

STIMPLE'S LAST THEOREM

“Stimple, Stimple,” his father laughed, shaking his head as the 18-month-old demolished a tower of wooden blocks with a red cast iron race car. Having raised a column several inches high, little Stimple seemed totally shocked that a green and purple wood block carved with an F could cause his masterpiece to sway and topple. He had already postulated a structure taller than any he had built and the intervention of an unknown law of nature outraged him.

Had this been but a single event in the unfolding of Stimple’s perception of the world, it might have been quickly forgotten. But the ferocity of his response when “things didn’t work out,” as his mother put it, caused the somewhat older couple to worry that their precocious, bushy-headed bumblebee of a son might have a few problems with the unexpected, and they were quick to retell the story of the “block incident” whenever Stimple threatened to throw something again.

The Stimples had actually named him George Edward after two uncles but, as his aunts and uncles would throw in if asked, he seemed such a curmudgeon and a little old man that Stimple fit just fine. He often evoked even stronger takes on his “fits” in the range of, “If he were my kid, why I’d...”

Mr. Stimple, already in his mid-forties, spent many afternoons mowing his lawn in even, parallel lines and wondered quizzically where Stimple developed such a need for orderliness. He had a chaotic childhood himself, moving from town to town with his “hair-brained” father and “kooky” hippie mama and insisted on organizing a life where outcomes were more certain and predictable.

Or perhaps it was Helen’s habit of breast feeding her son at exact intervals day after day without a miss, or potty training him by the numbers so he wouldn’t forget to put the lid down, that fed Stimple’s impulses to “take it out” on the situation when his outcomes failed to please him. “For godsakes, be consistent, Helen,” the old obstetrician had counseled her. Faithful school teacher that she was, she wanted an “A” from the doctor for her mothering skills.

From the time he could sit in his high chair and flourish a fork, Stimple insisted on certain protocols. When not observed as closely as he wished, he would point at the

offending parent with a set of prongs and squeal until he or she complied. His cereal was to be served dry, with milk in a Beatrice Potter mug on the side; instant hot chocolate with one tablespoon of mix and five miniature marshmallows; peanut butter sandwich on multigrain toast with grape jelly daubed on top; eggs up and basted; mom to his left, dad to his right.

During the stage of “why” and “because” which Stimple hit early, the Stimples found that he usually came up with different kinds of questions. “Dad,” Stimple asked, “why doesn’t Mother have a tail like we do?” Trying to remember when Stimple had seen the Missus undressed, and to respond wisely at the same time, all Mr. Stimple could manage to say in his chagrin was, “Women aren’t born with one.” To which Stimple was quick to respond, “Well, at least they’ve got tits.”

Stimple learned to read before the age of three but his greatest love was numbers. While many boys his age were out beating up little girls, Stimple lay on his stomach on the carpet of the den lining up rows of marbles, counting them, creating formations. It became difficult to open the door to his bedroom because, with a ball of twine, he managed to involve the doorknob in an elaborate web that led from the bed’s posts, to the light fixture, to picture hooks and back again. With his green plastic ruler he learned to measure distances and angles. “Mom, your finger is four and three-fourths,” he would say, and record the measurement in a tiny spiral notebook.

After his first day of school, Stimple began the practice of labeling all that was his. No one knows if the boy in the desk across the aisle tried to steal his crayons, or if he lost a No. 2 pencil and someone else claimed it, or what. But from that day, Stimple’s name appeared on his lunch pail, his book bag, his thermos. Helen Stimple noticed this one Saturday night after he had fallen asleep with his light on. Before turning off the reading lamp, she took a minute to look at his desk top and saw the orderly layout of his favorite objects: “Stimple’s Ruler,” “Stimple’s Eraser,” “Stimple’s Watercolors.” In late November of that year he added a battery operated label gun to his Christmas list.

In the school bag that contained his pencils, erasers, ruler, marking pen, paper clips and a little stapler, Stimple kept his prize instrument, a set of stencils. In addition to the stencils, which were always helpful in marking things, the pouch included plastic triangles, hexagons, parallelograms and other geometric shapes. When he tired of

arranging his marbles or playing with the abacus, to which he quickly graduated, Stimple would spend hours on cold, snowy nights tracing the wonderful lines that led to forms that led to images that led to visions of spaces being enclosed by them.

Stimple soon translated the lessons he learned on those nights and during free time at school into rules. These he numbered and carefully recorded in his notebooks. "Stimple's First Rule: Before you play, be ready for next day." "Stimple's Second Rule: Better eat slow or to bathroom go." "Stimple's Third Rule: Open my lunch pail, go to jail." "Stimple's Fourth Rule: To find, put with own kind." By the time he climbed onto the bus into junior high, Stimple had compiled a small bookshelf of spiral notebooks.

While the Stimples were pleased to see that their son had an interest in academics and science, they shared a nagging concern that he might devolve into an egghead. Mr. Stimple, he of the absent father, did not want his son to miss out on the manly occupations required in the greatest country in the whole world, such as fishing, hunting, hiking, exploring, in tradition of his idol, the vigorous and hyperactive Theodore Roosevelt.

"He needs to know about worms," he told Helen on the many occasions Stimple locked himself in his room.

She bore this burden silently, her fears of disease and infection, thorny bushes and tarantulas, pushed aside for the greater good.

Stimple endured a few of these adventures into the natural world and did find his father's explanations of such processes as photosynthesis worth the effort but rolled his eyes when he was led into a Cub Scout meeting for the first time, recoiling from the over eager lads with their blue uniforms and gold bandanas bobbing up and down around the juice bowl and flashing their merit badges on the green sashes they so proudly wore. Duly noted, the older Stimple told Helen it was no match and thereafter limited their outings to a bamboo pole, bobber, a simple weighted fish line, a can of earthworms and bottle of shrimp eggs. He wanted Stimple to be out in the fresh air and out of the house into "the real world," climbing trees and playing catch with the neighborhood kids. If a little leaguer knocked on his door, Stimple would drop what he was doing and run into the yard smacking his mitt with the expected gusto but rarely stood in the foyer in anticipation of a sandlot game. He had his own schedule in mind and exhibited only a

slight interest in balls, primarily his own, which his anxious parents oversaw with some reticence, meaning whether to comment on the activity or simply ignore his preoccupation with himself. In time, perhaps at the Lincoln Log stage, he progressed to more linear interests and they congratulated themselves on their restraint. After all...

Stimple's polish in the looks department kept him from becoming the class odd ball. He could fart and belch with the best of them and otherwise talk nasty. Though he was different in many ways from his loud raunchy peers, he didn't look that much different and was clever enough to know how to dress and what to say. Besides, when he found excitement in an activity, Stimple could do just about anything better than they could. He could throw and catch, shoot baskets, punt a football and tap a toe. His comic valentines were famous; phallic drawings for a favored few. Even the jocks would approach Stimple in a pinch and beg for a little help in math. He thought about charging a fee but decided instead to hold out for small favors in return such as protection from the socially challenged class bullies. "Do for free, get back times three," he wrote.

Much to Stimple's puzzlement, the young ladies seemed drawn to little Stimple's stunning precocity. His massive head of naturally curly dark hair stood out from the mowed down blockhead style of the whitewashed plodders. Though small in stature, the sought after beauties found his fine polished features, penetrating tiny eyes, well formed but fragile frame and slightly shaded skin more alluring than the bold and ever present shaggy dog demeanor and smelly effrontery of his roughneck buddies. Stimple caught on to this unexpected gift early in the game and teased his top-heavy bush in Einstein's practiced bohemian style. Helen often found him posing in her full length mirror, checking out his profile this way and that. The only missing touch was Einstein's grim mustache and hangdog expression. The girls thought him "soooo cute," and they loved the way he kissed. He had researched kissing early and practiced his smooch on his own hand whenever his loins began to tingle at the thought of his first real sampling of the warm moist female anatomy.

Then there was this girl, a plain but friendly brunette with a passable figure, large eyeglasses and known for her neat set of jugs, a slightly taller and prim young lady named Dorothy, who spent a lot of time after school in the hallway asking for Stimple's

help and inviting him to dances. In time they habituated each other's eyes, sighed often, held hands when they could and kissed with a gourmet's slow and pleasurable nuance.

Stimple first encountered the use of theorems his sophomore year in Mr. More's geometry class. During second hour on Tuesdays and Thursday, he sat for a course led by Mr. Upton for honor students entitled, "Philosophy For Beginners." The convergence of geometric angles with philosophy's slippery lines of thought may have accounted for Stimple's quantum leap from rules to painstakingly drafted notions known outright to him and to the select few with whom he shared them as "Stimple's Simple Theorems." The Theorems were fewer in number than his rules and sometimes took days and weeks to capture in words. Stimple knew they were not really theorems. He just liked to call them theorems. Sounded more scientific. In fact, Stimple would spend hours in the library or under a tree in the park with Dorothy's head on his lap writing and rewriting them. But when he finished and held them up to the sun, his Theorems, unlike the rules of his nursery, split into a thousand contradictions and he often rumpled the notebook paper they were scribbled on and hurled them with the same finality into the wind as he had into his alphabetized wooden blocks of yore.

In college, where Dorothy followed Stimple with a major in home economics, the wrath of the little Stimple and his building blocks returned with a new fury. His professors fielded the brunt of it as the argumentative young man with bushy brows and set jaw found ways to disagree with just about everything they said and demanded answers that made sense and could be set in cement. But few explanations were forthcoming and Stimple tormented them for four tough years and whined with his head on Dorothy's lap that *nothing* seemed to make sense. During these years of discovery and many crumpled theorems, Stimple and Dorothy discovered the simple but complex idea of love for which Stimple had no theorem. The Stimples, now nearing their 60's, were pleased and somewhat amazed that their prickly little boy had found someone outside of his bedroom to love and cherish him as much as they did.

They were proud too when he and Dorothy married right out of college and Stimple moved on with a scholarship and a grant to an engineering school. Dorothy found work as a sous chef in a Chinese restaurant that she and Stimple frequented on Friday nights where Stimple enjoyed ordering by the numbers. She was happy with her

match and gazed for minutes at a time at the intense puzzled face of her new husband. She secretly wished he would make love to her a bit more often but his semesters were packed and, late at night after his studies, he would sit for hours at his drafting table mulling over exceptions to the smooth surfaces of his Theorems. Dressed for bed in a modest shift, teeth brushed, hair combed and panties folded on the nightstand, Dorothy thumbed through cooking magazines and romance novels waiting for him to accompany her down love's trail. Growing drowsy but still slightly on edge and looking for release, she would poke her head into the smaller room of the apartment he had labeled, "Stimple's Study," and say softly, "Stimple" (for she, his classmates and friends had quickly learned to adopt his last name as his first), "don't you want to come to bed and hold me for a while?" "In a minute, Dorothy," he would kindly reply, still absorbed in his work. By the time he did climb, tense and troubled next to her between the sheets and blankets, Dorothy had already pleasured herself au solitaire and fallen asleep.

In high school, Stimple graduated a valedictorian. But in college he slipped to cum laude, a consequence perhaps of too many Theorems and much ill will with his dows. He fell to tenth place as he was handed his engineering degree but, since the school was so prestigious, no one seemed to notice the decline. So it came as a great surprise to Dorothy, not to mention the aging Stimples, that he had difficulty gaining employment with any of the leading engineering firms who interviewed him. When Stimple received the nice, carefully worded letters stating he had not been chosen to join the firm, his standard response was to rip them into tiny pieces, fling them in the air and spit disgustedly, "Those stupid idiots." He had no concept of the impression he might have made during the interview: a surly, argumentative young man with a curled lip, a ready fist, an unsheathed index finger and waving hands, espousing his principles, his values, his distaste for the profit driven society that glossed over the "laws of nature and life," yet undiscovered and undefined, by which men should live and Stimple was ever close to discovering.

But as Dorothy pointed out one night in a dark bar as she wiped her eyes with her third Kleenex, if they ever wanted children and to own their own home, a degree of compromise might be in order. Stimple could not comprehend the idea of having his own children but he did joke with Dorothy in one of Stimple's Silly Theorems, "No money,

no honey.” That’s why he decided to accept the one offer he did receive, a low paying job in the Research and Development Department of The Practical Toy Company. “Toys That Teach Something Useful,” was its slogan and in the dullish office lit with the bluish lights of drafting tables Stimple was clearly a star.

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Seven years later, Stimple could claim the creation of twenty-three new toys, most of them ingenious but seldom accepted, manufactured or distributed. The Dream Bubble was a Stimple creation. It was a sphere, five feet in diameter, with an inner chamber. It could be rolled over virtually any surface by the little tyke inside with simple sideways or forward/backward movements of its little body. But The Dream Bubble was ruled unsafe and caused confusion and vertigo in some of the youngsters who tested it. The Wobbly Web was Stimple’s version of a jungle gym but “there again” as many of his competitive colleagues loved to point out, its nylon maze so frustrated the three-year-olds who were to be captured by it that it too was scrapped. After a string of failures, Stimple was handed a book of ideas from the MBA’s in the marketing department who, like other specialists of the business world, were supposed to have their fingers on the consumer’s pulse. This both insulated and depressed Stimple. But because he was also producing pages and pages of backup material for his theorems and corollaries late at night and learning to invest in the stock market, Stimple took the path of least resistance. When he was finally invited to sit in on a strategy session chaired by the venerable founder of Practical Toys, Elmer O. “Bud” McKracken, Stimple suddenly stumbled over his own convictions.

The object of his outburst at the far end of the long mahogany table was a proposed tool kit for three-year-olds. Tentatively labeled, “Tools For Democracy,” the plastic and rubber set of implements bore mottos designed to inspire a little “booger”, as “Let’s Get Crackin’ ” McKracken liked to call the eager boys and girls he aimed to

The handle of the hammer was inscribed in blue scroll with, “Nail it down for America,” and the pliers with, “Grab hold of Freedom.” The discussion of the moment in the long solemn conference room centered around slogans for the saw, the wrench and the screwdriver. Stimple had already fashioned a saying for the screwdriver but it was too immodest and would have raised eyebrows so he voluntarily shit-canned it. But as

the meeting dragged on, the assembly was asked for conclusions and he was the first to blurt out a response.

“The main problem,” he said with some authority, “is that it will never sell.”

A gasp circled the table causing heads to bob and wag. Having arrived late for the meeting in the first place, Stimple was unaware that the idea for “Tools For America” belonged to old McKracken himself. But McKracken, benevolent patriarch that he was, held up his hand to silence the expected onslaught of counterattacks against Stimple’s naïve bungle and pushed his fine white hair off his forehead.

“And why do you think it might not sell,” McCracken said calmly, letting his head drop slightly to one side in a benevolent, all-knowing gesture, smiling down the row at Stimple, who had not yet realized he was on the hot seat.

“For one thing, they don’t really work. The saw won’t saw, the screwdriver won’t screw and I can hardly imagine a plastic hammer driving in a nail,” Stimple said. “If someone gave me a tool kit and I went outside with Dad to help with a little carpentry, I’d soon get very angry if none of my tools really worked. Once I started crying and throwing a tantrum, Dad would get mad too. When mother heard me crying, she’d run out into the garage and give Dad hell. Dad and Mom would have a terrific argument that would last all night and ‘wop,’ a black eye for Practical Toy Company. Besides, a three-year-old isn’t going to understand any of this rubbish and, if he did, he’d have to think it was a little corny.”

Old Bud McKracken’s face reddened until Stimple, as he told Dorothy later, thought the old man was going to cry. But he gulped, forced a second kindly smile and said in a slightly scratchy voice:

“Young man, Practical Toy came into being because of this country, my love of this country, a will to keep this country strong...” and other platitudes Stimple couldn’t add up or even remember.

Then, McCracken did one of his famous switches. One never knew if it meant an on-the-spot firing or a complete reversal.

“Stimple, my boy,” he said, leaning over the table and shooting Stimple two eyes afire. “I have been watching your work from afar. I’ve given you rope, lots of rope. I sincerely believe one day that you, George Stimple, will be responsible for one of the

most spectacular events in the history of The Practical Toy Company. I don't know if it will be a slinky toy, a hula hoop, an Etch-A-Sketch or a Rubix Cube, but something on the order of one of those magnificent breakthroughs. So with that parting word of encouragement to each and every one of you, gentlemen, ladies, let's get crackin'."

The fallout — notes, whispers, other suggestions about Stimple's future at Practical Toy — left the normally optimistic Stimple puzzled and in a confused funk as his thirty-first birthday cut an oblique angle across the patterns of his sleep. His parents had died a year apart — Dad with a stroke; Mom with cancer. Dorothy's "folks", as Stimple called them, were unhappy with Stimple's prospects and wrote grumbling letters from Florida. His theorems, though plentiful, seemed to lead nowhere. He stopped talking to her folks about them. It was doubtful they would understand anyway. And once his theorems exploded out of the abyss of Stimple's late nights, they quickly disappeared in the smell of the toaster that crackled at dawn next to "Stimple's Coffee Mug."

Then one of Stimple's corollaries proved itself right. Stimple's Twenty-Second Corollary: "Wait long enough and it waits for you," was quoted immediately by Stimple to Dorothy on hearing the news. Elmer O. "Bud" McKracken, founder of Practical Toy, had walked out onto the deck above his swimming pool that morning in his shorts and tennis shoes ready for calisthenics, preparing his body for his latest twenty-four- year-old wife. Stretching his arms above his head, he yawned, belched, doubled over the railing and fell onto the tile below, the victim of a heart attack and a broken neck.

The immediate dilemma for Practical Toy was obvious. McKracken's only son, Troy, had scuttled off with his trust fund to Spain and fancied himself a painter. McKracken's grandson, whom he had raised in his mansion by the lake, was a nebulous MBA from Harvard and in no position to lead Practical Toy through the tough market fight that "fun toys" like realistic submachine guns and space monsters, promised to offer. The Board, wisely assembled by the Old Man to guide Practical Toy into the future, a future that he optimistically described as "teeming with opportunities," promptly put the company up for sale, and a conglomerate that was into tools and doughnut shops, grabbed it like a new found toy. Diverse holdings was its mantra.

"No wonder the Japanese are beating our pants off," Stimple complained to the ever patient Dorothy. "Give a company seven years of your life and 'snap' – off to the glue factory."

In the weeks that followed the sale of The Practical Toy Company, a team of hatchet men descended into its usually quiet and solemn headquarters building. Rumor had it that layoffs were imminent and some said the buyer, Amalgamated Arbitrage, might scoop up the large cash reserves that Elmer O. "Bud" McKracken had accumulated, sell off the more profitable units and close the company down. So when Stimple was summoned to the office of one of the young moguls, the newly appointed CEO of Practical Toy, for a personal meeting, he had already begun to explore alternatives such as marketing a chain of hot dog and chili stands in lobbies of the cold granite office buildings of northern cities.

"Who could turn down a hot dog and a cup of chili on a freezing day in January when the reality of another year of the business blahs sets in. Variations on a theme, weenies for assholes and capitalist pricks, topped with shredded cheeses and polished off with chocolate chip cookies and cocoa. Just a small spot off the lobby, a short-term lease, a couple of illegals to cook the stuff and dish it out, and we sit home by the fire counting our chips until something better comes along. In the summer frozen yogurt wagons in the corporate park. We'll sell franchises to retired mom and pop teams. You know, use The Tom Sawyer technique. 'See how much fun we're having'; that kinda deal."

Seated in the reception area of the executive suites waiting for what might be his final meeting at Practical Toy, Stimple browsed through the business publications that had been so neatly arranged on the glass table. He was nonchalant at the moment given that the Stimple's had left him a neat little pile and he had a few years to get a new gig going. In the meantime, he'd write a book using his theorems and corollaries to inspire the populace to revolt against the stock market overlords and their phony political hacks. Dorothy could work on a cookbook. Everybody else was doing it. The new yuppie thing. On the theory that the whole world was a short-term proposition overshadowed by dark time. That was his plan and as he sat there thinking it over he felt geared up, animated, ready to roll the dice.

He scowled and occasionally let go a "Ha!" or a "C'mon, you've got to be kidding," at what he saw in the headlines of the business publications before him and chuckled sarcastically at the buzz words of the day: "bottom line," "synergy," "networking," "interface." What a bunch of triple talk and mega trend hooey.

When the executive assistant called his name, he rose bravely, supported only by a nice evening the night before with Dorothy and his entrepreneurial plan and prepared to receive his death sentence. A smartly dressed woman he had never seen before led him down the hallway and opened the door into what had been Bud McCracken's office.

The man behind the desk was Joseph Callahan, Amalgameted's very own whiz kid, a lawyer in his late thirties who already had some successes under his belt. His wavy hair was trimmed on the short side, his glasses dark rimmed and functional. He spoke with the kind of New England accent that grated roughly on the ears of Midwesterners and he thrust his malformed jaw and tangled teeth forward when he spoke in a way that invited someone, Stimple thought, to simply slap him.

"Gawge," he said, rising from his brown leather swivel to crush Stimple's cold palm. "Sit right down, Gawge, and let's have a candid chat, shall we?"

Stimple could feel his heart defying his most simple commands. Usually, his body did what he told it to. He squeezed in his postmortem raison bran rumblings.

"Gawge," Callahan started right in, "this is all very confidential. Is that our understanding? Good. We've got to keep a lid on it, Gawge. You see, my job is to make this place take off again, be all that it can be, and frankly, Gawge, now that I've been here a few weeks, I'm shocked, Gawge, just shocked."

Callahan began a long story that told Stimple what he already knew. Practical Toy was close to extinction. It was rapidly losing market share. The electronics revolution made most of its toys obsolete. Amalgamated's newly graduated MBA's had made the decision to buy the company but only for its large cash reserves. It seems McCracken's anxiety over fear of losing the affections of his young sweetie, his divorces and the lack of a succession plan had clouded his judgment and left Practical Toy bereft of a business model for the future. Its clean and patriotic Tinker Toy style image just wasn't going to hack it any more among the kind of brats being spawned in a greedy marketplace.

“And so, Gawge, I’ve been scratching around for some kind of game plan, a way to get us off square one, get Practical Toy spinning again. I’ve got you in here for one simple reason. During the course of our due diligence, we’ve tried to identify personnel who have been the movers and shakers. Frankly, Gawge, you’re one of the few at Practical Toy whose work over the last few years has made any sense. Yet they’ve shit-canned every solid idea you ever developed. Oh yes, your ideas were a bit off beat and impractical but kids these days are looking for off the wall stuff.”

Not used to such attention but bubbling with the effervescence of one who could now say, “I told you so,” Stimple shifted on the thick pad of the Queen Anne chair previously only made available to investors and Bud’s lovers, folded his hands in his lap, crossed his legs and squeezed as casually as he could -- a secret strategy for holding in the malodorous effects of that morning’s hastily consumed breakfast.

“But there’s no time to implement any of this,” Callahan said, disparagingly flipping up one corner of Stimple’s dossier, a bit too dismissive for Stimple’s liking. “I’m looking to you and others for bold initiatives, Gawge. No lies told, my mandate is to make this place a profit center for Amalgamated fast or shut it down. It’s going to take a good eighteen months to two years to test these newer toys, make them and get them on the shelf. I think one day soon your type of toy will go over big time, especially in the high-end market. A lot of these little bastards are already into computer games. I can’t imagine — at age three and four, zipping through computer science. What are we going to do in the meantime, Gawge? Ideas? I see here your one-off suggestion to the investment department under ‘Stimple’s Simple Fall Back Plan.’ Tell me about it.”

Stimple had a number of what he called “realistic toy” ideas. But with all of his secret debauchery, McCracken had been repelled by his latest submission, a toy that Stimple had given a working label of “Dolly’s Little Friend.” There was general agreement in the marketing group that society wasn’t quite ready to accept the idea of toddlers naturally and regularly dallying with their privates. The toy was immediately rejected as unacceptable and pornographic to even the most liberal members of the R & D review committee. At the same time, “Dolly’s Little Friend,” quickly became the object of numerous jokes, uproarious laughter and even serious discussion.

Society had gone backwards, not forwards, they all agreed.

"The hippies lost, Stimple," Henry McNab stated outright. "It's we Yuppies turn now."

"Think B. C.," Stimple retorted. "Yuppies, hah! The wallflowers of the 60's. No free love for them. Nose to the grindstone. Big cars, big houses. Trophy wives."

"You're just jealous, Stimple. Besides, what parent in their right mind would buy such a toy? If a man bought one for his daughter or a niece, he'd be arrested for incest or pedophilia," they said, index fingers at the top of the conference table.

One young practical female MBA, a double History/Econ major, came to Stimple's defense with a professorial comment.

"Well, of course," she said, "it's been well documented that Victorian nanny's commonly comforted their bawling charges using quite similar techniques and kept the little lords quiet and restful as well by entertaining them under their little blankies."

"Next," the chairman of the marketing group cut in.

"It's just science," Stimple said with a shrug collecting his papers. "It's about what really goes on in the world."

The thankful marketers sighed in unison in celebration of Stimple's quiet departure from their group. Stimple simply shrugged. No tantrum. No thrown objects.

These types of meetings led Stimple, who often pointed out Practical Toy's lack of competitiveness in the new world of technology, to submit Stimple's Simple Backup Plan to one of the vice-presidents in the finance. The two had become lunch buddies and often exchanged stock market tips. The VP had several old college pals willing to share insider information and while Stimple did not seek it out he was always glad to garner an earful. The VP had taken his thoughts "under advisement" and Stimple assumed it was as dead on arrival as many of his game and toy creations.

No one other than Callahan had ever asked Stimple the simple question, "Any other ideas?," but he had rehearsed the moment many times for Dorothy's benefit.

"Well, sir," Stimple said, clearing his throat. He found his voice solid and straightforward with the clarity of someone eager and ready to jump off a cliff. "You are aware, I am sure, of the large cash fund that old... ahem... that Mr. McKracken has been accumulating over the years and I think it holds the key to some short-term gains."

"Gawge, of course, Amalgamated already have a fine investment department..."

“But if you look at it closely, you’ll find the strategy is far too conservative,” Stimple said, pausing to remember the arguments with the VP in the lunch room over getting in and out of the market at the right time rather than plodding along with the blue chips. “The market’s going up, up, and Amalgamated seems to be dribbling all over the court and rarely taking a shot. Now if I may quote one of my own theorems, ‘When it’s going up, up it’s going.’ Therefore, I’d like to recommend that we take this money out of the bond market and the blue chips and invest it to the hilt in start-up ventures.”

“Sounds bold, but terribly speculative, Gawge.”

“Depends on how it’s done. Now for several years I’ve been trading for my own account and I’ve never had a losing season. Find a new company that’s made up of veteran business people with a hot track record, put your money in early, watch the market closely, cash out quick, turn it around again,” Stimple said, on a roll. “While you’re converting R&D to product lines, we’ll have steady income to offset losses. And let’s face it, Mr. Callahan, Practical Toy’s R & D line item is not much more than a dodge for hiding a very large retained earnings tax obligation. The pharmaceuticals do it all the time.”

At that, Callahan froze. He had the expression of a toddler who had been caught in the act of messing his pants. His purchase of Practical Toy had been based on his discovery of this golden nugget and he thought that he, and he alone, had stumbled across it. Those Midwestern dullards had no concept of what they were sitting on. McCracken had been a clever old sod.

Callahan thanked Stimple and told him he would take it under advisement.

“It’s a dead rooster,” Stimple told Dorothy during the evening news. “You should have seen how his face fell when I brought it up. They’ve probably already got a timetable for shutting Practical Toys down.”

Dorothy grilled him a Cornish hen that evening stuffed with grapes and raspberries, soaked up a mess of fresh green beans with bacon, served homemade egg noodles steaming with a rich gravy and baked his favorite cherry cobbler topped with vanilla yogurt. They sat on the front porch swing afterward sharing a pot of French Roast coffee and watched the neighborhood children race their bicycles up and down the street

in the initial exhilaration of summer at the end of the school year. After they were called inside, the night became clear and very quiet.

"Look at the stars, Stimple," Dorothy said. "They're giving off starbeams."

"Huh?" Stimple asked.

"The stars. They're giving off starbeams."

"Humm. Yes, I suppose. Probably some sort of refraction," Stimple rattled off.

They sat quietly, each in their own thoughts.

Finally, Dorothy leaned in Stimple's direction hoping for an advance. She reached over and stroked the inside of Stimple's thigh.

Stimple smiled and thanked her for the wonderful dinner and wandered back into the house. He flicked on the lights in his little study and sat directly in front of his drawing board. The evening before he had articulated Stimple's Forty-Ninth Theorem, "When all doors close, find the trap door," and felt he needed more time to tinker with it.

In the days after he had been admonished by the late Elmer O. "Bud" McKracken at his last board room meeting, Stimple found new comfort in his mere human attempts to understand the laws of nature and humanity. Though some of the other toy designers in the office had not quite abandoned him, he sensed a gradual withdrawal by his more casual acquaintances and old supporters in the marketing department. Once, passing the lunchroom, he overheard laughter and a chorus of jeering voices repeating the maxim, "Keep it Stimple stupid."

He often sat in his study until early morning reading philosophy, science and economics, penciling a word here, drawing a shape there, waiting for a construct to make itself known. During this embryonic period, Stimple continued his mastery of the computer. He put it to use not only for formulating theorems and their corollaries, but also in trying to decipher the future movements of stock and money markets. He subscribed to several services and was only one of a few employees to spot and report errors he thought were being made by the investment department which, instead of evoking "sorry" and "thanks", tended to miff the number crunchers.

"What would an airhead creative type know about money," they liked to grouse.

Stimple usually managed to anger and amaze his stockbroker, Fatty Wooten, by successfully second guessing his recommendations and threatening to get his own license

so he could avoid paying fees for bad advice. His humble pile grew quickly and was prevented from exploding into a small fortune only by the small size of Stimple's investments. Much like the two dollar blackjack player in a side street casino, Stimple believed in hedging his bets.

Along with his late night excursions into philosophy, economics and computer science Stimple had taught himself the art of hacking into someone else's systems. That's how he had hacked into the heart of McCracken's end game. The old conservative had schemed to tap out and take his young mistress with him and was in the process of laying plans to shift his fortune to Ireland to avoid further tax liabilities. Too bad he had in effect tripped over his own dick.

In the shadows of those lonely nights, Stimple meditated on the meaning of the universe. He knew he had to do something about Dorothy. She deserved better. But what and how?

"If life is a game, it's okay to cheat," he wrote down. Everyone else did. At least that was the attitude of the MBA's he knew at Practical Toy.

After thinking himself into a minor stupor and deciding on an investment strategy for the next day, Stimple rolled into bed next to Dorothy and postulated to himself what it would be like to run away. Stimple didn't want to leave Dorothy but he sure could do without Practical Toy.

To his consternation, Dorothy would consult on the QT with her father about Stimple's plans (which did, Stimple admitted to her, aggravate the shit out of him) and old mister fuster-buster would automatically register his preset veto.

"When is he going to give up all this foolishness and get to work on a real job? Make some money? There are all kinds of projects out there just waiting for a rock solid engineer to make them happen," her father always barked.

Dorothy had no reply. One thing she did know. Stimple was no rock.

* * *

Two days after his meeting with Callahan, the telephone next to Stimple's drawing table rang. He had again been summoned. His pessimism after the meeting with Callahan proved to be a miscalculation. He found himself seated again in the Queen Anne chair gagging slightly at the odor of Callahan's cigar.

“Sorry to beat you up so early, Gawge,” Callahan said, looking weary. “I myself have been up all night. After we talked, I had a chat with the investment people and they were soundly against any change in strategy for this year. But the more I thought about it, the more it began to make sense. I’ve looked at the current inventory and the projects in the works. I don’t want to spend any more money on them. They’re losers. It’s going to take a good two years to get new product on the shelves. We’ve got the cash and we’re willing to invest in our acquisitions, when and where they make sense. The toy business is strong and will get stronger. We know that. But we have some hungry stockholders to feed. I’ve been given a mandate by the board of Amalgamated to make it happen here soon or sell it off in pieces. So, Gawge, the bottom line is I’m promoting you to Vice President, Finance. You’ll begin right away. If anyone gives you any crap, call me immediately. We’ll meet for five minutes every morning. I’m counting on you, Gawge. Let’s get out there and score a Hail Mary. How about it?”

“Two up, one back, three forward,” Stimple said without thinking. His latest theorem had rocketed to the surface.

“Pardon me, Gawge?”

“Oh , sorry. Just a little pep talk I give to myself, Mr. Callahan. Quarterback coming out of a huddle. I’m ready to hit it.” For the first time since he arrived at Practical Toy, Callahan pulled back his lips and let slide a sick, gruesome smile.

“Gawge, let’s start off on the right foot. It’s Pat. Just call me Pat. Now you might think Pat comes from Patrick. But it’s just a nickname I’ve earned. ‘Francis’, an old boss told me, ‘you got this shit down pat.’ And it stuck.”

* * *

Invigorated by his new orders, Stimple whizzed across the Big Board like a comet from another galaxy. His enthusiasm inspired Practical Toy’s investment department to create ever more colorful graphs and charts. At the end of his third month as Vice President, Finance, Practical Toy’s portfolio had jumped several percentage points. Standing around their screens, Amalgamated’s wizards cheered in unison as Fridays closed out the week as another winner.

“Cash,” Stimple told Callahan. “They know now about our hidden cash.”

"The R & D allocation, you mean," Callahan sparkled, rolling a cigar between his thumb and forefinger. "Don't worry, Gawge. It's top secret. I'll keep a lid on it."

Stimple began to sprinkle his theorems throughout his morning meetings. Callahan would lean on his fist with a tight smile as Stimple explained why Practical Toy's worth as a private concern had started to climb after years of losing ground or staying flat. The financial analysts in the investment department scratched their heads and quoted Stimple as they puzzled over columns of numbers. "Not up or down, but across and through," Stimple might say, or "What goes around comes crashing down." "Square it, bare it, bend it, pare it," was another favorite.

Four months worth of Stimple's strategies added up "nicely" as his cohorts might say in the jargon of the trade. Stimple snickered privately at their empty cliche' ridden world. He stopped working late and held Dorothy's hand during the late show although, except for now and then, he dozed and napped until she escorted him to bed. "We're on a roll, Dorothy," Stimple would mumble as she helped him pull up his pajama bottoms.

Day by day, the shapes on Stimple's home computer screen began to drift from the bars, graphs and peaks and valleys of lines on flow charts into formations that more closely resembled clouds. Gazing at them from his worn secretarial chair, Stimple could see whales and lions and elephants. Gazelles leaped over bushy obstacles that grew wildly out of the statistics that splashed through the financial jungles of the day. Bar graphs morphed into magnificent undulating worms.

With his fantasies came a curious nostalgia. Stimple remembered the days of laying out a whole play farm with little plastic fences, barns and tables, jocular rubber pigs, ducks, cows and horses, a Farmer John and his helpful wife, their children dressed in overhauls and neckerchiefs, the ponds he cut out of blue construction paper, the trees he folded and fanned out of green and carefully placed as windbreaks to keep the paper sack dust down.

During one such reverie a tornado spun upward from a bell shaped curve and patches of cactus sprouted from points along the base lines of his graphs and charts. With a calculator in one hand and a computer mouse in the other, Stimple followed the ascendance of Practical Toy's future, columns that reached beyond the top of the screen. Late one afternoon the shapes, the lines, the pie itself, cut into wedges of varying

proportions, came together in a tiny spot in his brain and Stimple jotted down his Fiftieth Theorem, "The closest distance between two points is off the grid." It was followed by Stimple's Two Great Laws of Economics:

- "I. Find out who's got the money.
- II. Figure out how to get it away from them."

When the tiny spot exploded, Stimple stood calmly in front of his computer. Aha, that was it!

This time it was Stimple who put the call into Callahan, caught scurrying about on the squash court. Between Stimple's outbursts and Callahan's breathless questions, "Are you sure, Gawge?" and "Gawge, but the triple witching hour is just..." and "Gawge, let me see if I've got it straight...", the scheme took its final form and the decision was made to put it immediately into effect. Though third quarter results had been, "Fantastic, Gawge," Practical Toy remained a rather small and dull asteroid in Amalgamated's heavens.

When Callahan returned to the office still sweating from a hasty shower, he sat down with Stimple and went over the plan one last time. Laughing, swatting each other on the back, the two departed with multiple congratulations. It was a late Thursday evening when Stimple crashed through the front door of his humble bungalow and advised Dorothy that he would take the next afternoon off. Autumn was at its peak and he wanted to kick through the leaves.

By mid-afternoon the next day the market was already reacting as Stimple had predicted. Callahan called to congratulate him again and Stimple slung his tweed sports jacket over his shoulder and ambled out of the office to his aging Pontiac coup. It was a dream-like autumn afternoon in the mid-60's. No clouds blocked his full view of the sun.

Stimple and Dorothy spent the weekend cooking a beef stew, avec grilled onions, carrots, potatoes and green beans, set in motion a batch of chili, and packaged their fine meals and spices in microwave dishes for later lunches and dinners. As promised, they visited three different parks and returned home with an assortment of leaves, pine cones, acorns, berries and crab apples. Dorothy sat in front of the unlit fireplace as happy as ever, stringing nature's pearls together for decorations to hang around the house. Stimple took off his shoes and read a little suspense stinker in the cozy leather recliner he

inherited from the Stimple's living room. By Sunday evening, mellowed by their long walks and embraces and safely stashed in their "love nest" as Dorothy called their bungalow, the Stimples slid into a deep love followed by an unbroken and harmonious sleep.

* * *

On Monday morning, Stimple bounced out of bed, shaved, sucked up his raison bran and was on his way to the office by seven. It occurred to him that he had not picked up a newspaper all weekend, listened to the news on radio or television, or said anything to another soul, except Dorothy. It was the best weekend together they could recall.

Several minutes after he had seated himself at his computer terminal and rearranged Stimpel's pencils, ruler and note pad, each properly labeled as was his habit, he began to notice the silence. Looking up suddenly, he found his associates standing around him in a circle, staring.

"What's up?" Stimple asked.

Jack Martin and Otis Pickering, two MBA's who had been forced to give way to Stimple's regime, chuckled nervously, then turned glum.

"Somebody die?" was all Stimple could think of.

"Stimple, surely you've been following developments," someone grumbled.

"As a matter of fact..." Stimple started to say and then thought how surprising it was that his interest in the Grand Plan had quickly faded in autumnal bliss. In fact, it was the office that seemed strange now.

Martin approached Stimple holding out several newspapers as though they were tarnished toilet paper. Stimple accepted them in the same fashion.

The Monday morning headlines read:

LATE MARKET CRASH WORST SINCE '29

WALL STREET MELTDOWN

LATE AFTERNOON COLLAPSE

DOW TUMBLES AS TRADING SUSPENDED

S & P WORST EVER

ASIAN EXCHANGES SINK

EUROPE STUNNED

“Oh shit,” Stimple simply said. His hands shook, his heart did bell shaped curves, his colonic anxiety attack included water, heat and wind.

The rest of the day all Stimple could do was mutter to himself while a team of Amalgamated’s finest from New York flooded the investment department to install various systems of damage control. Practical Toy’s stock, with the rest of the world’s, continued its downturn, heralded by moos and moans at each report, given at fifteen minute intervals by the indignant Pickering.

While Amalgamated's MBS squad and computer whiz kids were quick to figure out that Stimple had hacked the exchanges and implanted a computer worm, they lost sleep trying to learn how Stimple had been able to make that worm disappear with out a trace. And Amalgamated had no intention of blowing the whistle. If Stimple was going down, Amalgamated's executives had no intention of going down with him. They had themselves, their stockholders and the bottom line to worry about. First things first.

“It was the longest day of my life, Dorothy,” he told her as she sat astride his buttocks and massaged the cones of stress that had hardened throughout his back. Occasionally, Stimple reared his head screaming and pounded the base of his fist into the mattress. “Dammit. Dammit. Dammit. Fuck. Shit. Pickle poop,” he shouted over and over, working up to a full-fledged tantrum and throwing everything he could find to throw.

Later in the evening, he perked up.

“It will bounce back. It always does. They need to recognize market cycles. It’s that short-term thinking again. They need to wait it out. Not to worry. This has been true throughout history. I’ll tell them that.” he philosophized. “If they will listen. The stupid fucks.”

Tuesday passed with no call from Callahan. Perhaps he had been fired. Meanwhile, Stimple found himself forced to one side of an old desk the secretaries sometimes used to sort mail.

He ate his peanut butter, jelly, lettuce and banana sandwich alone on Wednesday at a dreary table in the lunchroom with the other non-exempt employees. The afternoon moved as slowly as the stock market on Friday before Labor Day. But at four o’clock

someone yelled his name with a message. His summons had arrived. All heads turned to watch him plod from the room, head bowed, hands locked behind his back.

Stimple entered Callahan's office feigning a jaunty step but the young mogul sat with his back to the desk looking out the large arched window onto the "AB/CD" fountain that had been McKracken's last erection. Stimple noticed in the golden hues of late October sun that Callahan had acquired a web-like arrangement of fine lines over the surface of his taut yachtsman's tan and few whiteys in his coif, the first acknowledgement of a little suffering. Callahan muttered to himself, grinned, laughed at a private joke or two. He acted as though he had not heard Stimple come in, though Stimple had coughed twice, sat in the Queen Anne chair, crossed his legs to contain his gastrointestinal uproar and rustled about from bun to bun.

But then Callahan said, "You know, Stimple," stabbing the burnt, dead end of his cigar in the air, "we may be the only two people on the face of the earth who really know what caused this Black Friday." Laughter to himself, inside jokes, snickers all round. "Oh me, Stimple. You had us convinced. Maybe we could have made it. Just maybe. Who knows? But they're too smart, Stimple. They've seen it before. Those old blue jackets down in the pits. They could smell it. A scheme. An end-run. Never figured you for a schemer, Stimple."

"Just a, just a..." Stimple tried to say but nothing came out.

"It's like that new scientific theory I've been reading about." Callahan said. He continued to muse, "Chaos, I think it's called. The old intervening variable."

Callahan turned towards Stimple. "So much for your theorems, Stimple. They sounded halfway interesting, but looking back, they stink. Bonus. Golden parachute. Is that what you had in mind?"

Callahan's face spread into a sneer. Stimple thought his long, bent, Bostonian nose needed to be flattened. His gnarly teeth could certainly use a manual orthodontic update and rearrangement.

"Never again, Stimple. Stick to the game plan from now on. Listen to the numbers. No more daring ploys or forays. That's what the boys in New York are telling me."

Callahan turned his chair and faced Stimple with a genuine look of hurt. “Unfortunately, that means no more you, Stimple. Brilliant as your R&D has been and as close as we came to pulling it off, I had to sacrifice you.” He tried to puff his dead cigar. His pupils grew tiny. “Hardball, Stimple. Tough out there. You know the routine. Sometimes a CEO has to protect his own – uh – interests. Uh, pardon me. I think I may have interrupted you a few minutes ago. You have something to say?”

“You asshole,” Stimple blurted out, standing upright.

“Beg pardon?”

“Once an asshole always an asshole,” Stimple improvised.

“Oh, come on, Stimple. This is business. We’re both big boys here.”

“Why don’t you just shut the fuck up and listen to me for a minute,” Stimple shouted into Callahan’s face, leaning over the desk to face him down eyeball to eyeball.

When Callahan froze for lack of any cogent thought, Stimple grabbed a crystal paperweight with a photo of President Ronald Reagan’s stupid grin curving across the sphere and threw it against the wall, denting the polished mahogany woodwork.

“Hey there, Stimple. I’ve done well by you. A great severance arrangement. Nothing but praise in your personnel file. No mention of Black Friday at all. It’s like the big guns at home office tell me, ‘It’s not what you did for me today. What are you going to do for me tomorrow?’ That sort of outcome. You know that. The American way. High stakes poker. I win, you lose. Bend over and grab your ankles.”

Callahan’s face suddenly dropped as he anticipated what Stimple set out to do next.

“Stimple, please don’t throw my trophy. I’m very proud of it.”

Stimple allowed the golfing trophy to fall out of his clenched fist onto the floor at his feet. It bounced on the carpet. The brass golfer lay on his side, driver on the back swing, forever ready to launch an invisible ball.

Callahan recovered as he had been taught to do at the universal academy of MBA aspirants when confronted by an angry and hostile employee who had just been fired. He let himself drift into noncompliance.

“Stimple,” he said in his detached managerial voice. “HR will be sending you some paperwork to sign. A check will follow. You know the drill. Go peacefully with

security out the back stairwell to the service elevator. I suggest you sign and return forms promptly if you want the deal I've put on the table. Let's be a good sport and leave quietly," Callahan ended in a soothing voice.

"We've taken the liberty to box up your things," he continued. "You'll find them at the security kiosk on the delivery dock."

Stimple sat where he was and looked one last time at the humbled, MBA, CEO, hot shot. He sighed, stood up and strode towards the tall heavy doors that led past the reception desk. Halfway through the door and perhaps harking back to that moment when he hurled the cast iron roadster into the ruins of his first engineering feat, Stimple looked back at Callahan and announced,

"A stinky, a smelly asshole."

* * *

"What next, Stimple?" his loyal wife, Dorothy, asked that evening after Stimple had cried his heart out on her lap and thrown the sofa pillows in every direction.

"Oh, we'll do all right, Dorothy," he said through a nose made stuffy by his tears. "We've got our own personal investments which didn't dip as low as some and we've got the hush money."

"It's just a severance check, Stimple."

"But I have to sign a release form to get it. The sneaky greasy turd."

Stimple had yet to tell Dorothy he had profitably sold several long-held positions he had purchased in her name via the power of attorney she had given him years before late on Thursday afternoon. To himself he noted the instant he received confirmation of the transaction — with great satisfaction given her father's harassment over the years — that win or lose Dorothy would one day receive a substantial inheritance. Sure, he might eventually go to jail — who knows how these things will work out — but that news he would keep to himself. If the regs ever found out — they were always a little slow to say the least — it would take them years to trace anything untoward back to Stimple. If he fell, so would Callahan, and if Callahan fell, so would Amalgamated's finest. He paused a moment to allow Callahan's words to echo again as they slowly drifted into the stratosphere.

"You know, Stimple," the words echoed through his cranium and out into the ceiling, "you and I may be the only two people on the face of the earth..."

And then he let them go at that.

"Want to go to bed now?" Dorothy asked, almost in a whisper, for he seemed to be in some kind of a stupor.

"No thanks. Not yet. I think I'll just work in the study for a while."

Dorothy lay awake for a long time. She could hear Stimple bumping around in the other room but she might have dozed. Then, as in a dream, Stimple appeared beside her.

"Are you sleeping, Dorothy?" he asked in his kindest, softest voice.

"No, Stimple."

She could feel Stimple move close to her, lift her head from the pillow and kiss her full and deeply on the lips. His tongue, fresh with toothpaste, entered her mouth and he began to slide her gingham shift up the side of her thigh.

When she woke again, it was morning. Stimple was buzzing beside her through the meadow of some new adventure in the REM zone. She walked from room to room in her old flannel robe carrying her "Always Ready" coffee mug and admiring the carpets and furniture she and Stimple had collected at estate sales, thrift stores and antique shops. Every object reminded her of a day with Stimple and that, today at last, she and Stimple would be together while the rest of the world followed its dismal routine.

The door to Stimple's study was halfway open. Dorothy poked her head inside and noticed that disarray had careened off the shelves and drawers of the kingdom of the usually neat and orderly composition of her husband's domain. "Stimple's Stencil" had been flung casually onto his hardwood chair; his crayons and colored pencils were scattered on the desk top and floor, the tops of magic markers left off. "Stimple's Ruler" and "Stimple's Pencil Sharpener" lay near one leg of the drawing table in a pile of shavings. It was then looking up from the ruler that she first saw it on the large white poster propped on "Stimple's Easel." It was framed in reds, oranges, blues and yellows, among tulip, sunflower and geranium blossoms he had drawn, written in his neatest handwriting, carefully outlined in crayon, colored pencil, and magic marker:

For Dorothy:
Stimple's Last Theorem
:MAKE LOVE, NOT WORK

Dorothy dropped to her knees and slowly crawled towards Stimple's bean bag, rolled into it and sighed. She would let him sleep all morning if he wanted, undress and shower with him, then lead him again to the nuptial couch. When they were finished making love, she would ask him to take her to a restaurant they liked down by the river. Don, who owned the place, would make sure they would get their favorite table in front of the fireplace where they would listen the rest of the afternoon to the harpist and relish a bowl of Don's Famous Clam Chowder with a dollop of butter in the center.

By then, it would be time for another nap.