

Rules for Modern Living

When Marc visits New York, he returns encumbered with big carrier bags from the FAO Schwartz toy store.

Once, a customs official told Marc he had duty to pay on some Lego MindStorm Robots. Marc, aghast, threw the box at him.

Marc lectures on the mathematics of behaviour. He describes how animals flock, and reveals how, with a couple of rules and big numbers, one can generate such complex-seeming behaviours.

He used to build little robots to demonstrate his points, only now, thanks to the Lego people, any fool can make them, and his postgrad lectures are summarised on the back of a billion colourful boxes.

Naturally, Marc has upped the ante. Now he says: what about human behaviour? What's the smallest amount of code you'd need to model the gritty stuff of our experience? Jealousy? Rage? Pity?

'It comes down to faces,' he says, when next I go round to his flat. He sticks a plastic eyeball onto a blue plastic prism. 'You see?' He works at it: a curly swizzle-stick becomes a tongue; a red ball, a nose.

This is his latest FAO Schwartz find. Zolo: a box of interconnecting plastic shapes. As you fit them together, you find that these shapes make little creatures. Imagine Mr Potato Head crossed with Miró.

'Meet Kevin,' Marc says. (Already the flat has acquired a stale, bachelor smell.)

'Marc.'

‘He looks like a Kevin.’

It seems to smile at me.

‘*Hello!*’ Savagely, Marc snaps it apart. ‘You try.’ He flings the pieces at me.

The shapes aren’t anatomical. You don’t say, ‘That’s an arm, that’s a torso, that’s an ear.’ Still, in a few minutes, almost in spite of yourself, you find in your hands a cute, crazy little alien thing with an expression, a character all its own.

‘I’m not interested,’ I tell him, and I cross to the kitchen to throw away my tea. There are take-out cartons everywhere.

‘Anthropomorphism,’ he calls out. ‘Bunnies in pinnies, mate. Add another rule or two to that, you’ve got every human behaviour under the sun.’

‘Just give me her passport,’ I say.

Alice’s story: two years ago she was drinking Havana Club in the bar of a New York hotel when a man walked in with a suitcase.

He sat alone in a quiet corner, watching her. When she stood up to leave, he took from his case seven fist-sized robots. Seven mindless pieces of plastic each following the three same, simple rules.

They scurried around her, herding her toward his table.

My story: I was lecturing at the London School of Economics, explaining why, despite our best intentions, we seem to be wiping out all life on this planet. The trouble is, we are conscious. Consciousness, I believe, is profoundly wasteful. That is, consciousness *lays waste* to its surroundings. I am an economist and I have math to prove this.

That is what I said to Alice. *I have math to prove this.*

We were in a restaurant, waiting for Marc. I was struggling. Beautiful women intimidate me.

‘Are we so complex?’

‘Very,’ I said.

She laughed. ‘Difficult and doomed!’

‘Yes.’

She leant forward and tugged my beard.

Look at it from her side.

Marc enters laden with bags. ‘Look what I found in New York!’

‘What? Let me see!’

‘A *Furbie!*’

‘Oh.’

Look, it *blinks!*’

Alice might have expected a piece of jewellery, a picture, a posh dress; a first edition, perhaps.

But according to Marc, what Alice *really* wants—what we all *really* want—is a sink, a sponge, an object, worthless in itself, into which one can pour one’s humanity. ‘Look at de cute liddle Furbie. *Ahhhh...*’

Needless to say, since Alice left him, he has been sending her fluffy dogs, stuffed mice, Kinder Egg dragons...

So I have whisked Alice away to Hawaii. Since I had a lecture to give here. Pissing on SETI’s parade.

‘Consciousness is at best a short-lived phenomenon, and this, I believe explains the stubborn silence of the stars.’

Back at the condo, I shave off my beard. My success owes much to this beard—its incongruous, avuncular fullness. Attending my talks is like being told by Father Christmas that you have two months to live.

Still, Alice wants to snorkel, and if I don’t shave, the mask won’t seal.

Ta-da! I stare at myself, peeved. That long top lip makes me look mournful. Worse. *Pained.*

I have no lectures for a while, thank God. Just imagine: that big, red, wounded mouth, spitting deadly formulae like bits of glass.

On the beach, I read aloud an article about the local coral. It’s mostly dead and gone, thanks to us tourists. And we all insist on having our brush with fast-vanishing nature, don’t we?

Alice scrambles to her feet. ‘I’m going in,’ she says.

‘Okay.’

‘Hand me the PhishPhood.’

That is how it’s spelled. I hand the tube over. ‘*Per-hish, per-hood.*’

‘Whatever.’

I go to the car for another magazine. She’s already out of the water when I return. ‘So many fish,’ she says, pretending to laugh.

‘*Per-hish.*’

‘Go see them.’ Blindly, she bundles the snorkel into my hands.

This is why she is crying:

Because it’s like Dr Seuss in there. Big fish, small fish, green fish, blue fish. So many faces. So many creatures to be friends with, to love.

But we can only love on our terms.

Do not make the obvious mistake. Do not for a second imagine that the logger cares nothing for trees, that the whaler does not respect the whale, that the miner does not kneel awed before the seam.

We all love nature. But we love on our terms (how could it be otherwise?) and our terms are deadly. We think the world’s a sink, a sponge, for our humanity—and we hug it to death.

Stubble rises, veiling my death's head, lending it an expression, a character,
Alice once, however briefly, loved. But it grows too slowly, and three weeks later, she
is back with him.