied, “I know a handful of people I could ask.”

“That would be great. So are we going to have a show?” Francis asked.

Most of them nodded, but Peter and Lucia looked nervous. My excitement completely took over my heart.

“Great, I will find a good room for us tomorrow. We have about half a year to get it done. Should be possible,” I said.

A vibration in my pocket demanded attention. I took it out and, while the others continued to discuss their collections, I read the message from Maki.

“When are you coming home?”

I wish never.

I replied “Almost done.”

The spirit in the room was high but I could no longer join their enthusiasm. The impending encounter with Maki already made my stomach growl. I felt like a Mega Blok amongst these true LEGO fans.

“I am sorry Francis, I have to leave.”

“Oh, all right. Is everything okay?”

“Not really. My wife.”

“Let me show you out.”

We both got up and, while I put on my jacket, Francis asked, “Is your wife okay?”

“I think she hates me having fun with LEGO.”

“That’s not uncommon. But it’s usually not the brick. Maybe she wants more of your attention.”

“I think so too, but when I’m with her she complains about me.”

“That’s tough. Maybe you should go and see a counsellor?”

“I guess so. See, LEGO is one of the few joys in my life and

she is still trying to kill it. I don't know what I did to her."

"Maybe it is not you. Maybe she is just unhappy with herself."

"But isn't it my duty to make her happy? I am her husband."

"There is only so much you can do."

"I feel like I have already bent my soul for her. She hates my parents, she dislikes her own parents. I had to give up so much to please her. But then again, she says she did the same for me."

"And did she?"

"Her life certainly changed as well, both with the children and with her moving away from Japan."

"Is she happy here?"

"I thought she would be, and there was an improvement when we arrived, but now we are back to where we left off."

"Problems have a nasty habit of travelling with you."

"There is no escape."

We paused in sympathetic silence.

"Well, I'd better get on my way."

"Take care of yourself, Rob, and may the brick be with you."

"Good night Francis."

When I arrived home, I noticed a light shining from Maki's door.

She must be still awake.

I put the bike in the garage and, when taking off my shoes and jacket, I grunted a short, "good night" at the direction of her door. There was no reply and I was grateful for being spared.

I got myself ready for bed but could not stop thinking about whether there could be such a thing as a true and ideal order, or whether the quality of an order can only be determined by its usage. In the latter case, the order would be ever-changing and relative to the humans using it. If the order was truly ideal then it would be fixed and eternal. I put on my favourite audio book again while my thoughts were still circling around the true and ideal order. I listened to the narrator pronouncing Pirsig's ideas¹⁴:

"To do this, Plato says that Immortal Truth is not just change, as the followers of Heraclitus said. It is not just changeless being, as the followers of Parmenides said. Both these Immortal Truths coexist as Ideas, which are changeless,

and Appearance, which changes. This is why Plato finds it necessary to separate, for example, 'horseness' from 'horse' and say that horseness is real and fixed and true and unmoving, while the horse is a mere, unimportant, transitory phenomenon. Horseness is pure Idea. The horse that one sees is a collection of changing Appearances, a horse that can flux and move around all it wants to, and even die on the spot, without disturbing horseness, which is the Immortal Principle and can go on forever in the path of the Gods of old."

A comforting thought. There can be an ideal order for the bricks and there can be the concrete, changing appearance of an order. Both can co-exist. I don't need to make a choice.

My body sank a bit deeper into the bed and it took only a few more moments for me to follow my mind into the eternal blackness of sleep.

Thursday

The canteen was not good, but not bad either. Once in a fortnight I felt the need to indulge myself in all the unhealthy options the canteen had to offer. The domestic academics would sit here more often, but it was a surprise for me to encounter Professor Smith slurping a soup by himself.

“Lunch and entertainment, I am lucky today,” I approached him.

“Professor Doctor Park, how nice of you to stalk me here.”

“There is no escape from me.”

“I have noticed. How is life treating you?”

“I met with Francis and some other friends yesterday to talk about starting a LEGO show.”

“You get together for the first time and immediately decide to show off your jewels. Why am I not surprised?”

“We are young and need the money.”

“Why don’t you do some proper work instead?”

“Like reading and writing papers?” I asked.

“That can hardly be considered proper. And most certainly not work.”

“Talking about indecent behaviour, I read a book about the old Greeks last night.”

“Not that drunken Epicurus?”

“No, I went pre-Socratic.”

“Now I am curious,” Professor Smith replied.

“So, prior to Socrates we had two schools of thought that both upheld the existence of an eternal truth. Heraclitus and his followers believed that the truth is that everything in the world is changing. Plato is often cited as describing Heraclitus’s doctrine of change as, ‘you cannot step into the same river

twice’.”

“I already told you this before.”

“I know, but allow me to put his idea into another context. The other school of thought was founded by Parmenides who claimed the exact opposite of Heraclitus. All change is just an illusion. Nothing ever really changes.”

“This is indeed the conflict that Socrates, or shall we say Plato, resolved. He distinguished between the changing appearance and the eternal ideas,” Professor Smith replied.

“Exactly. There is an eternal idea of horses that never changes and the particular appearance of a horse that can change.”

“This is all very interesting and I am happy to engage in this discourse, but what does it have to do with your sorting problem?”

“I was torn apart between the conviction that an ideal order exists and the realisation that the quality of the sorting would depend on the relative whims of its users.”

“So?”

“I came to the conclusion that these two are not mutually exclusive. Following Plato there can be an absolute and unchanging ideal order and a concrete appearance of such an order. They don’t need to be identical.”

“That must be a relief for you,” Professor Smith replied.

“It certainly is. I can happily continue searching for an ideal order while still making the best of what options are available to me.”

“Since you are the probably the sole user of your brick collection, the sorting order will be done according to your whims?”

“Why would I care about other peoples’ order?”

“You might want to talk to them about your bricks. This requires not only a taxonomy, but also a nomenclature. Have you figured one out yet?”

“I’m afraid I missed that detail. Could I use the branches of the tree to give a brick its name?” I asked.

“Yes and no. Linnaeus used only the last two branches to name all the living things. If he had used a word from every level of his taxonomy then the names would have become so long that they would be impossible to use in a conversation.”

“So I need to defines names?” I asked.

“I would recommend using the nomenclature of Bricklink. That way you can be reasonably certain that other AFOLs will understand you.”

“Naturally. It does actually feel good to create an order. I can transform the mess into an order in which it ought to be. It’s an old and deep satisfaction that I get from tidying up. It makes the collection, and my life, habitable. Messiness is a disruption.”

“Talking about a mess. You are planning to apply for a promotion soon, aren’t you?” Professor Smith asked.

“I have my annual talk with my group leader next week.”

“Do you see that guy over there next to Adam?”

“Yes.”

“The Innovation Processes and Business group has just hired him as an associate professor.”

“So?”

“His CV is online and you can check his list of publications on Google Scholar and Scopus. His name is Bret Kramer.”

I typed Bret’s name into the search engine on my phone.

“There are several Bret Kramers, but only one in that research field. But that can’t be him since he has hardly any publications or citations. He would never meet the promotion criteria.” I said.

“He matched the one criterion that mattered.”

“Which is?”

“He is good friends with Adam.”

“I don’t get it. There are much more qualified researchers in our department waiting for a promotion. Why do they demand that we fulfil the promotion criteria when they hire whomever they want at any level they want?”

“Rob, you are so naive. That is exactly the point. It is the most brilliant move I have seen so far.”

“What’s so brilliant about it?”

“With the promotion criteria they give everybody the illusion that if they fulfil them, they will get a promotion. So the academics work extremely hard to meet those unrealistically high demands. As a matter of fact, the criteria have enough ambiguity in them that they will always find a stick to beat you with.”

“But why would they want to do that? They’re already at the top of the hierarchy.”

“If everybody became professors, then nobody is professor. Their status is defined by denying it to others,” Professor Smith explained.

“So why did Adam make Bret an associate professor?”

“Because he can. He has to demonstrate that if you serve him loyally then you can get a promotion.”

“That sounds very much like the mafia.”

“Oh, it is. Alexandre Afonso has already written an essay¹⁵ on how academia resembles a drug gang.”

“What?”

“I’m not joking. The essay is based on the work of the economist Steven Levitt and sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh. They analysed the internal wage structure of a drug gang, which is extremely skewed in favour of the leaders¹⁶. Even working at McDonalds would be more beneficial than exposing yourself to the occupational risks of being a street dealer. Does that sound familiar?”

“Well, the chances of getting shot at the university is rather low, but the low income for postgraduate students, the immense job insecurity for post-docs, and the insane work load for tenure track staff is indeed, how should I put this, threatening. You only find out if you have a career in academia once you are around 40. It’s very much a become-a-professor-or-die-trying type of process.” I said.

“Yet neither drug gangs nor academia have trouble recruiting new staff.”

“That’s true, for every position that’s advertised we get hundreds of applications.”

“So you have an ever-increasing number of lower-level workers who forgo income and security for future wealth, and a small group at the top that has all the privileges and powers. This is considered a winner-takes-all market,” Professor Smith said.

“But this is also the result of how universities are being funded. We increasingly only get money for research projects that last for a year or two. Once the project is over, there is no more funding for those people.”

“Still, the university could offer permanent contracts and let

them work on consecutive projects. There is a continuous flow of projects coming in.”

“Why don’t they?”

“Because they can offload the risk onto the lower levels.”

“Because we are like the mafia?”

—∞—

Later that day we had our usual dinner procedure. Maki had prepared dinner and the kids were half eating half playing around.

“Sit down on your chair, Camellia. We are not finished with dinner yet,” I insisted. “That also applies to you Poppy, it’s impolite.”

“You can both leave, you don’t need to wait for me,” Maki said.

The two jumped up right away and ran off to the living room. I put my head between my hands, while my elbows rested on the table.

“Don’t make such a face!”

“Maki, you shouldn’t do this.”

“Do what?”

“If I ask them to do something then you need to support me. You are interfering with my attempts to raise the children. If you disagree about their table manners then we need to talk about it, but not in front of the children.”

“Interfering with your rules?”

“Yes, you are. And you undermine my authority. I can’t tell the girls anything because you tell them the opposite.”

“So what. When you’re out we do it my way anyway.”

I shook my head, got up and took some plates to the kitchen.

“Maki, this...”

“Don’t Maki me!”

“How am I supposed to address you?”

“Don’t lecture me!”

“Lecture, if only you were listening,” I murmured.

“(まか!)”

Maki followed my example and took some plates to the kitchen, placing them into the dishwasher. When she turned around, I moved her plates into another position.

“The professor is controlling the dishwasher again?”

"I'm just making sure that everything fits in there."

"It doesn't matter! If it doesn't fit then we run it again," she shouted.

"But that's inefficient."

"I don't care! You're so obsessed with order. Why can't you let go?"

Poppy and Camellia came back into the dinner area, sitting on their seats. They held each other's hands and stared at their parents.

"Let what go? Making sure this family and this household works?" I asked.

"It works fine, except for you. You are mentally sick. You should go to a therapist and have your head checked!"

Maki's body became stiff and her face raged with anger. Poppy put her fingers in her ears.

"I'm what? What makes you think that?"

"I actually read an article about Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and I think it is a pretty clear case. I found a questionnaire where you can test yourself."

"I might like order but I am not sick. You just don't understand the difference between a true mental illness and personality tendencies."

"Oh, here we go again, Professor Park, another lecture."

"I'm just trying to explain to you that..."

"Shut up!"

Maki lifted her fists into the air and approached me. I caught her fists when they rammed down, holding her by her wrists.

"You want to fight, do you?" I yelled. The world blurred around me and only Maki's distorted grimace entered my consciousness.

"We can do that. You can hit me, and I can hit you back. And that will hurt. I'm fed up with this! I will kick you out! I won't tolerate this any longer! You will not hit me again!" I screamed with all my might.

Camellia and Poppy stood up on their chairs, both crying their hearts out. Maki was trying to get out of my grip but I swirled her around, her arms twisted in front of her and held from the back by my powerful grip.

I screamed, "You are going now!"

“I didn’t want to hit you!”

“Bullshit!” I yelled.

I pushed her forwards in the direction of the front door. She let herself sink to the ground but I didn’t let go of her hands. I turned around and dragged her across the floor behind me. The children were crying in terror.

“Out, out, out you go!”

“I didn’t hit you.”

I pushed her over the sill and slammed the door after her. She immediately gripped the door knob to enter the house but I had already locked it.

“Go away! Go away! GO AWAY!” I yelled while pressing my back against the door. The first tears appeared in my eyes.

Maki hammered on the door, “Let me in! ぼか!”

Every beat on the door vibrated in my chest. The silence that followed sparked my fear. I held my breath.

Why did she stop?

I peeked around the door in time to see Maki disappear through the garden gate.

The back doors! The children!

I ran back into the dining room and took both girls into my arms. I could already see Maki through the kitchen window.

“Everything will be all right, it will all be okay,” I said to them while my tears flooded my face.

I carried the girls with their heads pressed against my chest so that they could not see Maki. But I could not block her yelling and both girls cried out loud, “Mummy! Mummy!”

I ran into the only room in the house that did not have a window. The walk in closet in Maki’s room. I switched on the light, and closed the door behind us. I sat down on the floor with both girls in my arms.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Everything will be all right. I promise.”

“I’m scared, Daddy! I want Mummy!” Poppy cried.

“You can’t go there now. I’m sorry. Mummy is very angry.”

Together we cried and cried, holding onto each other.

I could hear Maki running around the house, yelling insults and rattling on all the doors and windows. I could only hold onto the girls and provide them with protection. But it was really me who needed them to not lose it all.

What are we doing? We shouldn't fight like this in front of the children. I should not use physical force. This will damage them for life. How can I ever make this up? I ruined our marriage, I ruined the future of the girls. It is all gone.

The hammering and yelling outside subsided and I regained my composure. I hugged the children and enclosed them in my wide arms.

"It's all right. I'm sorry."

"What's going to happen?" Camellia asked.

"I don't know. But we will figure it out."

A loud bang followed by the sound of shattering glass disrupted our hug. The girls screamed and even I twitched.

"What was that, Daddy?"

"I don't know. Your girls stay here. You are safe here. I'll have a look."

"Don't leave us!"

"It's okay. I will have a quick look and then come right back."

I got up and the girls squeezed into the corner of the closet, holding each other in their arms. I kept the door open a little bit and walked into the corridor. I heard some noises from the utility room and slowly moved towards it. Shards were scattered on the floor and the pattern indicated that they came from the side entrance door. I looked into the room and found a wooden log on the floor. Maki's hand reached through the broken glass door trying to operate the handle without cutting herself.

"What are you looking at? You can't keep me away from my children."

"What did you do?"

"What does it look like?"

"Maki, be careful, you are going to cut your wrists!"

"Then open the door!"

They looked at each other and both our furies receded. I looked at the pile of glass fragments that surrounded the log and Maki noticed my red eyes.

I said, "We need to clean this up. The girls might hurt themselves."

"I will call the glass repairman again."

While Maki called the number, I returned to the girls.

“Mummy and Daddy need to talk a little bit. Can you please go to your room and play for a little bit.”

“What was that sound and where is Mummy?”

“Mummy broke the glass of side door with a log and she is now calling the repairman.”

“Can we talk to her now?” Camellia asked.

“Of course.”

They rushed out of the room, still holding hands. Maki knelt down and embraced them.

“I am sorry girls. I am so sorry.”

“I was scared,” Poppy cried.

“Me too!”

“It’s all right. Mummy and Daddy will work it out. Can you play for a little bit by yourselves?”

“Okay.”

Maki and I sat down on the sofa in the living room.

“Is the repair guy coming?”

“He’s busy and it might take him two to three hours to come here.”

“Shall we talk?”

“I’m sorry Rob, I wasn’t trying to hit you.”

“Of course you were. You raised your fists and came at me.”

“But even if I did hit you, it wouldn’t hurt.”

“That doesn’t matter. You can’t hit me.”

We paused for a little while before Maki continued, “You see, I used to get angry at my last boyfriend. I hit him as well and he used to take me into his arms. He held me while I was trying to hit him. In that very moment I felt truly loved.”

“I can’t do that. I’m sorry, but I don’t have the capacity to embrace you when you are trying to hit me. You really must hate me if you get that angry. You want to physically hurt me, Maki.”

“I don’t know. I just felt so angry.”

“I get angry too, but then I usually leave,” I said.

“And that drives me crazy.”

“Maki, what do you want?”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you want from our relationship?”

“Be happy.”

“And are you happy?”

“No, I am miserable.”

“We can work on that, but you need to know what it is you want.”

“Maybe I need a break from this relationship. Maybe we can spend some time apart. You could move out for a while.”

“I don’t do half ways. Either we do it or we don’t. I’m not going to have one of those on and off type relationships. So tell me, what do you want?”

Silence.

“What do you want, Maki?”

“Maybe it is time for a new direction.”

“What do you mean?”

“We should separate. At least for a while.”

My face froze and I could no longer move. The house crumbled in front of me.

“But then everything we worked for, everything we did, will fall apart. This house, our family, our future.”

Maki didn’t respond.

“I’m sorry, this is too much for me. I need to digest this.” I said and walked to the girls’ room where they nervously played with their dolls.

“It’s time to go to bed, girls. Can you please help us tonight and get ready quickly?”

“Yes, Daddy,” Camellia replied, “Come on, Poppy, let’s put on our pyjamas.”

The girls prepared themselves for the night and I stayed with them. Maki kissed them good night before returning to her own room. I kept my door open so that I could hear the girls. I should have felt angry, or sad, or anything, but nothing could fill my profound emptiness. My skin marked the border between the world and me, but this hull was all there was. A fragile layer that I called myself.

I fell asleep quickly but woke up again at 2 a.m. My thoughts kept spinning and no rest seemed attainable. I put on an audio book but even this would not overwrite my own pondering. A visit to the bathroom offered a small relief but not enough to kiss the prince of slumber. I got up at 6 a.m. and, to my surprise, Maki entered the kitchen not much later. We were in the same room, only inches apart, but I never felt further away from her.

“Morning.”

“Good Morning.”

“Did you get any sleep?” I asked.

“Not too much.”

“Listen, I don’t think we should rush into a decision. Too much depends on it.”

I went down on my knees and put my forehead on the floor.

“I am sorry Maki, I am deeply sorry for not being a good husband.”

“Get up, Rob. You don’t have to play this trick on me. It didn’t work when I tried it on you, remember?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t understand this gesture back then and apparently I am doing wrong right now. But what I said is true.”

“I need to think about it.”

Part Two

Friday

The office fans ran as they always did. At least this form of disturbance remained constant and predictable. Also Hao's arrival occurred at the usual late point in the morning. Life seemed unchanged, but for me everything was altered.

"Good morning, Rob."

"Morning, Hao."

"You look horrible."

"I feel horrible."

"Then allow me to cheer you up. I had a chance to think about your sorting problem and I might have found a solution. It's called hierarchical cluster analysis."

"That's wonderful. Thank you."

Hao had expected a witty remark, a banter of some sort. Nothing.

"Are you all right?"

"No, I'm not. I had a big fight with Maki."

"Oh, what happened?"

I felt far too ashamed of what had happened. How could I admit my actions and the failure of my marriage?

"It's a long story, but it was the worst fight we've had so far."

"Let me know if I can be of any help."

"Thanks, you've already been useful. I will look into cluster analysis."

"You also have the talk about your promotion coming up, don't you?"

"Next week."

"I hope that will work out for you."

"Me too. I've put a lot of effort into preparing my application."

I turned towards my screen and started feeding my search engine with terms. Before hitting the enter key I looked at the cursor.

Am I feeling lucky today? How much worse can it get? Yes, my search engine overlord, I feel so lucky. Make my day. And what a surprise, Wikipedia is delivering the good news.

For a while I tried to understand all the mathematical formulas but eventually I had to give up.

“Hao, I’m not sure if I understand this correctly, could you have a look?”

“Sure,” he replied while walking around our desk.

“The first thing I need to do is to find a way to describe the similarity of my bricks. For this I need two things. First, a way to describe them, and second a way to calculate their similarity based on these descriptions. Let’s use a simple example. I could assume that all my bricks have only two features, their number of studs and their height. The latter would be measured in a multitude of the height of a plate. A normal 2x4 brick then has eight studs and a height of three. A 2x2 plate would then have 4 studs and a height of 1. Their distance can then be calculated by using the Euclidian distance.”

“That sounds about right. What is your question?”

“How exactly do I calculate the Euclidian distance?”

Hao took a piece of paper and started to scribble on it.

“Let’s take the example of your brick b and plate p . If we put these two points into a Cartesian matrix in which the x axis represents the number of studs and the y axis represents the height of the bricks then we get a graph like this one.”

Hao completed the graphs with a few lines and points, carefully labelling each axis.

“The distance d between point b and p is then this,” said Hao as he wrote down the formula.

$$d(b, p) = \sqrt{(b_1 - p_1)^2 + (b_2 - p_2)^2} = \sqrt{16 + 4} = 4.47$$

“Okay,” I replied, “Let’s consider some more cases. They can also be put into the graph, right?”

“That is correct. The graph then becomes a so called Scatterplot in which each dot represents a brick, like this.”

Hao added more points to the graph giving all honour to the term scatter.

“I got that, but how exactly does the hierarchical cluster analysis work?”

“You first merge the two bricks that have the shortest distance between them. They form a new cluster that consists of at least two bricks.”

“Okay, but how can I then calculate distances? I now have multiple points in one cluster.”

“You need to find a new distance measure that works for clusters. There are some obvious choices. It’s possible to use the distance between the two closest points, or the two most distant points, of each cluster. Since the Euclidian distance between points is already defined here, it would be easy to calculate the distance between clusters this way, but a better way is to consider the distance between the centres of clusters because that represents a group of points. Every point in the cluster has an influence on the so-called centroid.”

“Hold your horses. Can you please demonstrate this on the example?”

“The centroid for the points b and p would be...”

$$C_1 = \frac{p_1 + b_1}{2} = 6$$

$$C_2 = \frac{p_2 + b_2}{2} = 2$$

“So the coordinate for the centroid for the two bricks is then 6 on the x axis and 2 on the y axis. I assume it would then be possible to calculate the Euclidian distances between any two centroids,” I said.

“Bingo! Step by step, the clusters would be joined until the last two clusters are joined into one. You might also enjoy a non-mathematical representation. The resulting cluster at each stage of the merging can be shown in a dendrogram graph. The horizontal axis denotes the rescaled distance at which the clusters merge.”

Hao sketched a dendrogram onto the paper with amazing precision.

“I’m not sure if this is an insult or what a rescaled distance is, but I get the point of the graph. So how does this apply now to my sorting problem?”

“Given that maybe only three bins are available in your rack, it is possible to start from the right side of the dendrogram and move towards the left. As soon as three horizontal lines are

available, the optimal solution is found and the definition of the three clusters is complete. If six or eight bins are available it is only necessary to move further to the left to find the optimal cluster. It's not necessary to define the number of clusters beforehand."

"This is pretty neat. Most of all because this tree is not using a single feature to distinguish clusters, but all features at the same time. The distances already calculated took two features, height and number of studs, into account at the same time. The dendrogram even gives me an idea on how to arrange the bricks in the shelf. Starting from the right, the first couple of divisions could be my tiers."

"That would be a good idea," Hao replied, "but the cluster analysis doesn't provide names for the branches of the tree, which would translate to names for the tiers in my rack. There is no label similar to 'mammal' in the tree of life."

"So it's up to me to look at the members of that cluster and assign an interpretation. I could, for example, call the topmost cluster 'tall bricks'."

"Yep. The advantage of a hierarchical cluster analysis is that the results can be represented in a way that's easy to understand. You can directly translate the results into the organization of your rack. Many other classification systems, such as neural networks, produce results that are at least as powerful in forming clusters, but the solution can't easily be interpreted by humans. Hence it would be very hard to label their results."

"But how do I deal with features that I can't express in numbers? The Euclidian distance is meaningless for features that can't be quantified. The presence of a slope on a brick can only be captured with a feature of the type yes/no, while other features, such as the brick's colour can best be described by their names," I said.

"These types of nominal data require a different type of distance measure, such as the Jaccard index, which is defined as the size of the intersection divided by the size of the union of the sets. Or more formally..."

$$J(A, B) = \frac{|A \cap B|}{|A \cup B|}$$

"I have to trust you on this one since I have even more

serious concerns. The hierarchical cluster analysis doesn't consider that I may have more bricks of one type than another, that some bricks might be bigger than others and may fill up a bin quicker, and that the sizes of the bins in my rack differ. Moreover, there is one issue that cluster analysis can't solve. The rack has exactly 22 bins. A hierarchical classification of the bricks would already be useful, but an optimal solution for exactly those 22 bins is required. Can the hierarchical cluster analysis guarantee that it will end up with the exact number of clusters necessary? At a certain point in the dendrogram, the tree might split in a way that either too many or too few clusters become defined."

"If the exact number of bins is known beforehand, then the k-means algorithm can be used. In this algorithm, k number of points that form the initial centroids are defined up front, either by randomly selecting centroids or by guessing possible centroids visually by humans. Next, the actual data points are assigned one by one to their closest centroids. With every addition to a cluster its centroid may change ever so slightly, resulting in points being reassigned to other clusters. The algorithm stops as soon as no more points change their association to a cluster," Hao explained.

I remained silent.

That is exactly what is happening to me. My family cluster is going to split. But I could not reveal this to Hao. Instead I half jokingly said, "Why can't relationships be like maths? It would be so much easier if you could calculate the similarity between people and form couples based on this calculation. You could even calculate the distances between families and hence find friends easily."

"I guess that online dating sites are already using algorithms like this to find matches for their clients. The Gottman Institute even conducted studies that showed that their method is able to predict the likelihood of couples staying together with an accuracy of 94%. There is method in the madness¹⁷."

Again I fell into silence. Yes, madness. I'm not so sure about the method. I will probably have to sign up for one of those dating websites soon.

Hao picked up the clue and walked back to his desk.

"Thanks Hao, this was really helpful. Math is always so

clear and simple.”

“Any time, Rob.”

—∞—

The morning passed and I was not sure if I was hungry or not. My stomach felt weird, everything did.

Time for some unhealthy food and lots of chocolate.

I took the lift to the eighth floor and consumed the most deep fried meal available. No feeling of satisfaction set in. I bought some chocolate, but even that did not taste like anything. Nothing made any sense and I couldn't imagine anything that could make me feel better.

On the way down another person in the lift had selected the third floor and in a spontaneous decision I stepped out as well. Looking more like a zombie than a man, I ghouled my way to Professor Smith's office. The office was deserted. No graves to rob, no dead meat to eat and no professor to get lectured from. Great. I looked at the mirror above the sink and noticed that my eyes were dark and puffy.

I will just sit on the couch for a little while. Maybe I will put my feet up. Yes, I am feeling lucky today.

Prince Valium accepted me into his realm and the nothingness of my existence was a true relief.

I woke up from a loud voice outside the door, which was a bit ajar.

“Yes, I will give you that book the next time we meet. No worries at all. Just come by later. ALL RIGHT?” Professor Smith said.

He must be talking to a colleague. He can't find me here sleeping on his sofa. How embarrassing.

I put my feet on the ground and noticed that a blanket covered me.

Where did the blanket come from? I didn't cover myself. Professor Smith must have been in here before. Oh, how embarrassing. He must have seen me sleeping. How long was I gone? I checked my watch and it must have been at least an hour. Damn. Enough time to walk across the whole campus! I put the blanket aside while Professor Smith kicked the door with his feet.

Oh, he is giving me a hint. He wants to spare me the

embarrassment.

Professor Smith pushed the door open and walked into the room backwards. Once he turned around, I was sitting upright with only the blanket on the sofa as evidence of my slumber.

“Oh, Rob, what a surprise. How are you doing?”

He is such a gentlemen. Pretends that he didn't see me sleeping just to save me from the embarrassment.

“Not too bad.”

“You don't look good, unless you have a zombie fetish.”

“Hmm.”

“Seriously, what's going on?”

“Maki wants to separate.”

“What?”

“We had a big fight and she doesn't want to go on.”

“I didn't know it was that serious.”

“Me neither. I mean, there are always good times and bad times in a relationship. I assumed that she would still want me. But it looks like I was wrong.”

“What exactly did she propose?”

“She wants a ‘new direction’, she wants to separate. Maybe for a little while, maybe for good.”

“And what do you think about that?”

“I am not a fan of on-and-off again types of relationships.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I don't know where I am at.”

“One thing is for certain, if you force a decision she will leave. If you want to keep her you will have to give her the room she needs to breathe.”

“But how am I supposed to live in the same house as her?”

“Consider her your roommate.”

“Roommate? Are you serious?”

“How would that be different from the status quo?”

“Well, there is the sex, well, not really. The children. She is still the mother of my children.”

“I understand. It will be a difficult situation for all of you. The children will probably figure out, at least subconsciously, that something is different.

“Mark, I understand rationally that this might be the way forward, one shouldn't dismiss a marriage quickly, particularly if children are involved, but I'm just not sure if I can handle

such an arrangement. I'm willing to compromise, hell, I've bent my soul for many years already, but that was all under the assumption that we fundamentally belong to each other and that we're both working towards our future. But she's not committed to our future any longer."

"I understand but I can't really advise you. There is no right or wrong path and nobody can guarantee you an outcome. The only thing you can do is try."

—∞—

The children were already in bed when Maki and I finally sat down together that evening. We had continued with our daily routine except that there was no physical contact whatsoever.

"Did you have a chance to think?" I asked.

"Not much, how about you?" Maki replied.

"I had a couple of thoughts, but maybe it would be better to start with what you want our relationship to be like."

"I don't know what it should be like. I only know that I need some time apart."

"How do you envision this to work with the children?"

"You could find a small rental place. You don't need much anyway."

"I'm not going anywhere and I am certainly not going to leave the kids."

"Why can't you just leave me alone? Why do you always make things so difficult?"

Saturday

The morning started earlier than I wanted. My shoulders hurt when lying on the side and my back was uncomfortable when lying on my back. I put on a fleece jumper and walked to the computer to select some music. Decibully - City of Festivals. I sat down and started to sort more bricks.

The 2x2 corners go into this bin, the 3x1 slope into the slope box. How did the users of Bricklink ever agree on a taxonomy and nomenclature? I can create my own order, but what happens if a lot of people have to agree on a single solution?

The basic bricks started to form a more stable pattern. While I had to merge and divide bins frequently in the beginning, it had become less frequent as more bricks were sorted. Reaching this stable plateau was better than any paracetamol. The only exception was my Technic collection. There were some obvious clusters, such as axles, tooth wheels, bushes and pins, but the immense diversity of parts did not grow into clusters. There were too many specialist pieces.

I need smaller bins for these. Looks like a trip to Bunnings again.

The children slowly got up and I welcomed them with hugs and kisses.

“Can we watch some TV?”

“You need to go to Japanese school this morning.”

“Just a little bit?”

Hey, I’m just a roommate. I don’t have to make the children go to Japanese school anymore. That’s Maki’s job now.

“Sure. Let me know when you’re hungry and want some breakfast.”

I covered the children in a blanket on the couch and

started the fire in the log burner before putting on the kettle. I prepared the tea and observed how the darkness slowly withdrew its grip on the day. It took another hour before Maki poked her head into the living room, still wearing her pyjamas. She carried her phone and asked the children to talk to their Grandparents via Skype. The conversation continued in Japanese for a while before Maki returned to her room. Through the slightly open doors I noticed that the tone of the conversation had turned serious. My name was mentioned a couple of times but I could not make sense of their conversation. Eventually Maki ended the conversation and returned to the living room.

“You need to go to Japanese school, girls!”

“Do we have to?”

I kept my gaze on the floor. Let her handle this.

“Yes, and it is late. Get yourself ready! Now!” Maki said before stomping back into her room.

“Would you like some breakfast now, girls?”

“Yes please. I want cereal,” Camellia requested.

“And I want rice with tuna and avocado,” Poppy explained.

“Get yourselves ready and I’ll get it for you.”

I took a bag of rice from the freezer and heated it in the microwave while cutting the avocado. The rice went into a bowl with the tuna, avocado and some soya sauce on top. Next I put some cereal in a bowl. Camellia recognised the sound and yelled from her room, “No milk, Daddy, just the cereal.”

“All right!”

Maki arrived in the kitchen and started the coffee machine. I observed her movements, the twirls in her hair, her dancing steps on the floor and the curves on her chest. How can she be so close and yet so far? The initial relief I had felt from not having to bother about the Japanese school was pushed aside by plain loneliness.

I couldn’t endure her proximity any longer and fled to my room. I opened Bricklink and browsed through the available Minifigures.

So many of them and such horrible photographs. They really deserved better. Maybe I should photograph them all and make a catalogue. That would be a worthy goal. I would become the Linnaeus of Minifigures.

Maki yelled at the children, pressing them to get ready. I should probably be there for them.

I returned to the dining room and helped the children to get ready. Maki continued to yell commands, while desperately trying to get herself ready.

This is not your fight, Rob. Let her handle this.

I calmly helped them into their jackets and shoes. Maki ordered the children to the car and I made sure they were buckled correctly.

“Have fun, girls,” I whispered into their ears and kissed both on their foreheads.

“Get away, I’m late!”

I closed the car’s door and stepped back. The engine howled when Maki accelerated.

The empty house was in complete silence and Decibully’s tunes flowed in the empty spaces. The scene on the dining table still held the presence of Camellia and Poppy. I cleaned the table and returned to sorting the bricks. Peace.

—∞—

The engine noise from the driveway announced Maki’s return but I did not bother to get up.

“I am so hungry. I am the only one who did not have any breakfast.”

“Go right ahead. There’s plenty in the fridge.”

“Can you join me? I would like to talk.”

The alarm bells in my chest rang.

“Sure.”

I sat at the kitchen table with a cup of tea while Maki prepared her food.

“We should go somewhere this weekend.”

I could not suppress my surprise.

“Where, how?”

“We could just take the car and go on a holiday in the South Island. Maybe Kaikora. It would be good for our family.”

“Where would we stay?”

“Just in a hotel.”

“Hmm, booking at such short notice might be expensive, but more importantly, what would our sleeping arrangements be? I guess we would have to book two rooms.”

“That is silly. We can just sleep in the same room and my parents would pay for it.”

“What do your parents have to do with this?”

“Let’s not get into this. This is a family honour matter.”

“I wouldn’t be able to sleep next to you! I would want to touch you.”

“Can’t you control yourself? It would be a good experience for our family.”

“I completely agree. It would be great to experience our relationship as something that wasn’t negative. We need some shared positive experiences. Maybe we could take a day trip to Akaroa?”

“That is just around the corner.”

“I also have another LEGO meeting tonight that I would like to attend.”

“You and your LEGO.”

“Yes, me and my LEGO.”

“Did you buy more sets?”

“Maybe.”

“Oh god, when will this ever end. You have money and time for LEGO but you don’t want to go on a holiday with me.”

“I want us to be together and I want us to work on our relationship. Maybe we should see a counsellor.”

“That would be useless.”

“I can’t bear being so close and, at the same time, so distant from you.”

“Whatever. Go and play with your LEGO,” Maki said before getting up to put her dishes into the dishwasher. I remained in silence for a moment before getting up.

—∞—

Finding Peter’s house was difficult as he lived in a holiday park outside the city. It got dark earlier each day and I had difficulties not only finding the entrance to the holiday park, but also finding the community hall where we were meeting.

The park was well maintained and I felt an immediate sense of having a holiday when I encountered all the families who were cleaning up their dishes in the community kitchen. It was already cold at this time of the year but it didn’t seem to stop the visitors. Peter welcomed me in the great hall, which was

heated by several fans.

“Did you find it all right?”

“It was okay, I haven’t been out here before, so I missed the entrance. This does seem like a very nice holiday park,” I said.

“It is and, since my work takes me all across the country, it doesn’t make sense for me not to bother with anything else,” Peter said.

“But where do you keep all your LEGO and, more importantly, where can you build?”

“I have an arrangement with the owner and he’s renting me a room upstairs. The others are already there. If you want to go on up, I will just get some biscuits.”

“Sure thing.”

I climbed up the wooden stairs to the attic where the rest of the crew were assembled. The room was filled with large plastic containers of bricks and models. Some large Technic models were scattered around the room. A young woman with a friendly face caught my attention. She had long, brown hair with a stocky body.

“Hey, Francis, Roman, Lucia and Samuel. How are you all?”

“All good, how have you been?” Francis replied.

“Busy. With moderate success.”

“That’s great. Let’s wait for Peter to return before diving into the planning. Rob, you probably haven’t met Daisy yet.”

“Hi Daisy, nice to meet you. What’s your LEGO project?”

“I mainly photograph Minifigures scenes and post them online.”

“Are you brickpick76?” Roman asked.

“Yes, that’s my alias.”

“I’m a big fan of your Flickr feed. Great to meet you in person.”

“Thanks. Well, that’s all I do with LEGO.”

“Could you maybe give me the address of your feed?” I asked gently.

I couldn’t keep my eyes off her and when our gaze met it lasted slightly longer than convention would allow.

“Sure.”

She took out a pen and an old receipt from her handbag. She carefully wrote on its back and handed it to me. Neither of

us said a word but the split second our fingers touched felt like minutes to me.

“I also have another question that you might be able to answer, since you have all been into LEGO so much longer than me,” I spoke to the group.

“Are you suggesting I’m old?” Francis asked.

“When you think you’re old, then you are.”

“Then I’m a teenager. With some experience.”

“So this Bricklink website. How did that ever come about?”

“Bricklink is the brainchild of Dan Jezek who created the website around the year 2000. He single-handedly developed the website and it grew since then.”

“But how did he come up with the inventories of all those thousands of sets? And how did he identify all those bricks?” I asked.

“He didn’t start from scratch. AFOLs have been inventorying sets way before him. There has been LUGNET and Peeron. The data was collected and validated by AFOLs. It has been a group effort.”

“Could they not just copy the data from LEGO’s database? I am certain that they must maintain their own data.”

“The LEGO company was initially not collaborative at all,” Francis said.

“They have been a very closed Danish company,” Samuel added. “So the AFOLs had to reverse engineer most of the part ID’s and inventories. They also had to come up with common names, such as ‘Wedge 3 x 3 Cut Corner’. By the way, does anybody have any of those in dark green?”

“I have some, how many do you need?” Roman offered.

“About 20 or so.”

“No worries, I will bring them along next time.”

I continued, “The Bricklink website looks pretty old fashioned, why don’t they update it?”

“Well, Dan died in 2010 and its development practically stopped until recently when the website was sold to a company in Hong Kong. They are supposedly working on a 2.0 version,” Lucia explained.

“But not without pissing off the whole community with their new ‘Terms of Service’,” Roman interjected.

I asked, “What about those terms?”

“Bricklink now claims ownership of all the meta data and photos that the community has provided over the years. A lot of volunteers dedicated their time to maintaining the catalogue,” Roman answered.

“Why would they make such a silly move?” I asked.

“The design and functionality of Bricklink is outdated and some competitors, such as Brickowl, have entered the arena. As Bricklink is the de-facto standard for identifying bricks, they used Bricklink’s data to organise their own catalogue. Bricklink doesn’t like giving its data to a competitor,” Francis explained.

“But you said before that Dan built his database on previous data from Peeron and others. So how could Bricklink claim ownership of that data?”

“Exactly!”

Peter entered the room with two plates filled with biscuits, which he placed on a table in the middle of the group.

“Please help yourselves!”

I was keen on some sugar and took the first biscuit.

Francis started, “Thank you all for coming tonight. I know that some of you have been very busy in the past week so maybe each of you can tell us what you have accomplished. Rob, would you like to start?”

Biscuit crumbs fell from my mouth as I attempted to speak, “Umm. Solly. Sorry. I have spoken to the facility management at the university and they’ve suggested the big auditorium. I had a look at it, and it does seem suitable. It’s a square room that’s usually used by the theatre programme. It has wooden floors, black curtains on the walls and it is at least 5 meters high.”

“How big is the ground floor?” Francis asked.

“I’d say maybe 20 by 20 meters.”

“That could be enough. What would they charge for it?”

“That’s the best thing! We can have it free of charge. I also asked for tables and chairs and they have a whole warehouse full of them. They use it for large exams. They even offered to deliver them to us with their truck.”

“That is excellent news,” Roman replied.

“I think so too. The university is actually rather supportive.”

“Should I go next?” Roman asked, “Well, I had a talk to the Children’s Festival organisers and they would be happy

to include us in their brochure. I think we should also have a website to advertise the event. Do you have any suggestions for a name?"

"Maybe we should have a web page for our club and then have the show as a sub page from there," I suggested.

"The convention is to use LUG for LEGO User Group," Francis said. "So we could be LUG something something."

"We would probably be the most southern LUG in the world," Roman pointed out. "In another club we use 42 in the name since we're 42 degrees south."

"And we have the core 4 by 2 brick. So how about LUG 4/2. I recently saw a logo that used the slash to symbolise the shape of New Zealand," I explained.

"That could work. Is everybody okay with this idea?" Francis asked.

The group gave their consent through ayes and nods.

"Samuel, have you been able to contact more AFOLs?" Francis continued.

"I visited ToyPlanet. There's a girl working there who is very knowledgeable about LEGO. Her name is Ray and it turns out she's a pretty big AFOL as well. She knows some heavy LEGO spenders and some of them even come to the shop just to talk to her. I asked her to join our meeting but she couldn't make it tonight. She promised to talk to some of her special clients."

"That could be a very useful contact. I guess we all buy at least occasionally from ToyPlanet," Lucia said.

"Looks like we are making some good progress," Francis concluded. "Maybe Peter can show us some of his MOCs? I am also very curious to find out what's in all those containers."

"Sure, let me get some out."

Peter pushed aside some boxes to free the view on a one and half meter long all-terrain crane. The group held their breath.

"This is a little something I've been working on. It isn't ready yet. The boom extends about a meter out and everything is motorised, including the stabilisers."

"That is amazing!" Daisy exclaimed, "Can you demonstrate it?"

"Well, just let me get this battery pack here switched on and this little thing here put back in..."

The boom started to extend and the platform slowly rotated towards them. None in the group dared to speak.

“Yeah, it still isn’t ready. I have a few other things in these boxes.”

He opened a few lids to reveal large Technic models.

“What is that chromed model?” Samuel asked.

“That’s a modified 5571 Truck from 1996. It was a beautiful model, but the original model didn’t have enough chrome on it. So I replaced as many parts as I could. Looks better now, doesn’t it?”

“It looks very special.”

“I haven’t convinced myself yet that I want to display them. Most of them are not ready. And I don’t want to be the laughing stock in my company.”

“Is it really that bad with your colleagues?”

“You work at a university with plenty of weird people. I work for a construction company where everybody is supposed to be ‘normal’. If they find out that I build with LEGO bricks, they will give me a hard time for months.”

“Or they could admire your models. They probably built with LEGO when they were young and they might also have children themselves by now. It would be such a great loss if we couldn’t display your models. We barely have enough models to fill the room.”

“I’ll think about it.”

The discussion continued with Peter showing more models which were all greeted with astonishment and admiration. Occasionally the conversation hopped to more general LEGO topics, such as special offers at toy stores or tales of great purchases at garage sales. In many other circles our revelations would have been considered odd, but here and now we dared to show our inner selves and were rewarded with acceptance and affirmation. I wished I could have stayed forever.

Monday

To: All Staff

From: Jan McRiley

Dear Department, We would like to welcome the Economic Innovation Science Group into our community. Prof. Dr. Adam Hummer is going to give an introductory talk about his research group today at 2 p.m. in the large lecture theatre. We hope that you will take this opportunity to learn more about the group and to meet its members. Yours truly, Prof. Dr. Jan McRiley, Dean.

“Now, this will be an interesting talk,” Hao exclaimed as he sat down in the lecture theatre.

“Finally we are going to find out what that research group is all about,” I responded.

Adam Hummer stepped forward and spoke into the microphone.

“Within the context of the department’s mission ‘Design Intelligent Systems, Products and Related Services’, the research mission of the Business Process Design programme is to ‘Design and Analyse Business Processes for the Design of Intelligent Systems, Products and Related Services’.”

“That is a total tautology, Hao commented. “It doesn’t define anything they do. This is good. I’m loving it.”

“In this context intelligent systems are defined as systems that consist of a set of products and/or services that have the ability to adapt their behaviour based on the situation, context of use, and users’ needs. The focus of the Industrial Design

Department is especially on those systems that are of benefit to individuals, societies and different cultures worldwide, as well as on the underlying problems and opportunities.”

This time Professor Smith whispered, “Again, what does this tell us about their research, he is just repeating the department’s overall mission.”

“He simply hijacks the department’s mission and declares this to be his own. Very clever,” I answered.

“Our group has the leading expertise in global business processes, with a special emphasis on big data and value change analysis.”

“Oh great, big data, I’m safe, since my research is about even bigger data.” Mark said.

“You call your data bigger data? Then my data is even bigger data”, Hao replied.

“Companies can only survive with Lean Development using Agile Processes.”

Hao whispered, “My chickens are also lean and agile, maybe they should apply for a position in his group.”

“They probably make more sense than Adam,” Mark giggled.

“Design strategies for human relations in services and intelligent solutions are the key for rapid growth while remaining flexible in the changing market environments. Our group analyses case studies that help use modelling trading behaviours. These models then feed into decision-making algorithms.”

“Oh great, he is producing more Flash Boys,” I said softly.

“I can flash you already, I don’t need algorithms for that,” Hao suggested.

“Case studies, case studies. What does that have to do with science? What is so special about studying cases? Just go to a shop and buy a case already!” I said.

“Are you talking about suitcases?” Professor Smith asked.

“Ain’t he?”

“True, I guess it’s difficult for him to transport his Armani suits. That’s a worthy research topic.”

“The knowledge we create will help businesses in this country to produce better results faster than ever before.”

“Try to beat me, flash boy,” Hao said while continuing to

fiddle with his zipper.

“We reach out to local businesses to help them harvest their true power of innovation so that they can conquer global markets.”

“A photo of my private parts on Twitter can achieve the same effect,” Hao suggested.

“Yes, but that’s hardly science,” I replied.

“And his innovations are?”

“He keeps on talking about innovation but I doubt he actually ever came up with anything truly novel.” Professor Smith said.

“He is mixing lots of important words.” I admitted.

“I like using big words too. They make me look metamorphosis.” Hao replied.

The audience applauded and Hao, Professor Smith, and I joined in, even more enthusiastically than the others.

“Bravo!” Smith yelled.

“Are you trying to get a promotion after all?” Mark asked.

“I just enjoyed every word he said. And it’s cheaper than buying a theatre ticket.”

“The show must go on.”

While the lecture room started to empty, I checked my email on my smart phone. 29 unread messages. Too many. Wait! There is a notification of our journal article. It’s been in review for eight months already. Please, please, please!

My finger nervously hovered over the email list item. The news was only a tap away, but I had to use all my will power to push my finger down. My eyes flew across the essential lines and my finger, first slowly then at an ever-increasing pace, fell down. My shoulders and arms all came down.

“Shit! Shit! SHIT! Insufficient scientific contribution? What is that supposed to mean?”

“You got a review back?” Professor Smith asked.

I looked at the comments of the reviews. Two of them had barely written anything and a third did not seem to have understood the statistical methods we had used.

“Eight months! For this! These comments don’t help at all. Fuck the review system! Fuck the reviewers, fuck the editors!”

“Don’t take it personally. Tim Berners-Lee’s first paper on the world wide web was also rejected. The reviewers didn’t

understand the importance of the internet. He was knighted later by the queen for the invention of the world wide web.”

“That was just a lucky break!” I replied.

“You are right. The review system has some flaws. Peter and Ceci already demonstrated that.”

“How?”

“They resubmitted previously accepted papers back to the journals in which they were published¹⁸. They only changed the authors and slightly adjusted the title. Most of the papers were rejected due to a ‘lack of scientific quality’.”

“That is insane!”

“Welcome to academia.”

“Fuck the review process!”

“I agree, but while we do that, could you please stand up and let us leave this cathedral of knowledge?”

“Sorry, yes, of course.”

I stood up and started to walk towards the door with the others following me like ducklings.”

—∞—

The heater in my office provided sufficient heat to be able to enjoy the view onto the gloomy coldness outside. The wind was battering the trees, urging them to give up their last leaves.

The frustration and anger in my chest were distilled by my cerebral cortex into a devious plan. If Peter and Ceci could do it, so could I. I selected the most prestigious conference in my field and randomly downloaded to my computer twelve papers from the last two years of the conference. The papers were obviously still relevant to the conference, but hopefully not fresh in the memories of the programme committee.

I then slightly changed the title and completely replaced the authors, inventing a few names based on a list of popular first and last names. Ethan Boroughs, that sounds like a solid name! The only thing left to do was to remove the page numbers and any other indications that the papers had already been published in the proceedings of the conference.

A rush of evil energy flew through my veins. Finally I could do something about this insanity.

The submission system will ask for the author’s email address. I can’t submit all these papers to the conference with

my name associated to it. It would be implausible that I would have produced twelve papers. It would then also be extremely easy for them to detect the other papers. All these fake authors need to have their own email addresses. Gmail. Let's use Gmail. So many academics are so fed up with their university's email accounts that they forward all their email to a Gmail account already.

Hao came back into the room and sat in front of his computer. I quickly switched to an innocuous browser tab.

"Hao, I received this strange email and I'm not sure if it's legitimate. If the author of this email wanted to conceal his identity, what would he have done?"

"You can't detect spam?"

"Well, this case is a bit more tricky. It's a long story. It might be a student, so I can't speak about it. If this 'student' wanted to conceal his identity to send an email, what do you think he would have done?"

"The easiest would have been a disposable email address. There are several services that allow you set up an email account for ten minutes. Just enough time to respond to a confirmation email from some whacky internet service."

"But what if the student wanted a longer-lasting form of communication?"

"You can easily set up a fake Gmail account. Doesn't take much effort."

"Would it still be possible to track such an email back to the sender?"

"You could embed a tracking pixel in a response you send to the student. From the log file of your web server you can then see the IP address from the computer on which the email was opened."

"And if the student wanted to conceal his IP address?"

"Then the 'student' might use a commercial VPN service."

"What's that?"

"A Virtual Private Network is a service that gives you an IP address. Those companies offer IP addresses in a variety of countries. It's used most often to circumvent geo blocking."

"... And what is that?"

"Many services are only available in the U.S.A., such as some music and television streaming services. They check your

geographical location by your IP address. If you use a VPN then you get an IP address from the U.S.A. and you can use the service right here in New Zealand.”

“And those companies would not be able to track it back?”

“They would notice that you are using a VPN service provider, but that, in itself, is not illegal. Also users from within the U.S.A. might use it to conceal their identity.”

Hao paused for a moment.

“Your ‘student’ really seems to be up to something. Are you okay?”

I hesitated. Could I really reveal my plan?

“Yes, I’m fine. Just trying to get to the bottom of this.”

“Let me know if you need any more help. Computer scientists always find a way.”

When Hao had left for a lecture I registered at a VPN service and used a different IP address for all of my submissions to the conference.

Good luck with these papers, dear programme committee!

I leaned back and my mind drifted towards little plastic bricks. Maybe I should have an internet alias for all my activities on the web. What was that alias that Daisy used?

I searched for the little pieces of paper that Daisy had given me. ‘brickpick76’ I read. A quick Google search revealed her Flickr feed. Whoa. These photographs are amazing? How does she get such great close ups with such a short depth of field? Daisy’s smile is just as cute as the standard Minifigure 3626bp01 grin.

While I was biking home the first doubts about my fake paper submissions bubbled up in my mind. Maybe I over reacted. I shouldn’t have rushed into this. Oh well, what could happen? They find a couple of fake papers. This could hardly be the first time. I guess that they have to deal with plagiarism more often. They can’t trace it back to me, so what could happen to me?

Wednesday

The university was only slowly awakening and I used the quietness to switch on the private browsing mode of my web browser, connect to the VPN network and visited the Gmail website. I filled in the credentials for Ethan Boroughs and besides the confirmation email of my submission a new entry had emerged in the email list.

Ethan

I am sure you know the drill by now...

Your paper Ubiquitous Computing is a direct copy from a CHI 2012 paper “Envisioning Ubiquitous Computing”. Why is this? CHI takes plagiarism very seriously. Please explain what happened before we take this further.

Liam

Crap! They found the paper! But why would I know the drill by now?

I logged out of the Gmail account and connected to another VPN server. Then I opened Gmail again using another of my fake author accounts. A similar email.

They probably found all my papers. Damn! I quickly logged off, disconnected from the VPN and closed my web browser.

What if they find out that I did it? But I only did a scientific study. I wanted to test the quality of their review system. Peter and Ceci must have faced the same problems. Easy now. No rushed decision. Let's think first.

I could just not reply at all and let it go. But then all the effort would be for nothing and nothing could be learned from this endeavour. They haven't identified me yet, so I could still continue. I could ask them for their support for my study. Hopefully they will understand the importance of the study and the reasons for its method.

I started to draft a reply and edited it several times before sending it using Ethan as my disguise.

Dear Liam,

We are replicating the study 'Peer-review practices of psychological journals: The fate of published articles, submitted again' from Douglas Peters and Stephen Ceci, published in *The Behavioural And Brain Sciences* 1982, 5, p 187-255. The study requires complete anonymity. We would be grateful if you would collaborate on this study and would allow the papers to enter the review process. It is a good sign that you have been able to catch this submission, but the true test would be how the reviewers would rate the paper. It would be of great value to the CHI community if we can evaluate our own processes. Of course this is an unorthodox study and the peer commentary of Peters and Ceci's paper will highlight many of the conceptual and ethical issues. The goal is to collect and evaluate the reviews. All papers will be withdrawn prior to publication. The results of the study will be submitted as an alt.chi paper later this year.

We are hoping for your support.

Only a few hours later I received a reply.

Dear "Ethan",

Thanks for your explanation of apparent plagiarism in your submission 475 to CHI. To support your replication of Peters and Ceci's work, we may be willing to advance your submission(s) to full review. Before doing so, however, we require confirmation of who you are and which institution you work for. I see Peters and Ceci took just 12 papers, does that mean you only submitted 12 copied ones to CHI?

Please let us know,

Liam

I drafted my response.

Dear Liam,

Thank you for considering supporting our study. Yes, we submitted several studies under different names. I am using this email account to communicate with you on behalf of the other fake authors.

We are concerned about revealing our identities since Peters and Ceci gave some clear warnings. After the publication of their study they were subject to considerable social pressure. I am certain that this study will also not be liked by many. We do understand that you would need proof of authenticity of this study. Is there any way we can achieve both? Would there, for example, be a chance to keep the experimenters in this study known only to one trusted person instead of the whole organisational committee? Our intention was to submit the results anonymously. We are not in it for fame or credit, but are simply interested in the quality of the review process itself.

I would like to nominate Henry Duff as a trusted person to which we are willing to reveal our identity. Henry is heavily involved in CHI and a well-respected person. Would that satisfy your need for authenticity? I could send Henry the list of fake paper numbers and you could cross check it with your list to confirm that it is legitimate?

I would like to thank you for your consideration.

Thursday

The binder under my arm was filled with papers. Lists of all the achievements I could claim. Most of it was based on the opinions of other people, which I considered counter intuitive. Academia was supposed to be all about objective truth but when it came to the evaluation of its members, it was all about 'peer esteem', a completely social and subjective parameter. I had created lists of publications, awards, press coverage, grants I had been given, anything to make me look good. I strode towards the office of the leader of my research group, Professor Doctor Martin Berg, to find it defended by a resolute secretary.

"Can I go in?" I asked.

"Let me check."

She walked around her desk and slightly opened the door and had a short exchange which resulted in her swinging the door open completely.

"Come in, Rob!" Martin said.

Martin was a short man with longer, dark brown hair. His superior office chair had to cope with an inflated belly that the buttons of his shirt could hardly contain.

"Hi Martin, how are you?"

"Fine, how are you doing?"

I took a seat in front of Martin's desk.

"All good."

"So, what do you want to talk about?"

"I was wondering if you've had a chance to have a look at my application."

"Yes, I looked through it."

"And what are your thoughts?"

"I think that you have done an excellent job. Keep up the

good work.”

“Would you consider supporting my promotion to an associate professor?”

“I’m not sure if you are quite there yet.”

“Well, I have the list of the promotion criteria and I checked them against the material I sent you, and I am under the impression that I fulfil all of them.”

“If you just tick the boxes then you might be under that impression, but we have to look at your application as a holistic portfolio.”

“What does that mean?”

“See, there are three classes of academic. There are the superstars and for these we can arrange a promotion within a day or two. That is not you. And then we have the academics who have a well-rounded portfolio and who have shown expertise in all the areas. That is not you either. And then we have the researchers who are just not there yet and whom we encourage to continue working on their portfolio so that they qualify in the future.”

“So what you are saying is that besides the official promotion criteria there is a second set of criteria that only you know?”

“You need to give a coherent portfolio and your application needs to give a mature impression.”

“I don’t know what that is supposed to mean.”

“If you don’t know what this means then you are not ready for a promotion.”

“But what about Bret Kramer then? He doesn’t even fulfil the official criteria. How could he be hired as an associate professor?”

“You really can’t compare these two cases. Bret might have some weaker areas, but he compensated for them with excellence in the other fields. Besides, he came with excellent references from the University of Auckland.”

“But how are the researchers in this department...”

“You really don’t need to concern yourself with the department and its policies. In the changing financial situation of the university, promotions are an exceptional tool to acknowledge true excellence. I expect that you to continue your good work. I think there is a deadline for your paper coming

up? And what about the preparation for the new special topic course. Is your funding proposal for the ministry finished?"

"I'm working on it."

"You should exceed our expectations and impress us with your success."

"I don't know how..."

"There is no 'don't know' or 'can't do'. In the global market for science and research you need to realise your full potential and take a leading role in the fostering of excellence. Good day, Dr. Park."

I didn't know how to respond. Martin turned his attention to some paperwork on his desk and the secretary opened the door. I stood up in silence and returned to my office where I threw my binder into the trash can. I crossed the room and sat at my desk. The sky was grey and rain clouds drifted towards my building. I stared into the drizzle. After a while I turned to my computer and searched my music collection for an appropriate song. Smiths, it's got to be the Smiths. Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now. Morrissey's voice filled the room and my brain.

"I was looking for a job, and then I found a job
and heaven knows I'm miserable now.

In my life

why do I give valuable time

to people who don't care if I live or die."

—∞—

Hao Liu returned to the room. I could not overcome the barrier of admitting my failure. Instead I opened my web browser and surfed to Bricklink. Minifigures.

They are cute. I should collect them. Let's have a look how many different Batman figures there are.

I put them into a new wish list and then searched the shops for one that could offer them all. I notice that Batman of Zur-En-Arrh cost \$443.

Shit. How am I supposed to complete the collection with prices this high? Another incomplete portfolio. Great. How about Toy Story Minifigures?

This time I checked the prices before I put them in a wish list that I then used to place orders in two Bricklink shops.

Collecting is meaningless. In the age of the internet it has become a pure financial endeavour. You just search for the items you want on the various trading platforms and buy them. What's the big deal? But why should a shitty piece of plastic cost \$443. That is an artificially high price that's only a result of third class nutcases like me who compensate for their unhappiness with retail therapy. Fuck you, Rob. Can't have a career, can't manage your marriage. This whole mountain of shit is just hopeless. I can't manage. I can't deal with it.

Following an unexplainable impulse I got up and left the room. Over to the elevators and up to the highest floor. I got out and hurried across the corridors. The pure desperation in my soul gave me a final push of energy. I felt light.

It is not going to be long now, just a few more steps. That is it. Just a few more steps and then you are free. Everything will be perfectly defined in its nothingness. No more uncertainty. Nothing to worry about any more. There has to be an access to the roof somewhere, there should be another staircase leading upstairs. I rattled on a door. Locked. Fuck. I pushed forward. Along the corridor to the other side of the building. I passed by many empty offices that were as abandoned as my hope.

No more need for a well-rounded promotion portfolio. No more fights with Maki. No more Camellia. No more Poppy.

Another door blocked my way through the corridor. Wait, the room on the left might bypass this door. I walked back, entered a large room and re-entered the corridor through a door at the far side of the room. I arrived at the second elevator, giving way to the second staircase. I could see stairs leading up through a security glass door. Locked. I smashed my fists against the closed door. Damn it. Fuck! Fuck! FUCK!

I collapsed in front of the door and the heat in my chest turned into tears. Images of Camellia and Poppy rushed through my head and tore my heart apart. No more Poppy. No more Camellia. I could no longer hold back my pain and cried out loud. The weight of my pain pushed me to the floor. I lay flat on the floor, not being able to move while my stomach cramped into a stone of pure agony.

I could hear the footsteps of people walking up and down the staircase on the lower levels. Nobody was aware of my location.

I am a total failure. I can't get up and I can't get down. What a fucking life. Life. Death. What's the difference anyway? This is probably the clearest category possible.

Minutes passed and the pain subsided slowly. The emptiness returned and after half an hour out of sheer boredom I took out my phone. 74 new messages, 12 Facebook notifications. I searched for the definition of life.

Wouldn't you know it? There is no agreement on even this very basic dichotomy. More than a hundred different definitions. Edward Trifonov even resorted to analyse vocabularies to come up with a definition¹⁹. And he's a molecular biophysicist. A scientist resorting to consider the usage of words? Wittgenstein would be proud of him. If even my own existence is not defined, how can I be expected to find an ideal order?

I became aware of the hardness of the floor and all the dust. I sat up and started to clean my clothes as well as I could. Slowly I got up and looked at the stairs. Not much else to do here. I started to walk down the stairs and the further down I walked, the more people passed me by. I paid no attention to them.

"Rob, how are you?"

I looked up.

"Professor Smith?" I asked.

"Are you okay?"

"Where do I start and where do I end?"

"That's a very difficult question."

"Shouldn't it be the easiest?"

"Mori already pointed out in his book 'The Buddha in the Robot' that there is no clear boundary between your body and the environment.²⁰"

"What do you mean?"

"When you eat an apple, at what point does the apple become a part of you?"

"When you eat it?"

"But when exactly? An apple in your stomach is still an apple. Even worse, your stomach and your bowels are full of life forms that are non-human."

"Is an alien going to pop out of my chest?"

"Bacteria! So you might be rather lethal to invaders from

Mars. There are actually more non-human cells in your body than human cells.”

“So I am an alien?”

“The mass of the human cells is much higher, so I would still count you as a human.”

“So if I kill myself, would I commit genocide?”

“Rob, are you okay?”

“Not really.”

I walked on, leaving Professor Smith behind.

I can't talk. I can't talk about it yet.

Back in my office I turned into Ethan again. A new message had arrived.

Hi

Henry Duff (copied in), my papers co-chair, and I have discussed this. It didn't really make sense just to disclose to him alone as he and I need to work together on the CHI programme.

We discussed it with the technical programme chairs (copied in) and conference chairs this afternoon at the chairs' regular meeting to decide the view of CHI as a whole. After discussion, it was decided that it makes more sense for you to deal with the technical programme chairs directly.

If we are to take this further, then we really need a full list of the papers you submitted. We also need to know who is involved in your experiment so that we can fully judge what you propose.

I replied.

Dear CHI Program Committee,

Thank you for giving us the chance to pitch our research project to you. Our goal is to test the reliability of the CHI review process. We are replicating the methodology described in “Peer-review practices of psychological journals: The fate of published articles, submitted again” from Douglas Peters and Stephen Ceci, published in *The Behavioural And Brain Sciences* 1982, 5, p 187-255. We submitted fake papers to the CHI2014 conference and we are planning to analyse the reviews

that these papers receive. The results of the analysis would be submitted as an alt.chi paper in December.

It is encouraging that Stephen has been able to detect twelve fake submissions. With modern software this is not such a difficult task and some conferences already use an automatic plagiarism check. This is a weakness of our study. We have not been able to generate twelve new papers that have been verified as CHI quality. Only previously accepted papers are. We changed the titles and abstracts of the papers to mask them, without fundamentally changing their content.

We have a unique opportunity right now. Allowing the fake papers into the review process will allow us to gain valuable feedback on the quality of our own processes. Needless to say, the review process is a matter of hot debate and this would be the first time we would be able to investigate it at CHI. If we stop the study right now, then all we could conclude is that semi-automatic plagiarism checks work.

This study is, of course, breaking with the social norms of the CHI community and we are certain that not everybody will appreciate our goals and our methods. Hence we do feel the need to protect our anonymity. We also believe that it does not actually matter who is executing the study, as the results should be independent of the experimenter. We do, however, acknowledge that you need to protect the conference against a hoax. We can assure you that this is a serious academic investigation being carried out from a research group at a university. We proposed to reveal our identity to an impartial ombudsman. Henry Duff might be a good choice. That way you would receive the certainty that this is a serious study and we will remain protected against the social consequences of the study. It would be a truly double blind study.

In essence, we need to convince you of the merit of this study and we also need to build trust. I hope that we have managed to convince you of the value of the study with this email and as a sign of trust, at the bottom of this email is the complete list of fake papers we submitted.

Furthermore, we will contact Henry to reveal our

identity to him alone. We hope that this is sufficient. If you do insist on revealing our identity to the whole of the CHI community, then we will need to stop this study from our side. Peter and Ceci suffered from the consequences of their study and we also intend to submit normal papers to CHI in the future. It is not our goal to damage the conference or the community in any way, but simply to bring the discussion of the review process to an objective level.

We would be most grateful if you would consider allowing this study to proceed. This study is completely in your hands now and we hope that you see value in proceeding.

I added the list of paper numbers and hit send.

Friday

We worked in the kitchen preparing for the day. Maki made the children's lunches and I put together some breakfast for myself.

How is it possible that she is within an arm's reach but still unattainable. I could stretch out to her, hug her, kiss her and maybe all would be good. This jewel of mine has gone and I cannot get her back. Our proximity was inversely proportional to the confinement of the kitchen. Those few square meters of workspace equalled miles in our relationship.

Camellia woke up first and entered the kitchen with sleep still in her eyes.

"Morning."

"Good morning, my big girl. Can you get dressed before I serve you breakfast?" I asked.

"Sure. What are we having?"

"What do you want?"

"Some bread with luncheon."

"Coming up."

I walked back with her to open the curtains in her room. Poppy was still in her bed and she welcomed the light with a swift pull of her blanket to cover her head.

"Wake up, little princess. We have to get ready for school."

Camellia dressed herself without any complaints and I put her plate on the table when she came back to the kitchen. I then walked to the utility room to take the laundry out. The basket was full as I headed outside to hang it all on the clothes line. From the outside I could look straight into the girls' room.

Maki had entered the room and tried to convince Poppy to get up. Every plea and threat from Maki was met with ever

more demands and complaints from Poppy. For the time it took to hang out the laundry the two had been at each other. Maki eventually left, with Poppy lying on the floor crying that she had nothing to wear.

That is it! I cannot take this anymore.

I walked back inside and through the kitchen to the girls' room. Maki immediately understood my intention and howled at me, "Leave her to me, I will handle her."

"She needs a clear line. This cannot continue," I replied. I turned my body back into the direction of their room. While standing in the door frame I commanded, "Poppy, enough! You will get dressed NOW! No more complaining!"

Maki rushed towards me and smacked me on my shoulder with her open hands.

"Leave her alone!"

I turned around and, with an ice cold look in my eyes, roared, "YOU do not hit me!"

Poppy started crying again while Camellia sat in shock on her chair. My heavy breathing was audible in the room and Maki prepared for an impact. My face was frozen and I moved around in the tight corridor like a tiger in a cage. Unlike most fierce Felidae I found my way out. I stormed along the corridor to the living room and then to the front door, Maki right at my tail.

I had difficulties controlling my voice, "I think it would be best if you sleep at your friends tonight."

"Okay, I will take the children with me."

"No you will not. This is their home."

"Don't tell me what to do with the children."

I walked up to her and yelled full volume straight into her face with all my remaining energy, "I can't do this anymore! I'm at my end! This has to stop now!"

Blind with rage I stumbled back to find my shoes. I grabbed my jacket and walked into the garage.

"When I am back home, I expect you to be gone!"

—∞—

There was not much to do at work. My heart would not allow my mind to focus on anything other than my own pain. Selfish heart! Why don't you allow me to experience joy, or at least

hope? I aimlessly surfed the web to give Hao and whoever was entering the room the impression I was doing something. For an hour I managed to avoid Bricklink but I also knew that I would not be able to resist. The temptation to acquire every single one, to complete the collection, was like a black 45 Degree Slope 2 x 2. I was slipping down, down into a grid of perfectly arranged Minifigures mounted on baseplates with precise labels.

I've already ordered the Toy Story Minifigures, let's get all the Batmans, and the Sponge Bob Squarepants series looks amazing as well. I added the Minifigures to wish lists, then sorted the shops by their available unique stock. It took me an hour to complete the procedure and while this task occupied my thoughts, it did not fill me with joy.

I checked Ethan's email again.

Dear Author,

I want you to be aware that SIGCHI takes this issue very seriously. Can we stop with the anonymity and discuss this like gentlemen? We have already determined your identity and within the next couple of weeks we will be able to confirm this. We'd like to avoid this additional effort, as we have already spent too much time on this issue. There were numerous bits of digital trail that your experiment has allowed us to follow to identify you. We know you have two other real papers in the proceedings of the CHI conference (their ID's add to 98671 and you are the 3rd and 4th author on these two submissions).

I am going to send an email to your actual email address and I expect a reply. If you choose to ignore it, then we will have no choice but to present our information to SIGCHI and recommend that your real submissions be removed from the system and that your identity and experiment be revealed to the HCI community.

If, on the other hand, you continue this discussion with us without the fake name and email address, then we will do what we can to keep your identity from being revealed publicly.

Thanks,

Liam

My hands were shaking. I checked my author ID on the ACM's website and the 98671 stared back at me.

Dear Liam,

I am indeed Robert Park and I failed to protect my anonymity. So far your replies focused only on two questions. Now that you know my true identity and all the fake papers, there might be a chance to discuss the study. If we do not allow ourselves to question our own processes, then we are nothing more than a cult. So my hope is that you do allow the papers into the review process.

Yours truly,

Rob

I got up, took my jacket and started to walk. Anywhere. Just keep my body moving. Look busy so that nobody wants to talk to me. I walked across the campus and then towards the city centre. I put my earphones in and selected Sohn - Tremors - Artifice.

“Somebody better let me know my name
Before I give myself away.
Somebody better show me how I feel
Cause I know I'm not at the wheel.”

The sky was grey and the wind blew in my face. The fast pace of my steps kept me warm. I passed by a large clock mounted on the side of a building. I couldn't see the movement of the hour and minute arms but the seconds arm followed a peculiar rhythm. It would move forward, hold and then move again. The arm walked from second to second, pausing to appreciate the arrival of each second. Categories. They forced the continuum of time into the categories of seconds. How artificial.

I was mesmerised by the timeless dance of the seconds. Is my effort to categorise the bricks not as absurd as this clock? This thought paralysed my mind. No, it is not! LEGO bricks are man-made artefacts while time is a natural phenomenon.

And while the concept of seconds is as artificial as my brick categories, they are still based on humans trying to create a system. The LEGO system might not be perfect, but it is certainly less random than the waves on the ocean. The designers at LEGO at least tried to work within a system and their thinking will consist of categories. At least they used a human language, which is, in itself, already a categorisation of the world.

My lower bowels started to cramp. No, not now! I walked faster, scanning my environment for a toilet. Maybe I should run back, but if I run I can't press my buttocks together. I can't hold it in. There, a restaurant, I'm saved.

It was mid-morning and the restaurant was empty. A staff member was folding serviettes.

"Could I please use your bathroom?"

"The toilets are for customers only."

"I'm sorry, I really desperately need to use the toilet."

"We can't help you."

"Please, I'm begging you."

"We're not even open yet. Please leave now!"

I turned around, clenching my buttocks together as hard as I could. Heat waves of panic and embarrassment raptured across my body. I continued walking back towards the campus. Maybe I can hide in those bushes? No, too many people walking past and the leaves are almost gone. The pressure was beyond endurance. I could not constrain the diarrhoeic explosion with my buttocks and my underpants started to fill up.

I must keep the trousers clean, so that nobody can see this and I can't stop, otherwise they might smell it.

I rushed to my room and took the emergency pack from my cupboard before dashing off to the toilet. I locked myself into a cubicle that had a large supply of toilet paper.

I cleaned myself and my clothes as good as I could. The toilet door opened. I froze. Don't make a sound, this is not normal, he will know that I'm cleaning myself. Motionless, I remained in this absurd posture until the man had finished his business and left. Before continuing to clean myself I flushed, hoping that nobody would come in and notice that the person in the cabin didn't leave after flushing as normal people would.

The emergency kit contained fresh underpants, socks, and a plastic bag. I dressed myself and stored the dirties in the bag. I left the cubicle and cleaned my hands with soap. I smelt them and decided to wash them again, and again. I returned to my room to pick up my backpack. Hao was sitting behind his desk when I entered. I grabbed the bag tighter, sealing the air inside.

“Hey. Rob.”

“Good bye.”

I rushed to my desk and put the plastic bag in my backpack.

“Are you leaving already?”

“I have a meeting off campus. I’m late.”

“You’re never late.”

“I have to run.”

I took off and while bicycling home I knew that my trousers would become dirtier due to the pressure of my weight on the seat. At home I threw all my clothes in the washing machine, started it, took a shower and hoped nobody would come home.

—∞—

Another evening of pretending that everything was all right in front of the children. Another dinner, another bathing procedure, good night kisses. Life continued except that its foundation was gone. I felt like Coyote who had run over the cliff and continued running in mid-air. As soon as I looked down I would certainly fall, but for just a few more moments I looked ahead, ignoring the abyss below me.

Neither of us had any energy left to fight. We sat down on the couch as far away from each other as the couch would allow.

“Maki, this situation is unbearable for me.”

“It is okay for me.”

“That’s good for you. You’ve got me by the throat and you hold me over the edge of a cliff. Maybe you’ll drop me, maybe you won’t. How can anybody endure this?”

“At least you are not lecturing me anymore.”

“Maki, how do you imagine our relationship should be in the future?”

“What do you mean?”

“What’s your goal in our relationship?”

“I really don’t know how to answer that question.”

“Well, what can we do to make our relationship better?
How can we work towards a happy and healthy relationship?”

“Again, I don’t have any answers for you.”

“Maki, if you see no future in this relationship, and you’re not willing to work on it, then it’s very hard for me to imagine how we can make this work.”

“Yes, so what?”

“You give me nothing that I can work with.”

“I get it, so what?”

I swallowed and looked down on the floor.

“I hope you see that under these circumstances it makes little sense to continue our relationship.”

Maki paused.

“If that is how you see it.”

“I do.”

The irony of my utterance made me smile on the inside.

This is exactly what I promised eight years ago with a completely opposite meaning.

“Well, I guess it would be best if you looked for a new place to live,” I said.

“What do you mean? The husband is supposed to move out.”

“With your income you won’t be able to pay the mortgage for this house. So it’s best if you move out directly. I will then have to decide whether I pay you out or whether I sell it. I want to keep the house to provide an environment as stable as possible for the children. It will be confusing enough for them. This way they can stay at their school.”

“But you will have to pay for me!”

“I will probably have to pay for the children, there’s a government formula for that. We can look it up.”

“The housing market is very difficult. How am I going to find a new place?”

“I understand that difficulty, but I’m certain you can figure that out. I would be grateful if you could move out as quickly as possible. It’s important that we clear up this mess quickly.”

“I will see a lawyer!”

“You actually have to anyway. We won’t be able to do anything with the house unless each of us gets independent legal advice. But it’s probably a good idea to keep the lawyers

out of the discussion as much as possible, as they'll be very expensive for both of us. It is a lose-lose situation."

"I will make you pay and I will take the children!"

"We both have equal rights to parent the children."

"I'm their mother!"

"And I'm their father."

Saturday

The morning arrived with the same lack of uncertainty as the status of our relationship. The new day was unknown and scary. I had no energy to lift myself up from the bed. It was Saturday, so there was no pressing need anyway. More out of routine than pleasure I got out of bed and turned on the kettle. When I walked into the living room I immediately noticed the coldness of the autumn morning. I started the fire in the log burner. Its radiating heat was what my heart desired. Warmth. Comfort. I opened all the curtains and when I also opened the blinds I noticed a large cardboard box at my door step.

I walked to the front door and opened it. The coldness outside was sharp and direct. The package was not too heavy and the familiar rattle of bricks filled my heart with anticipation. I put the package down in front of the log burner and picked up a cutter from my room.

This must be it! The 928 Galaxy Explorer! The bricks were packed in a plastic bag and the instructions were placed at the bottom of the box. This set was probably the best Christmas present I had ever received when I was young. It had not lost its magic even 31 years later. The grey, blue and transparent yellow bricks formed a timeless style of deep space exploration. The model had thrusters at the back and facing downwards, allowing it to make landings on the moon baseplates included in the set. The loading bay had room for a small exploration vehicle that would roll down from a platform. The cockpit had a computer and was enclosed in transparent-yellow bricks.

I could not resist and started putting the model together. The model was set in a distant future, but it had the power to make my immediate future a pleasure, my build only

interrupted by the preparation of tea. Page by page I rebuilt my youth.

First Camellia, and then shortly afterwards Poppy, joined me in front of the log burner.

“What are you building?” Camellia asked.

“A spaceship.”

“That’s cool, can I help?”

“For every other model I would be grateful for your help, but I have to build this one by myself.”

“Why?”

“I had this set when I was a child, about your age, and I want to experience the build again. It reminds me of my childhood. You can continue building the house, if you want to.”

“Okay. Poppy, do you want to build the house with me?”

“Yes!”

Both of them focused on building and, while the log burner expelled the cold from the room, the Galaxy Explorer expelled the loneliness from my heart. We shared the radiation from the fire and from each other’s presence. Occasionally Poppy or Camellia would ask for my help and every time they received a hug as well as the advice. The children were absorbed in the task and we felt warm and loved.

I got up, walked to my computer, and brought up the auto reply option for my university email account. I typed into the box, “I am out of the office and your email has been automatically deleted. In urgent cases please contact our secretary, Catherine. I will be back in two weeks and if you still require my attention then please resend your message at that time.”

I smiled and pressed the ‘save’ button.

Part Three

Monday

Monday morning's work started with another unpleasant email.

Rob,

I am the Vice President for Conferences of SIGCHI and the issue of your attempt to repeat the Peters and Ceci study at the CHI conference has been handed off to me after consultation with the ACM Ethics Board. The CHI team has been told not to have any further discussions about this and they have forwarded all of the correspondence regarding this issue to me. Before reporting back to the ACM Ethics Board, I wanted to contact you and understand more about what you were attempting and what you hoped to achieve.

You should be aware that there have been significant concerns expressed at the CHI level (lots of hours expended to determine the source of the "plagiarism"), at the ACM level (inappropriate use of another author's work without their permission), and in the SIGCHI Conference Management Committee discussion we had around this (your name and any identifying information were withheld). Anything you can provide to help us understand this would be helpful.

My take is that decisions will be made by ACM well before February and those decisions could have significant consequences. Please get back to me with the information I requested below so I can represent your viewpoint. Please be also aware that the dean of your department has been made aware of the situation.

Jack

I can't handle this anymore. I screwed up and now it has gone to the level of the ACM. And the dean will most certainly have informed Martin about this. Shit. There goes my promotion. I hurried to see Professor Smith who was tucked away behind a pile of papers.

"Good morning, Mark."

"A good morning to you! What can I do for you?"

"I'm in trouble. Real trouble."

"What have you done?"

"Well, I got so frustrated about the rejection of my paper and all that craziness around the peer review process that I tried to repeat the study from Peter and Ceci you had introduced to me. I resubmitted twelve papers to the CHI conference."

"Ouch! What happened with the papers?"

"They detected all the papers before they entered the actual review process. I tried to convince them to allow the papers in, but all they were interested in was finding out who submitted them."

"And did they?"

"I should have listened to Hao. Yes, they found out that it was me. And now they've pushed it up to the level of the ACM. They also informed the dean of our department. I'm in real trouble."

"What exactly did they write to you?"

I took out my smart phone and handed the email trail to Professor Smith.

"Oh, I see. What's the worst thing that could happen to you?"

"They could kick me out of their association and ban me from all their conferences and journals. It is sort of my home base. Most of the papers go to their journals and conferences. Not to mention that I can kiss any future promotion goodbye."

"Well, you only tried to replicate a previous study and I see no reason why ACM should be exempt from being investigated. Are you aware of the sting that the Science journal conducted recently?²¹"

"No, what happened?"

"They wrote a paper which had some obvious flaws in it. They submitted it to over three hundred open-access journals."

About half of them accepted the paper. Clearly their peer review process failed. Or was non-existent to start with.”

“This method allows you to test for false positives. The paper was wrong and whenever one was accepted, an error of type I was made. Peter and Ceci’s study investigated false negatives. The papers should have been accepted since their quality has been proved before. So when they were rejected a type II error was made.”

“Correct. To fully test the quality of the peer review process, you need both. In any case, I think it is very unclear what exactly they are after. Here allow me help you with a reply.”

Professor Smith started typing with me standing behind him.

Dear Jack,

I think that it is important to establish at the outset that my research work was not engaging ACM or its members in any personal way. I am a member of ACM and SIGCHI and have been for years. I am vested in the success of ACM. The ACM is a professional home for me because, like my fellow members, I am a researcher and teacher. My research for a long time now has included questions about peer review and the broader social context of science and its publication. ACM is naturally engaged in those activities and does not stand apart from such questions. It is not exempt from research activities that evaluate the effects and effectiveness of peer review.

I am also sorry that my aborted research may have made some at ACM uncomfortable. But it is not absolutely clear to me why, or in what way, that discomfort arises from their official duties in the ACM. Perhaps before I attempt to respond in detail, you could clarify for me what policies or procedures of ACM are specifically in question here. For example, how would ACM react if it had been part of the Science magazine study recently published? Would ACM think differently of that exercise and if so, then why? With that background, I should be able to discuss this case more constructively with you.

I am also confused about how you are framing your relationship with me. I am not the organisation, of course, but I am a part of it. So when you say that ACM will make its decision, who are you saying will make a

decision? And what exactly are they trying to decide?

The tone of your message is also unclear to me. Are you implying some form of action against me as a person? Is this a legal action? In which case, I think I should be informed first. As a member of ACM, I would not naturally leap to those levels of precaution.

I will endeavour to respond to you as quickly as reasonable at this time of year. I am sure that members of the committees for which you speak will also have their personal obligations at this time and would be understanding of that.

Yours truly,

Rob

“That’s a very good reply. Can you send me that text?” I asked.

“Sure thing. And don’t worry too much about it.”

“I do. I worry about everything all the time. I don’t know what is going to happen tomorrow.”

—∞—

That night, once everybody was asleep I switched on the TV since there was nothing else to do. Bill Murray and Andie McDowell appeared on the screen. My god, that’s Groundhog Day! Such a classic! Phil Connors, a cynical weatherman, was locked in an ever repeating day. No matter what he did, he would always wake up on the exact same day. Groundhog Day.

It had been years since I last saw this movie, but its story felt strangely appealing. I wish I could have my own Groundhog Day. I would have perfect certainty on what tomorrow would hold for me. I would be free to do whatever I wanted and still feel safe that everything would be okay. The only consequences would be my own memories. I could even jump off a building and still wake up the next day being just fine. I finally would have enough time to do whatever I wanted. Phil Connors was right, he was immortal. Well, the endless day changed him.

Made him appreciate others, made him attractive to Rita. He could not have known that building a relationship with Rita would be the key to get him out of the loop. I wonder if Phil would have any regrets after his relationship with Rita might have ended. He then would have lost immortality and a partner. Those are very high stakes.

Tuesday

The toilet on the third floor had become a second home for me. Its couch and the associated conversations continued to attract me and today was no exception.

“How did your talk with Martin go?”

“It would not surprise you.”

“That means not well?”

“Congratulations, you are able to remember your own predictions.”

“Don’t take your frustration out on me.”

“Sorry. I’m still frustrated. And I just don’t understand how I can get through?”

“Through what?” Professor Smith asked.

“This barrier they put in front of me.”

“You don’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“The stronger you push, the harder they will push back.”

“So what can I do?”

“You have two choices, walk around the wall or wait for the pull.”

“Explain.”

“The people inside an organisation are always less attractive than candidates from the outside. Over time it is almost unavoidable that you will be involved in conflicts. You will receive some battle scars and you will make some enemies. People from the outside have no history of conflicts. Management only has their CV to go by. It is much easier to look good on paper. Bret is a good example.”

“So?”

“You may need to look for a higher position outside this

university.”

“But I don’t want to leave. I own a house here, my family and friends are here.” I said.

“I understand. And it might not actually come to that. But given your recent banter with ACM you might not have another option. Once you have offers from other organisations you will also look much more attractive to the management here?”

“How?”

“It’s one of the oldest phenomena in social psychology: Envy! The possessions of others tend to look better than your own.”

“The neighbour’s grass is always greener?”

“Yep!”

“So I walk to my boss with an offer from another university and then?” I asked.

“You would have to play it indirectly. You could say something like, ‘I really like working here, but this other place approached me with a very tempting offer, is there anything you can do to help me stay?’”

“Smooth, very smooth. What’s the ‘waiting for the pull’ option?”

“This might take a bit longer, but it’s less stressful. You just lean back. You do exactly what is expected of you and nothing more. You avoid any extra work, you publish almost nothing. As long as you keep on teaching, they have little formal reason to fire you. You continue to promise that you will improve, and that you are working hard on your research project, but since you’re so busy teaching, there’s little time available to make progress.”

“When you say it takes longer, how much longer?” I asked.

“Several years. You will have to wait until a couple of research evaluations have swept over the department. You also can’t apply for any promotion. You just tell them that you’re happy with your current position and your current work.”

“And how is that going to motivate them to promote me?”

“Once they notice that you have no interest in them, you will look attractive again. People want what they can’t have,” Professor Smith explained.

“But this may also backfire and they will write me off

completely.”

“There is always a chance of failure, so you may as well enjoy the ride. If you lean back you have lots of time to explore all sorts of interests. Remember, you have the internet right in front of you. What else do you need to keep you busy and entertained?”

“I’m not sure about this option. I have too much energy.”

“That is a common problem in academia. But remember, the system is set up so that nothing is ever enough. No matter how many papers you publish, students you supervise, or grants you receive, they will always ask for more. You will have to learn how to set your own boundaries. You need to stop at some point. Otherwise you’ll just burn out.”

“Why does it have to be so difficult? Why doesn’t management have an interest in giving its employees a career path, job security and appreciation? Academics are intrinsically motivated. We wouldn’t stop working just because they praise us.” I said.

“Appraisal is cheap. They would usually tell you what a great job you have done, right?”

“That’s what they told me.”

“Because it doesn’t cost them much, just a few words. True appraisal is based on money and status.”

“Again, why is it so difficult?”

“Because the people that make it to the top are usually not good researchers. They are politicians. They enjoy power and they are busy defending it against each other. Have you ever looked at the publication record of our dean? It’s a joke!”

“So we are back to the Dilbert principle. Whoever can do something remains a lower rank researcher and whoever can’t do anything becomes a manager?” I asked.

“That might be true. So, do you really want to climb the career ladder?”

“Not all the way to the top. It seems like the only thing they do is fight about resources and prestige. I still want to do research.”

“You can’t have it all.”

“This is absurd. I’ve published more papers than the rest of my group combined. I’ve received plenty of citations and I’m invited to conferences and panels. Everybody except this

department seems to appreciate my work. Shouldn't all my achievements count for something?"

"Rob, you underestimate the vanity of the upper management. If you are more successful than they are, then you make them look bad. Never be smarter than your boss! You need to ask yourself what is truly important to you?"

"That is a truly good question."

—∞—

The rest of my afternoon was filled with lectures and emails. I picked up the children from school on my way home and we continued our charade. The children sensed the tension in the family, but weren't able to reflect on it. They adjusted, even to this disturbing situation. The only true discussions between Maki and me happened once the kids were asleep.

"I will take care of the children. You can have them every second weekend and maybe you can pick them up from school every once in a while," Maki declared.

"That's not what I have in mind. The girls need their father and I can only fulfil this role if I am integrated into their daily lives. I don't want to be their entertainment officer for every other weekend."

"Why do you make it so difficult? I am their mother and I should take care of them."

"You are indeed their mother and I am convinced that you are going to do a good job, but I'm their father and need to be with them as well. Both parents have equal responsibilities and equal obligations towards them. In the past you did take care of them more than I did, but we were married then. You decided to leave, so now you also have to accept the consequences."

"You only want the children so that you don't have to pay more money."

"That's not correct. I want to be with my children and they want to be with me."

"I make you an offer, you get the children on the weekends."

"That won't work. Both of us will need some time to relax and recover. We should alternate the weekends and work out the weekdays from that."

"But I have to work and what am I going to do when the children are sick. I am getting paid by the hour and if don't

show up I don't get paid."

"I understand that this is hard for you, but that's what's to be expected from a separation. Both of our lives will change dramatically. Our costs of living will double while our income will remain the same. It will be less comfortable for both of us."

"You still have a large salary!"

"I got you your job to start with. Without me you wouldn't have work at all."

"All right, how about if you get the children on the weekends and you only have to pay me as if we are sharing them equally."

This is a trap! If I say okay to this then she will conclude that I am just after the money and that I am not a good father. Nice try. There is a reason why I married you. You're smart. But you are so wrong. The children need me. Your father wasn't around for you. You really don't know how important it is.

I replied, "I told you before and I will tell you again. The children need their father not a funny uncle. I understand that you were pretty much raised by your mother, and that does work to some degree, but it is so much better when their father is involved. You never truly accepted me as their father in our family. But that opportunity is gone. Now we deal on the basis of family law and you will have to accept my role."

"I will put my lawyer on this."

"Do as you please, but it isn't going to change anything. My lawyer will respond and we will both waste lots of money on nothing. In the meantime we will have to work out a temporary solution. We need to come up with a plan for taking care of the children now. We can't wait for a ruling from the family court or a discussion between our lawyers. We need something that works now. I suggest that we split 50/50."

"That is unfair."

"I don't understand your definition of fair. What could be more fair?"

"They are my children."

"We are going in circles. We've already discussed this. Look, a week has seven days, I am willing to compromise to a 3/4 days split. But that is all I will ever accept."

"I have to think about it."

“Maki, we are practically separated now. We need to take care of the children now and not once you’ve consulted with your lawyer.”

Thursday

Jack's response arrived after lunch. I immediately forwarded it to Professor Smith.

Dear Rob,

I understand that your intent was not to engage members in a personal way, but you should be aware that your attempts to probe the CHI conference peer review did have negative consequences, and those consequences could have been worse. For example, in the CMC discussion, there was at least one CHI author who was extremely upset that their work was resubmitted without their permission. I am certainly not suggesting that those negative effects were intentional, nor that your efforts were malicious, which is why we are having this discussion.

My responsibility is to oversee all of SIGCHI's 18 or so conferences, including CHI. Let's do a thought experiment for a moment - let's say that 100 researchers all decided to probe the effectiveness of our peer review system in the same way you did. What would happen? An extra 1200 papers would be injected into a very overloaded system and it's possible that many mistakes would be made. Unlike the original Peters & Ceci study, which sent one paper to 12 journals, you sent 12 papers to a single conference. What would have happened if those papers all got in? Unlike a journal process, conferences have limitations that often mean that 12 other papers would not have been accepted. Even if you withdrew them after the acceptances and rejections went out, there would be little we could do to resurrect 12 potentially deserving papers after the members of the programme committee were no longer available. We don't leave the PC meeting with a rank order of papers. Again,

potential harm as a result of your study. How would you feel if one of your retracted papers was accepted with scores very similar to a paper from one of your students or colleagues, which was rejected?

This isn't about making people comfortable or uncomfortable. I can tell you that I've never seen a Papers Chair or Technical Programme Chair who was 'comfortable' until all the meta-reviews were in and the letters went out. Please remember, we're all volunteers here, as are the members of the Ethics Committee, as are the Papers Chairs, SCs, ACs, and reviewers. As to the policies and procedures, ACM has a Code of Professional Ethics and violations of that code of ethics are referred to the Committee on Professional Ethics (COPE).

I'm aware of the Science article, and the Nature paper and many others. In the case of the Science article, the papers in question were fabricated, not recycled papers from previous editions of journals. I can't speak for ACM, but from SIGCHI's perspective, it would have been appropriate to have the discussion about what you were attempting to do, and what your expected outcomes would be, if not with the papers chairs, then at least with the CMC or conference chairs. We would have been in a much better position to manage the process, and deal with the potential of multiple, overlapping studies. As it is, what do you conclude from your experiment? The duplicate papers were detected and the CHI process worked. Do you intend to publish that? I wonder what Science would have done if all of the trash papers in their sting were rejected from all of the journals?

ACM has an Ethics Committee that deals with issues of ethics and professional conduct under the ACM code of ethics. What they need to decide is if this study violates that code of ethics and, if so, what the remedy might be. In my role within SIGCHI, I would love to see it not get that far, but it may be out of my hands.

No, ACM's remedies are not a 'legal' action in any sense of litigation, but the question will almost certainly be your ethics, as an individual. I have no idea what remedies the Committee on Professional Ethics (COPE) would apply (I haven't had any interaction with them until now).

Thank you, I'm sure we'll all be happier once this is all cleared up.

Jack.

I knocked on Professor Smith's door before slightly opening it.

"Did you see the email that came back?"

"I'm looking at it right now."

"Can we talk about it?"

"Sure, come in and close the door."

"What do you think?"

"Well, did you have a look at the ACM Code of Ethics?"

"Yes, they talk about how a computer engineer should not cause harm such as loss of information or damage of property. We are also supposed to protect the fundamental human rights, respect the diversity of culture and in general we are supposed to avoid computer systems causing threats to health and safety."

"That would mean that no member of the ACM can contribute to developing any weapon system, since those are clearly intended to cause harm. Many computer scientists in the U.S. receive financial support from the military and are working on weapon systems. So none of them could be a member of the ACM?"

"In theory yes. I could try to email their ethics committee."

"That might not even be necessary. Shall we try to draft a response?"

"Yes please."

The two of us worked for more than an hour before I send the email reply.

Dear Jack,

Thank you for the clarification, in particular about the legal situation. Please allow me to point out that all research activities have costs. Any cost can be seen as having the potential to cause harm, but in this case the 'harm' was theoretical and not disproportionate to a burden that the organisation has created for itself, namely to conduct a vetting procedure on incoming papers. My methodology was very similar to that used by others (e.g., Ceci & Peters, the Science magazine study I mentioned earlier). In the case of Science magazine,

the intent appears to have been to cause reputational damage because the journal released the names of the other journals it tested. In contrast, the scope of my research was modest in time requirements (although I accept annoying to those who invested effort in them) and I never intended to release the content of the papers or make it possible to identify the authors of the papers or the identities of the reviews for ACM.

I accept that if 100 of my colleagues had conducted the same experiment at the same time it would have been overwhelming. But there is no evidence that such has ever happened or that there is any likelihood of it happening. The Science magazine study could also be said to have incurred a cost on the journals and their reviewers who received the fabricated manuscripts. The scale of the Science magazine study certainly dwarfed the scale of my study. That study involved 304 journals and all the reviewers and editors that the 255 responding journals used in the exercise. ACM is not above being studied, just as no other institution in society is above being studied. Others who put themselves in the role of peer reviewer have been the subject of similar research for a long time²¹.

I agree that if the papers I submitted had been accepted and then withdrawn (as they would have been), this would have left the conference with a challenge to fill those slots. However, papers being withdrawn after acceptance is not unheard of, so the issue would have been one of scale, not novelty. Against this potential inconvenience would be the value of the research to ACM and others. What is the 'harm' in doing research that might be of benefit (obviously within limits)?

I can see that individuals might be upset because of the implications my research had for their workloads, but I cannot see an ethical issue for the ACM as a body. When it comes to the individuals, I am sorry for any increase in work that I may have caused. However, that I actually caused it is not clear. Even 12 papers would have been small compared to the number received or anticipated to be received and thus the system was designed to handle this workload. And it was the system, not the individuals, that I was studying. Those who are working in these systems must accept as part of their commitment that the system is not above being a part of someone's research.

The remaining outstanding issues are whether my use of the papers was a violation of copyright, or constituted plagiarism. Ceci and Peters faced the same challenges. On the first matter, since I had no intention of publishing the submitted papers there was no violation of copyright (to my understanding). I also was not asked to sign any copyright agreement. On the second matter, I was not attempting to claim the words as mine, or benefit from any such claim for the fictitious person submitting them. I did technically reproduce the text as a substrate for my research, but did not reproduce the text for purposes of associating the text or its meaning with me.

My feeling at this time is that I could have done this in a better way. I have learned that, largely because of the challenges to my methodology coming from ACM. However, at the moment I do not see that I have made an objective violation of ethical standards in how I treated the ACM, or of individuals by adding marginally to a workload that they had already accepted. I believe that the Ethics Committee might want to review the discussion around Ceci & Peters paper and hence I have attached it to this email.

Let's continue this discussion in early January. During Christmas time I would prefer to let my work rest and instead attend to my family. I hope that you feel the same and I wish you all the best.

Yours truly,

Rob

"That sounds excellent," I said.

"Have you received any comments from Martin or the Dean?"

"Not yet. Let's hope it stays that way. Anyway, thanks for the help, I have to get back to my work."

I left Professor Smith's office and walked into the kitchen to prepare some tea before getting back to my desk. As I entered the kitchen I noticed Professor Doctor Martin Berg filling his cup with some coffee. I froze in a split second.

"Hello Dr. Park."

"Oh, hi there."

"My secretary noticed the receipt from the ACM concerning

your membership.”

My face went pale.

“What about it?”

“Are you certain that this membership is still, how should I put it, desired?”

“I guess so.”

“Very well then. I am certain that it will allow you to focus your research on truly important issues that fit into the focus of the group and that will contribute to your promotion portfolio?”

“Absolutely.”

“That is good to hear. Please remember that our department is expecting the highest standards for research and ethics. Have a good day, Dr. Park.”

“Good bye.”

I remained paralyzed for another minute before I could even think about preparing my tea.

Friday

The next LUG meeting took place at Roman's house a month later. The girls were with Maki so I could attend. Besides the usual crew, a young woman with long hair in a ponytail attended. Samuel introduced her, "This is Ray, she works at ToyPlanet."

"Hey, Ray", I said.

"Welcome to our LUG meeting," Francis continued, "maybe you can tell us a bit about your LEGO collection?"

"Well, my mum actually started our LEGO collection. When my brothers and sisters and I were young she convinced my father to buy us every LEGO set on the New Zealand market."

"Whoa, can your family adopt me?" Roman asked.

"It's less of a deal than you may think. There are the five of us, which makes plenty of birthdays and Christmas presents, not forgetting the ones for Mum and Dad."

"Your father joined in?" I asked.

"When the Star Wars sets came out he started collecting them."

"Your house must be full of LEGO," Daisy commented.

"Most of it is in boxes. Some years ago we threw away the original boxes and put all the sets into large plastic containers."

"So you actually built them all. Do you make MOCs too?" Roman asked.

"Of course. We usually have at least one large mediaeval village and castle under construction. I'm building every Harry Potter model and putting them into a large scene."

"The next meeting should be at your place!" Francis suggested.

"Sure, I can ask if that would be okay."

“Ray, do you know what the May the Force promotions will be?” Roman asked.

“Does LEGO have a special on May the 4th?” I inquired.

Roman smiled, “May the 4th is the official Star Wars day. Hence the ‘May the Force’ be with you promotion. Get it?”

“Who comes up with these word games?” I asked.

“The interweb,” Roman replied.

“Maybe we should talk about the planning for the show?”

Francis broke in, “Samuel, how many exhibitors have already registered?”

“About five, plus most of us.”

“That’s not enough. We won’t be able to fill the room with models. Any ideas?”

“Daisy, are you going to exhibit your photographs?” I asked.

“I’m not good with crowds. I really couldn’t.”

“Oh, okay.”

Ray made a suggestion. “I could talk to some of the customers who buy plenty of LEGO, but they are usually pretty shy. I’m not sure if they would dare to exhibit.”

“Without exhibitors we don’t have a show,” Francis said.

My concern lay heavily in the room.

“Even if we bring together all the models we own ourselves, it won’t be enough to fill all the tables. There’s nothing worse than an exhibition that looks empty,” I said.

“I could try to find more AFOLs in the online forums. But most of the ones I’ve contacted said they would attend, but that they didn’t feel comfortable exhibiting,” Samuel said.

“So how do we get them out of the closet?” I asked.

I looked around the group but nobody dared to answer my question.

Francis ended the uncomfortable silence by asking, “Rob, how is the planning for the location coming along?”

“I’ve got the floor plan, so we can make a layout of the tables. I assume that the different exhibits will have individual needs?”

“That’s correct,” Samuel replied. “They’ve given me information about how many tables they want and how they want them to be arranged. It might be challenging to find a good overall exhibition design. We might want the different themes together. Like all the City scenes should be next to each

other and the Technic sets could also go together in one area.”

“I can work with you on a layout,” I offered.

Francis asked, “Roman, how is the brochure coming along?”

“I saw the proofs and we are ready to go. I also talked to some radio stations and we might even make it into a children’s show on TV. They’ve been very enthusiastic about our show.”

“This all looks very good. We’re making good progress. But there is not a lot of time left. Please remember that all of you need to exhibit something at the show. Roman, maybe you can show us your collection next?”

“I would be delighted. Just follow me.”

Roman took us along a corridor to a medium-sized room. Shelves on both sides were overflowing with Space models. Collectible Minifigures were placed on the top shelf and a half-open wardrobe revealed a large stack of LEGO boxes.

“Welcome to my LEGO room. It’s not a large collection but I’ve put a bit of effort into it.”

I asked, “Are these custom-made shelves?”

“I good friend of mine made them for me so that they fit exactly into this room.”

“Oh, you don’t only have the Galaxy Explorer but also all the other sets of the first Classic Space series. I remember playing with this rocket launch platform.”

“Yes, 920 is pretty cool. Classic Space is, well, classic,” Roman said.

Our small group inspected the models with great approbation. We had to take turns as the room wasn’t big enough to allow all of us to move around and view the models freely. Slowly we returned to the living room. Our discussion continued for a while and when I got myself another drink from the kitchen, Francis approached me.

“How is it going with your wife?”

“She’s moved out.”

“Is that good news or bad news?”

“It’s very good news. The thorn is out of my flesh and I finally have a chance to heal. I need to come to terms with myself and the situation.”

“And how are the children taking it?”

“Better than the adults. We have a provisional agreement. I have them three days a week and she takes them four. It’s

working okay so far.”

“How are you doing on the inside?”

“I feel lonely at times, but when the children come home it’s just great. I love them so much. And I have much more time now to work with LEGO. I am building a couple of things for the show.”

“That is good to hear. Maybe it will help you to find some peace.”

“It doesn’t solve my problems, but it does take my mind off them for a while. Sleeping remains a big issue. Too many nightmares and too many far-too-early mornings.”

“What do you think about Daisy? Isn’t she a real 1x5 brick?”

“A 1x5 brick? That would be an amazing design. But the LEGO company doesn’t produce any 1x5 bricks.”

“Exactly! You need to find these rare and beautiful creatures in the real world!”

—∞—

The nights still didn’t bring any regeneration. Intense nightmares would throw me back into consciousness, which in comparison was bad, but still better than my dreams. The lack of sleep took its toll. I rotated my spine into the vertical position without enthusiasm. I stumbled forward and when I opened the bedroom door I saw a note on the floor.

Were the children up again last night? They should have been sleeping.

I opened the note and recognised Maki’s handwriting, “I am sleeping in my room and will talk to you tomorrow.”

Maki still had a key to the house as the financial transactions had not been completed yet. I also could not make myself move into the master bedroom. It was still filled with the reminiscence of Maki and it was far away from the girls’ room. I started the kettle and made some tea.

I had better talk to her before the children wake up.

I balanced two cups of tea to her room and softly knocked on the door. A grunting noise indicated Maki’s presence and I decided that it would be good enough for a ‘please come in’. I carefully opened the door and found Maki lying on the bed, still in her clothes.

“Good morning,” I said.

“Hmmm.”

“I brought you a cup of tea.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you okay?”

“I am not doing well.”

“Are you sick?”

“Not sure. I am just miserable.”

I put the cup down next to her bed and sat down at her feet. I took a sip from my tea.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Maki sat up and took a sip of tea herself.

“I just want to have a happy family,” she wept.

“I understand. I want that too. What do you imagine a good relationship between us to look like?”

“I don’t know?”

“What can we do to achieve a happy family?”

“We just need to be together again.”

“But if we just move together again, without changing our behaviour, then we will end up with the same problems again. Would you like to work with me on our relationship? Maybe we could include a counsellor?”

“No, that would not be a good idea?”

“Why is that? We haven’t been able to resolve our issues by ourselves. We need to get external help.”

“They are all useless.”

“Then do you have any suggestions on how we could improve our relationship?”

Maki remained silent.

“I’m sorry Maki, but unless we make some specific plans on how to overcome our differences, I’m not prepared to move back together. I am prepared to visit a counsellor with you.”

“I don’t want to go there.”

“Well then, maybe you want to get up before the children wake up. It would be very confusing if they found you here. It might foster wrong hopes. Camellia is already asking for us getting back together.”

Saturday

Three weeks later my phone rang. I had bought the latest smartphone as my retail therapy after Maki had moved out. Even though we lived apart she remained the most frequently used number in my phone. The coordination around the kids made it necessary. So I was not surprised to see another incoming call from Maki's number.

"Daddy, can I come to your place for a little while?"

"Sorry, Camellia, you have to speak up, otherwise I can't understand you on the phone."

"Daddy, can I play at your place for a little while?"

"Well, it's almost bed time. What does Mummy say?"

"I can give the phone to her. Wait."

But she had already passed on the phone. I was not too keen to talk to Maki.

"Rob, Camellia wants to see you. Can you take her for an hour or so?"

"Well, I just came back."

"She really wants to see you."

"All right then, I will pick her up in ten minutes."

"See you soon."

I put my shoes back on and walked into the garage. The engine was still warm and making the crackling noises that only cars can make when they cool down. I jumped in, pressed the remote for the garage door and swiftly drove down the road to Maki's new rental place. Getting onto her road was always tricky since I had to take a right turn onto a very busy road.

Patience. An opportunity will present itself. There.

I pushed the pedal of my Nissan Cube almost to the floor to get my little brick-shaped car onto the road. Only 100 more

meters and I had to break again to get into Maki's driveway. Even before I locked the car, the front door opened and Camellia stormed into my arms.

"I missed you so much, Daddy."

"I missed you too."

Maki appeared in the door and said, "Can you bring her back in an hour?"

"Sure can. Come on, Camellia, let's drive home."

She climbed into the car and we were on our way.

"Daddy, your car smells nice."

"Thank you."

"What did you do today?"

"I was busy."

"With what?"

"Well, I drove up to Castle Hill."

"Who with?"

"A friend."

"What's her name?"

How could she guess? She is far too smart.

"Umm, well, her name is Daisy."

"Did you kiss her?"

Whoa, that is a direct question. Should I tell her the truth?

"Oh, well, umm, I guess I did."

"Can we play PlayStation at your place?"

That is it? No more questions? Looks like she is okay with Daisy. That was easier than expected.

"We certainly can."

Before I was able to turn on the PlayStation, Camellia dragged me to the floor and wrapped her arms around me. We sat on the floor cherishing the embrace.

"I missed you so much."

"I missed you too."

"When can I come to your place?"

"I will pick you up from school on Friday."

"But that's such a long time."

"I know, but Mummy wants to be with you as well. Shall we play Blob 2?"

"Yes."

We played together, colouring a grey world and defeating 'Papa Blanc' whenever we could. I took her back after an hour

and Poppy gave me a big hug when I left. When I was back home I called Daisy.

“Hey, Daisy.”

“Hi, Rob.”

“I just wanted to thank you for a wonderful day.”

“I had a good time too.”

“I just had the most interesting conversation with Camellia about you?”

“You already told her about me? Isn’t that a bit premature?”

“I don’t intend to hide you from her.”

“I’m not sure if I’m ready for it.”

“You don’t have to meet them right away. But I’m also not going to lie to them.”

“Did you tell Maki about me as well?”

“No, it didn’t come up.”

“Good. Well, have a good night.”

“You too.”

Sunday

The traffic was dense, but I used the bike lane to pass the long lines stuck in front of the traffic lights. It was almost twelve o'clock. The girls were on play dates and today I was going to have lunch with Daisy in a cafe. Not too fast, Rob, or you will sweat and smell like a grizzly bear. I locked my bike, storing the helmet in my bike bag before entering the cafe. Daisy was nowhere to be seen so I took a seat close to the door.

You're too early again, Rob. Does this still surprise you? Let's look busy by looking at the menu.

"What would you like to order today?" the waitress asked.

"Oh, I'm just looking. I'm waiting for another person."

"No worries, just give me a shout when you're ready to order."

"Thank you."

I took out my phone and checked my email, Facebook and RSS feed. A quick scan around the room revealed that at least two others were desperately trying to use their phones to hide their solitude. Thirteen minutes later Daisy walked through the door.

"Sorry I'm late, the traffic was insane."

"That's okay. I'm glad you could make it at all. It's a busy day."

"Shall we have a look at the menu and then order?" Daisy asked.

"Sounds like a plan."

It didn't take us long to decide on our lunch and the waitress took our order.

I started, "I'm really happy that you're here. I got a bit worried after our last phone call."

“Oh, what did I say?”

“You mentioned that you don’t feel ready.”

“Rob, I do like you, but you have to understand that you’re the first guy I’ve dated that has children and an ex-wife. That’s scary.”

“It feels very natural for me. I’m not proud of failing in my marriage. Maybe you can talk a little bit more about it, so that I have a chance to understand why you find it scary.”

“It’s just such a big commitment and I’m worried that you’re just looking for the piece in the puzzle that replaces Maki.”

Daisy explained.

“I’m not looking for another mother for my children, they already have one. I’m looking for a new partner.”

“I understand that, and I like you, I truly do, but it’s rather overwhelming. What should I say if I meet her? Will the girls like me? And what if the girls do like me, and it doesn’t work out between us. How could I leave them behind?”

“Maybe we can take it one step at a time. First, we figure out if the two of us match, and then we figure out if the four of us can make it work.”

“I need time for this,” Daisy said.

“No pressure.”

I took her hand and we looked into each other’s eyes.

“I think the girls will love you. Aren’t you looking forward to that?”

“I want to have my own children too, and there is not so much time left. I’m not getting any younger.”

“One step at a time,” I said.

“How was your day so far?”

“Not too bad. Answering emails. Hmm. Do you think they serve food in this cafe?”

“We ordered.”

“Yes, but they don’t seem to have any intentions of bringing it to us.”

“Maybe you could talk to them?”

“When I’m in a cafe I turn invisible. Waitresses never seem to notice me. I’m tempted to take off my clothes and run around naked to test this hypothesis. All the customers are starring at their phones anyway.” I said.

“You can’t do that!”

“Watch me.”

I took off my shoes and socks and had started to fumble with the zipper of my trousers when the waitress appeared.

“Here’s your food,” she said, delivering two plates.

“Thank you, that looks yummy”, I replied as I hastily corrected my trousers.

“Is everything okay with you?”

“Just some minor costume malfunction,” I explained.

“Let me know if you need any help.”

“Your attention is all I desire.”

We started eating and after a few bites Daisy asked, “How is your back coming along?”

“I’m going to have another M.R.I. scan.”

“You’ve had one before?”

“Yes, I need to keep an eye on my spinal cord. Every couple of years I get it done to see if my condition has worsened.”

“And has it?”

“There’ve been some recent occurrences that lead me to believe it’s time for a check-up.”

I looked down on my plate, but Daisy did not pick up my signal.

“Like what?”

Oh no, how am I supposed to explain what happened?

“I can’t control every part of my body all the time.”

I looked at my legs, hoping that Daisy would finally read my discomfort.

“That must be hard. Has it always been like this?”

“I was never good at running or pretty much any sport that involved running.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. What was it like growing up?”

“It felt pretty normal. Okay, I was a slow runner, maybe a bit clumsy, but otherwise fine. We all grow up in our own bodies and accept our functions as normal. And so did I. It was mainly my mother who reminded me that I’m ‘special’. She loved discussing my medical conditions with her friends and, later, with mine.”

“Ouch, that must have been embarrassing.”

“Most certainly. She used to say, ‘I want my boy to grow up as normal as possible’. In a way she had to come to terms with my condition as well. And she achieved this by talking with

others about it. Still, the public display of my problems was always humiliating.”

“Oh dear, I never had anything broken,” Daisy admitted.

“Consider yourself lucky. In the end we all have our cross to bear.”

We finished our lunch and I returned home before I picked up the children to drive them to the swimming pool. Camellia and Poppy had worked up an appetite and the pasta dinner went down quickly.

“Can we sleep in the same bed again?” Camellia asked.

“That’s fine with me. Poppy, come here. It’s pyjama time.”

“Can you help me?”

“Come here and I will.”

I was sitting on the carpet in the girls’ room and Poppy walked to me and gave me a big hug.

“Piggy back ride!”

“No Poppy, we need to get ready for bed.”

“All right then.”

She walked around, sat down in front of me and raised her arms into the air. I pulled up her sweater and when it was halfway up, I stretched out my fingers and tickled her under her arms. Poppy squealed with laughter.

“Don’t tickle me, Daddy! I said no tickling!”

“I’m not doing anything, I’m just helping you undress.”

She threw herself on the floor. While she was still pulling her arms out from the sweater I started to tickle her again.

“DADDY, I said nooo tickling!” Poppy burst out laughing.

“I’m not doing anything!”

I took her leggings and put them on my head.

“Look Camellia, Daddy’s got bunny ears!” Poppy said.

“Hello, Mr Rabbit,” Camellia replied, “would you like some carrots?”

“Yum, yum, yum!”

“Here you go!” Camellia said, stretching out her empty hand. I sniffed it, and then gave it a good lick.

“Ew, disgusting! Daddy!”

“I’m a hungry rabbit and you have some carrots.”

“No, I don’t. They are all gone!”

“Oh no!”

We all chuckled.

“All right girls, put on your pyjamas, brush your teeth, comb your hair, use the toilet and then off you go to bed!”

“Can you give me a ride to the bathroom?” Poppy asked.

“Sure can!”

I picked her up, legs first.

“Whee, this is fun!”

I put her down in the bathroom.

“Now brush your teeth and comb your hair.”

“Okay!”

I returned to the girls’ room. Camellia was on the floor. She wore her pyjama trousers, but had not yet put on her top. She looked down without any intention of putting it on.

“What’s wrong?” I asked while picking up the top and helping her into it.

“There’s this boy in school. I really like him. But Sasha said that he doesn’t like me back.”

“Oh no, that’s a pity.”

“Nobody likes me!”

“That’s not true. I love you. And you have lots of friends”

Camellia’s eyes filled with tears and she started to sob.

“Don’t cry. Everything will be all right.”

She fled into my arms.

“I don’t want you and Mummy to be separated.”

Tears ran down my cheek and Camellia looked at me carefully.

“Are you crying, Dad?”

“When you’re sad, then I’m sad.”

We looked into the depth of each other’s eyes and in that exact moment our bond was like two 2x8 plates stuck together. No 630 brick separator could disconnect us.

“Are you two crying?” Poppy asked when she entered the room.

I replied, “Just a little. We were both sad.”

“But now it’s much better,” Camellia explained.

“I want a hug too!”

“Family hug!”

All three of us cuddled together and my heart filled with joy.

Monday

After lunch the usual tiredness set in. My mind slowed down and I had already checked my Facebook status. My inbox screamed for attention, but I couldn't bother reacting. A short knock on my door was a welcomed distraction.

"Come in!"

"Professor Park, would you be interested in a cup of tea? I received a special tea from a visiting Chinese official."

"I would love to, Professor Smith."

I joined Professor Smith as he walked into the direction of his office.

"Don't you need some water to boil for the tea?"

Smith turned around and looked at me for just a second.

"Oh, right, your office is fully equipped."

"Have you already received any reply to your last email to Jack?" Professor Smith asked as we arrived and Smith filled a kettle with water from his private sink.

"None at all. I assume that's good news. But I did get a response from the ACM/IEEE joint task force on Software Engineering Ethics and Professional Practices."

"Oh, you did actually contact them?"

"I couldn't resist. They confirmed that their ethics code is designed to allow for the development of weapon systems."

"There you go. Don't harm anybody unless it's the others."

"I've had another observation," I said.

"Which you are going to share with me, I fear."

"I can't tolerate your ignorance any longer."

"What's it to you?"

"People know that I'm conversing with you. People will wonder how I can stand to be in the same room with you,

unless I am as utterly and completely brainless as you," I commented in an utmost polite voice accompanied with an extravagant gesture of my arms.

"Since when do you care about what the others think about you?" Professor Smith asked, barely being able to keep a straight face.

"I just don't want them to feel sorry for you. You must feel so inferior in my graceful presence," I exclaimed.

"I feel something in your presence, your highness. What is the word, inferiority? No, wait, pity! Yes, I have to admit that I feel pity for your complete detachment from reality."

We broke out in laughter.

"Before we do indeed lose ourselves in an alternate reality, allow me to return to my original observation."

"Only if you must."

"I was wondering what processes are being followed for establishing a taxonomy. How does it start and how does it become a standard for a community of users." I explained.

"And what did you find?"

"You may assume that it would involve a group of experts coming together, discussing the advantages and disadvantage of certain proposals. Maybe they would vote for the best solution that they would then implement as representative of their community."

"That sounds like politics."

"It turns out that this is historically not how many taxonomies came about. Just consider Aristotle. Just one guy who maps out the whole world. And he remained unchallenged for centuries."

"Unchallenged? Despite declaring that Arete is only a sub-category of ethics?" Professor Smith asked.

"That is only a personal issue between him and me. His ideas about reproduction are probably a much bigger blunder. His ideas, including the rubbish ones, were upheld for such a long time that nobody dared to challenge them anymore."

"That's an interesting example. What are you getting at?" Professor Smith asked.

"Aristotle is just one example. Consider Linnaeus, he created a taxonomy of all living things."

"Well, he started it."

“True, but his taxonomy quickly dominated natural history. And then we have Melvil Dewey who cooked up a taxonomy for categorising the contents of books. His decimal classification system was very popular and inspired the Library of Congress Classification system which was developed by Herbert Putnam in 1897.”

“Okay, these are all examples of taxonomies and you are able to reproduce many facts, but what’s your point?” Professor Smith asked.

“My point is that it has often been individuals, obsessive individuals, who just create an initial taxonomy. They are often consumed by their mission. Maybe it takes a good amount of preoccupation to dare to take on such huge tasks.”

“That might very well be the case. Are you suggesting that you might be just such an obsessed individual who defines the ideal order?”

“Maybe. It only takes one dedicated person and a lot of persistence. I do have much more time now.”

“That sounds all very promising. How is life at home?”

“Pretty good. The whole situation is like having a migraine and then you take two paracetamol. The pain recedes, you see more clearly, and the world is full of colours again.”

“That sounds good.”

“It is. All the fighting, all the friction, all of that is gone. It has become a peaceful home.”

“And how are the girls coping?”

“Poppy seems to be perfectly fine, but maybe she is just a bit too young to fully understand what’s happened and what consequences it will have in the future. Camellia is all right as well, but she is very sensitive to any argument between Maki and me. Most of all, though, there is harmony at home. Finally I have the opportunity to connect to them and there is just so much love going around. It’s crazy. In the morning they come into my bed for a snuggle. What better way to start a day?”

“That does sound like an improvement.”

“It is. Instead of one miserable home, we now have two happy homes. Well, I don’t really know what’s going on at Maki’s place and, to be honest, that’s good news as well. I don’t have to be concerned about her any longer. I always felt so responsible for her unhappiness. That’s gone. I’m free. And I’m

curious what else life has in store for me.”

“Would you have guessed that you would be back on track so soon? I remember how you felt just six months ago.”

“Yes, that was the worst time of my entire life. I felt so ashamed of having failed in my marriage. Life seemed so perfect before. A good job, two beautiful children, a Japanese wife, a house. I had everything worked out. I thought I just needed to cruise it all home. But then, bang! Life changes.”

“Life is very creative when it comes to creating disturbances.”

“My life is certainly more dynamic now. So many wonderful and weird things happen. Sad things too, but overall I’m much more balanced and happy. It’s more work when I have the children. Once the girls are sleeping I usually collapse. And on those days when I don’t have the girls, I have to catch up with all the work I missed.”

“And how is it going with Maki?”

“We have a working relationship. We have to, for the children. But again, it’s great not having to worry about her, not getting yelled at, not getting any complaints.”

“Looks like your private life is moving forwards.”

“It is, and actually, I have to run to pick up the children from school.”

“Off you go!”

—∞—

The school finished at 3 p.m. and I made it just in time to pick them up. Poppy had turned five and now attended the same school as her sister. The girls played in the school’s playground for a little while before we set off to return home. I had started to let the girls ride their own bicycles to school and, while it gave me the shivers occasionally to see my girls encounter difficult traffic situations, they had learned quickly how to master the route to school and back.

When we arrived home Camellia took out a questionnaire that she was supposed to return to the school the next day. I sat down with a pen and inspected it. Besides the usual background questions about Camellia, it also asked for her ethnicity. I looked a bit perplexed at the questions and its possible answers.

‘New Zealander, European, Maori, Samoan, Cook Island Maori, Tongan, Niuean, Chinese, Indian, Other. Please state.’

I looked at Camellia with her slight almond eyes and her light brown hair. I guess I would have to select the ‘other’ category and state Kiwi and Japanese. But why would they include a category ‘New Zealander’ in a survey targeted at New Zealanders?

The children ran into the garden to play while I started the kettle to make some tea.

Asking an ethnicity question might have made sense when the first European settlers arrived in the 19thth century. At that time Maori and Pakeha would have made sense, but how quickly would there already been mixed children, so this categorisation would fail. Ethnicity is a complex phenomenon to start with. It can be based on citizenship, religion, language, country of birth, race, culture, and ancestry. How can they expect us to squeeze all of that into a single category? At least New Zealand didn’t have anything close to the Apartheid system that was introduced in South Africa. The Apartheid system required a thick handbook to determine the racial status of its diverse population. But even if a country doesn’t openly discriminate against a certain group, it can still result in peculiar situations.

I remembered a former American visiting researcher who had lived in Germany for a while. Since it is obligatory to register your residence with the local government, he visited the city hall to complete the paperwork. Under the category religion there were only two options: Catholic and Protestant. He had asked the administrator how to fill in the form. She had said, ‘Just put in your religion. It is for the automatic deduction of the church’s tax’ to which he had replied, ‘But I’m Jewish’. The poor administrator was unable to respond to this in any meaningful way and simply had told him not to answer the question. Sometimes categories can be so deeply embedded in a culture that it becomes inconceivable to think outside of them.

Saturday

It was still dark outside when I drove to the Aimee Mann Auditorium, my car filled with LEGO models. We had put up the tables the day before but only a few exhibitors from the core team had come in to set up their models. At this rate many tables would remain empty. We will have to spread out all the models so that it doesn't look empty. I hope that the others bring some bed sheets as the university's trestle tables look a bit shabby.

"It still feels like night," Jim said from the passenger seat.

"Yes, but at least it's not freezing," I replied.

Jim was a young AFOL who had flown down from Auckland. Jim's parent had only allowed him to fly down by himself if he could stay with another AFOL, as he was still under age. I had offered him the spare bedroom and picked him up from the airport the day before. Jim had brought a suitcase full of wonders, including a 1.5m tall black and red dragon. It was the first time that I had seen such amazing sculpturing work using Bionicle.

"Do you think more AFOLs will show up today?"

"I hope so, we sent out another email reminder and Samuel and Ray have talked to a lot of people. I don't know why it's so hard to encourage them to exhibit. Is this a Kiwi culture thing?"

"Could be. Kiwi's don't usually boast about their achievements."

"A culture of modesty and understatement inherited from the Brits, I assume."

"I can't tell. I've never been to England."

They drove into the parking lot in front of the auditorium.

Another car was already parked and its cabin light was on.

“What are those two doing there in the car?”

“Looks like a father and his daughter.”

“Must be cold in the car, and they’re two hours early. I’ll talk to them.”

I parked the car and walked over to the other car. The young father was staring at his phone while his young, blonde daughter flipped through the pages of a book.

“Good morning! Are you here for the LEGO show?”

“Yes, we thought we would come in early.”

“It’s going to be another two hours before we open and it’s cold out here. Would you like to come inside?”

“No that’s all right, no worries.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, we’ll be fine here.”

“Let me know if you need anything.”

Jim had already taken out some additional equipment and I helped him to carry it inside.

“Kiwis! Never complaint about anything.”

“We leave it to the immigrants to complain about not complaining.”

“That’s very considerate and consistent.”

The doors were still locked and I had to put down his box to take the phone from my pocket to call the security officer, who arrived a minute later to open the auditorium.

“This is your big day then, isn’t it?” the officer asked.

“Yes, let’s hope it works out,” I replied.

“My grandchildren are keen to come.”

“How did they find about our show?”

“It was mentioned in the Children’s Festival brochure.”

“Good on them. We’ll be happy to have them.”

We walked into the darkness again. I used my phone as a flashlight to find the light switch for the two halls. On the right was the large square room where most models would be. On the left was a classical auditorium with seats and a stage. The area in front of the stage was large enough for some additional LEGO activities and Ray had organised six large containers of bricks from LEGO New Zealand that we had spread on the floor. The children could start building right away. A Mindstorms group had also announced themselves but had not

yet set up.

I started to set up my own table and tested the earthquake simulator I had borrowed from the Department of Civil Engineering. I had glued a Duplo baseplate onto the shake platform and the children could build Duplo houses that would then be disintegrated by a simulated earthquake. Given Christchurch's shaky history, this was a gamble but I hoped that the children's pleasure from watching destruction would outweigh any earthquake trauma they might have. Or maybe it would be good exposure therapy.

Jim tested if his large dragon would survive a short shake on the trestle table. It's neck fell down.

"Maybe you need to keep the head up with fishing wire. You can easily attach it to the ceiling. There are beams up there and there's a hidden staircase. This room is used as a theatre, so they have all the stage rigging up there." I said.

"But that's cheating," Jim replied.

"When you have children around, unexpected things will happen. They might touch it."

"I'll think about it."

Roman and Samuel entered the room with more boxes.

"Morning!"

"A good morning to you too. Did you bring some more models?" I asked.

Roman replied, "I brought some more to fill the gaps."

"Excellent!"

A large, bald, bearded man wearing sturdy shoes and shorts walked into the room.

What's a motorcycle gang member doing here? We really need to keep the doors closed for now.

"Hi, I'm Alan and I'm here to help."

Samuel stepped forward, "We've been in touch. I'm Samuel and this is Roman and Rob."

"Hello!"

Roman said, "Welcome to our show, did you bring any models, do you need a table?"

"I left them down south, I might bring them up next time. How can I help?"

"We have these signs over there that we need to put up on the street. Maybe you can figure out a way to mount them?"

"I'm onto it. Do you have any tools?"

"There's a theatre workshop behind that door. They even have power tools." I said.

"I can handle those."

Alan grabbed a sign and walked through the side door. Moments later we could hear the screaming of a saw and hammering, then Alan returned with the sign mounted on a pole with sharp ends. In his other hand he carried a hammer. He walked out the front door to fulfil his mission.

"Where did you find him?" I asked.

Samuel replied, "He's very active in the forums and on TradeMe. He's from Southland."

"Any help we can get is great!"

"I'm sorry, where can we set up the robotic competition," a middle-aged man with a blue shirt asked.

Samuel answered, "Right this way. You must be Clay? I'm Samuel, we had contact via email?"

"Hi Samuel, thanks for inviting us. Do you have some tables for us?"

"Sure, how many do you need?"

"Maybe six? We will have two teams competing and we need to have two arenas for set up."

"Six? This is going to be great. Yes, let me try to get them for you!"

Samuel and Clay walked off and I returned to my table to finish off my models. More exhibitors entered the hall and more tables were filled with wonderful creations. Curiosity took over and I had to walk around to inspect the MOCs. There were teddy bear themed sleeping rooms, large Star Wars scenes, and Roman had set up a Classic Space scene.

A man entered the room carrying three large boxes in front of himself. It was only when he put them down that we all recognised Peter.

"Peter, you made it! That is such great news!" I said.

"Oh well, screw my colleagues. Let them have a laugh if they must."

"Maybe the universal admiration of the AFOLs and the general audience will make up for it." I said.

Lucia came around with red t-shirts which had the logo of the show printed on them.

“Here, you are going to be red shirts.”

“But that means that we’re not going to survive the next commercial break,” I complained.

“Oh, be a man and put your laser to stun.”

“Aye, Captain.”

He put on the red t-shirt and continued his walk around the hall. Roman was instructing some volunteers in the entrance hall on how to handle the visitors and what the most frequent questions might be.

“Roman, look, there are already some visitors lining up!” I exclaimed.

“I know, the queue is growing constantly. And we have another half hour to go,” Roman replied.

“This is going to be good!”

“You betcha!”

“I hope that the crowd barriers in front of the tables will hold them back.”

“There will be collateral damage.”

I roamed around a bit more, helping here and there with all those little tasks that organising a show required. At 9 a.m. the doors opened and a wave of visitors washed into the two halls. Screams of excitement and joy filled the room and the parents had trouble holding their children back. After only ten minutes the venue was packed with visitors, promenading along the tables of MOCs. The barriers in front of the tables moved ever so slightly with every excited child pointing out a detail.

“Look, Daddy, a motorcycle. And there, a train!”

The other exhibitors and I remained calm behind our tables and bathed in the excitement of the children and the wonder in their eyes. We answered the questions of the parents and the children patiently. After an hour I felt exhausted and decided to have a look at the front hall. I walked along the back of the tables to reach the door, squeezed myself into the entrance hall but couldn’t get any further. The onslaught of prams, parents and children was just too strong. I manoeuvred along the walls until I made it to the front desk cashiers.

“This is insane! Where have all these people come from?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Roman answered, “but they keep on coming. Can you go outside to check how long the queue is?”

“Sure thing.”

“Sorry! Coming through!”

I walked down the stairs and saw that the line reached all the way to the next building. It had formed by itself. We had not put up any indicators or barriers. I followed the line, which continued along the footpath for another 50 meters, until I reached its end.

Oh my god, this is crazy. I don't think we have space for all these people. They'll have to wait. At least it isn't raining.

I returned to the front desk.

“The queue goes all the way back to the car park. I'd say around 60 meters.”

“We can't fit them in,” Roman answered. “We'll have to stop letting them in and only allow more people in when others leave.”

“That seems like a good idea. We should also let the people in the queue know how long the wait will be.”

“Maybe Alan can make some signs?”

“I'll find him and ask for his help.”

“We also need more help with handling all these people. We need at least two more people for the info desk.”

“I can call Daisy and see if she can make it.”

“That would be great. I've already called my sister-in-law as well.”

I took out my phone and send a text message, “We are being overrun. Can you come to the show tomorrow and help?” The reply came quickly, “I can come in the morning.”

I ploughed my way through the masses until I found a red giant.

“Alan, we need some more signs indication the waiting time. Like in other theme parks. ‘If you stand here then the waiting time is 30 minutes’. Something like that.”

“Coming right up.”

Alan disappeared back into the workshop and came back out with four signs, tape and cable ties. He had little trouble making his way through the crowd. I returned to my table and continued my duty. The flow of people did not stop and the crowd in the room generated so much heat that we had to open the fire exit doors to create a draft. Towards the end of the afternoon we were all completely drained but happy. Once the

last visitors had left, we gathered in the main hall.

"I hope you are all okay," Francis started, "this has been an overwhelming success. The queue was incredibly long and parents waited for up to two hours to get into the exhibition. Two radio stations and one TV station reported on the event, so we might even get more visitors tomorrow. Are you ready for this?"

We all giggled and cheered.

"Wonderful, I will see you all in the morning. Be here at 8 a.m. to tidy up your exhibition and to get ready for the day."

"Sir, yes, Sir!" I said.

On my way out my phone rang. Maki.

"Hey, Maki."

"Hey, Rob, I just wanted to let you know the children and I will drop by tomorrow."

"Call me when you arrive, there is a super-long queue."

"The girls also want to talk to you."

"Put them on."

Camellia said, "Are you at the LEGO show?"

"Yes."

"I miss you. Poppy and I will visit you tomorrow."

"That's great, I can't wait to show you all the models."

"Love you."

"Love you too!"

Sunday

Jim and I got up early, eating breakfast before we headed out again to the show. When we arrived at 8 a.m. a long queue had already formed.

“Looks like the media coverage had an effect,” I said.

“But will we be able to handle it?”

“There are only so many people we can let in at a time.”

While walking to the auditorium a text message from Daisy arrived, “I’ve got a terrible cold. When do you want me to come?”

I replied, “Stay home and get healthy!”

Francis and the others were already busy putting the crowd barrier back in place and replacing the batteries in the trains. A young man with a cardboard box pushed his way passed the queue and towards the front desk.

“Hi, I’m Ken. I heard about the show on the radio and I brought some models. Any chance they could be useful to you?”

I looked at the models, “Hi, I’m Robert. Let me have a look at what you have.”

Ken opened the box revealing a collection of army helicopters, tanks, and armoured vehicles.

“Now this is something that LEGO does not do. They’re amazing. Let me talk to Samuel to see if we can find a table for you. Come with me.”

We walked into the main hall and found Samuel adding some more models to his display.

“Samuel, may I introduce Ken. He brought some incredible MOCs. Do we still have a table?”

“Yes, we had two no-shows yesterday. We stretched some

models across their tables, but we can easily free one up.”

“That would be great”, Ken said.

“Here, let me show you.”

Samuel and Ken walked over to a central table and, while Samuel moved some scattered models to another table, Ken unboxed and carefully arranged a whole company. The new models caught the attention of other AFOLs who convened to welcome the new arrival.

Roman said, “These are beautiful. Lots of hard work to get green bricks in there.”

“And look at those capes and tents. They are certainly not from LEGO,” Francis commented.

“There’s a small supplier in Melbourne who sells all sorts of printed fabrics,” Ken replied. “They also have a large collection of flags.”

“Where do you get all those weapons from? That looks like an authentic WW2 rifle.”

“That would be from Brickarms. An American supplier. They have all sorts of weapons and accessories. And their quality is much better than Mega Bloks.”

Alan walked into the main hall and shouted, “We will open the door in two minutes! Get ready for the flood!”

They all scattered to their own tables to make final adjustments. Alan’s warning was no understatement. Within minutes the halls were filled with excited children and their parents, the steady pressure of visitors keeping them all nailed to their tables. I gave up trying to recognise any faces until two beautiful girls stormed around my table and gave me a big hug.

“Daddy!” Camellia and Poppy screamed.

“Poppy, Camellia! Thank you for coming!”

“Here are the children,” Maki said, “have fun with them. I will get a coffee.”

“Sure.”

As soon as Maki had left my phone vibrated. A text message from Daisy, “I’m at the front. Can you come out?”

I froze. My tired brain was simulating all the possible scenarios of Daisy, Maki and the children in the same time and space. Daisy is probably sick and only came to show her commitment. She won’t be in any condition to help me. I can just talk to her and sent her home.

“Jim, where’s the coffee truck?”

“Outside on the parking lot.”

“Can you watch the girls for just a minute?”

“Sure.”

“Girls, I have to talk to somebody at the front desk. I will be back in a jiffy. All right?”

“Can we play with this LEGO?” Camellia asked.

“Sure you can. I’ll be back.”

I rushed to the front desk where I found Daisy waiting on the side of entrance door.

“Hey Daisy, how are you?”

“Pretty sick, but I promised I would help.”

“That’s very kind of you, but it’s okay, we’ll manage. You should go home and get healthy.”

“Okay then. But the show looks great. What a success.”

“Yes it’s going well.”

“Can I have a look?”

I froze again. It’s too late to mention that Maki and the children are here. I should have told her that right at the start. It’s very busy and Maki is out for a coffee. I can probably show her around quickly, staying clear of my table. It will be a quick in and out.

“Sure, let me show you some highlights.”

We walked into the main hall and I pointed out some amazing models. I stayed clear of my own table, but when Daisy saw Jim’s great dragon she said, “Oh, a dragon, that is so cool”, and walked straight toward my table.

A cold rush of panic filled me as I followed Daisy’s lead. As soon as I approached Jim’s table the girls looked up to me.

“Daisy, um, this is Poppy and Camellia.”

“Oh, hi there,” she stuttered.

In the crowd I could make out Maki’s face. She had a cup of coffee in her hand and walked towards them.

“And over there is Maki”

“Maki?” Daisy yelled.

“Um, yes.”

“I have to leave.”

“Sure, get better.”

Daisy dashed off and I called after her, “I’ll call you later.” She didn’t turn her head.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Camellia said, "Can we see more LEGO now?"

Maki replied, "Okay, I can take the children now."

"Thanks, I have to attend to this table. Thanks for stopping by. Girls, have fun, all right?"

"We will. This is so cool. Come on Mummy. There's a teddy bear house!"

I watched them disappear into the crowd. My eyes were empty.

"Are you okay?" Jim asked.

"Oh, well, I'm separated and I have two beautiful children. What can still happen to me?"

Jim stared at me.

"See, when you're young, you try to find your one true love and you intend have children and stay together forever. I passed that stage. My marriage is broken and I have two amazing girls. If Daisy is my true 1x5 brick or not, it isn't so dramatic anymore. Nothing has been as dramatic as the separation. I can simply enjoy the relationship as long as it lasts."

"And is it going to last?"

"I don't know. I'm tired of having to apologise for having a family. If she can't deal with my girls and the fact that I've been married then I can't help her. But maybe she will come around and it will be all right. Who knows? Life has become much more dynamic than it used to be."

The masses streamed like a river along the tables, visitors asking repeating set of questions, such as 'Where can I buy this set?' or 'How long did it take to build this?' Suddenly I recognised a familiar face.

"Professor Doctor Smith! You! Here?"

"I'm working on an anthropological project. This is a field trip. Please continue with your native behaviour as if I was not present."

"I ignore you most of the time."

"And I'm grateful for that. May I ask how your sorting project is coming along?" Professor Smith asked.

"It is completed."

"Did you sort them all?"

"Almost. I realised that the only way I could have peace of

mind would be to sacrifice some of the bricks to go into a box for the children. I put some recent sets I bought for them in there. We now have 'Daddy's LEGO' and 'Girls' LEGO'."

"And does it work?"

"They can play whenever they want with their bricks and they can make as much of a mess with it as they like. It's their free play area. But when they want to build something specific, I often catch them going to my shelf. It's easier for them to find the right bricks there."

"That must drive you crazy."

"I accepted that there will always be a little bit of noise and I sort the bricks back in the evening. I now have the patience to do this. The more important thing is that they play with LEGO."

"And is your order, how did you used to put it, 'ideal'?"

"I have a much better understanding of what ideal means and I do have the desire to make my system ideal. Aristotle was right, humans have an innate propensity for organising the world around them into classes. Did you ever have a look at the book 'Collecting: An Unruly Passion' by Werner Muensterberger?²²"

"I haven't come across it yet," Professor Smith admitted.

"Muensterberger dives into the psychology that drives collectors, taking a classical psychoanalytic approach."

"You mean he is using Freud's theories and methods?"

"Exactly. Collecting is giving me a sense of control in an uncertain environment. It is also a clinging onto my childhood. I can't explain it here in more detail. Have a look at the book. It covers a wide spectrum of collecting behaviour and maybe you'll find yourself in some of the case studies."

"I shall have a look then," Professor Smith said.

"That book kind of gave me insights into the why we sort, but not on the how. Everybody is sorting their socks, shirts and silverware. They do it without much thinking. In Dual Process Theory this is considered the works of System 1²³. Our brain is able to process information very quickly and economically using this system. It's almost automatic."

"So sorting bricks should be easy?"

"As long as the complexity is low. Sorting three different bricks is easy. But when you have thousands of bricks you have

to start using your System 2, your rational system. It requires you to make features explicit and to derive rules that you then use when sorting.”

“Then you still just end up with an order that may be ideal for you, but only for you,” Professor Smith pointed out.

“Making information explicit is the first step for being able to calculate solutions but also for being able to communicate with others. The classification system we end up with might be artificial, but it will still enable us to function. I am able to find and order bricks at Bricklink.”

“The classification system at Bricklink can hardly be considered ideal.”

“It’s a social consent born out of an economic necessity. To be able to trade bricks you need to have a naming standard. You should also consider that this website is by far the most complete and up to date catalogue for bricks. The other inventory websites have fallen far behind,” I explained.

“That is because there is nothing to do there.”

“Bricklink fulfils a need. It’s a platform that allows AFOLs to trade. We need it and, therefore, we update it. The other websites were an act of love, but it takes an enormous effort to keep up with the hundreds of sets that are being released each year.”

“So you now believe in a social consent?” Professor Smith asked.

“I see its benefits. The classification system at Bricklink may be clumsy but at least the description of the bricks has been made explicit. I still haven’t given up on the ideal. I know it’s possible to calculate the best solution for a sorting order.”

“Then why haven’t you done it?”

“Because it’s hard! These days I enjoy building with LEGO, in particular with my girls, much more than sorting bricks. But just because I haven’t calculated the ideal order, is no proof that it doesn’t exist,” I said.

“So you have given up on your research?”

“I better understand my own limitations. My system 2 might be slightly faster than that of most others, but from an evolutionary perspective it’s still one of the most recent additions to our brain and we as humans can’t be proud of it yet. I’m no exception. We struggle with thinking rationally

or properly understanding probabilities. We are still fundamentally monkeys.”

“I dare to differ. We are primates.” Professor Smith protested.

“Who share 98% of their genes with chimpanzees.”

“We smell better.”

“Did you shower this morning?”

“That is not the point of discussion.”

“My sorting order might not be ideal, neither are research, my career or my relationships. I’m not an ideal father either. But classifications allow me to break down the overwhelming complexity of the world into something my poor little brain can handle.”

“At least you have a passion for something. Most people live their lives in the comforting mediocrity of shopping.”

“The only problem of having a romance of any kind is that it leaves one so unromantic.”

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