

THINKERTOY

by John Brunner

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Paul Walker was afraid of his children. For months now he had been afraid for them, ever since the fatal accident, but this was different—not a rapid change, but the gradual kind that is recognized one morning as having happened.

And he and Lisa had been so proud of their outstanding intelligence. . . .

He could not tell which of them he found the more disturbing. Logically it should have been Rick because of the way the crash had altered him. He bore no visible scars, but it had done incontestable damage. Whether directly, as the result of trauma, or indirectly, through showing him his mother hideously dead, had proved impossible to establish.

Yet in many ways Kelly, two years the older, affected him worse. There was something unnerving about the composure she maintained: in particular, the way she cared for Rick now that he showed so little interest in the world. It wasn't right for a child barely into her teens to be so organized, so self-possessed: to rouse her brother in the mornings, make sure he was neatly dressed and came to breakfast on time, arrange their return home because though Paul could drop them at school on his way to the office, he was still at work when classes finished. Most days they came back by bus, now and then in the car of one of the numerous other parents living nearby who had been shocked by Lisa's death. ... It was in principle a great arrangement; as his friends kept reminding him, it meant he could keep his job and even work overtime now and then, without worrying.

But he had worried all along. Now he had progressed beyond that. He had grown used to the sense of Rick not being wholly present anymore, yet not resigned to it. The boy went to school without protest, and endured his classes and maybe soaked up the odd droplet of information. But on regaining his room he would sit, both before and after supper unless Kelly coaxed him to watch TV, in front of his computer or his games console, perhaps with a game loaded, more often watching a net display scrolling of its own accord, looking—this had crossed Paul's mind weeks ago and fitted better than any other description—bored. Bored as though he was tired of being able to remember that he had used to operate these expensive gadgets, without recalling what he had actually done to make them work. For a while Paul had offered to partner him, but was defeated by his frustrating wall of indifference.

Every weekend he sought some stimulus that might reawaken his son's dormant personality, making a trip to a game or a show or some place of interest out of town. This time, though, Kelly had asked to visit a shopping mall, to which he gladly consented because he felt she ought to let him buy her new and more stylish clothes to keep up with her school friends. It was fruitless; she insisted on the same kind of items as usual, inexpensive, practical, plain.

However, there proved to be a compensation. He was double-checking his grocery list for the coming week before continuing to the supermarket when Kelly—in T-shirt, jeans, and trainers as she would remain until it was time for sweater, jeans, and boots— returned to him with a thoughtful air.

"Dad, I think you ought to see this."

Instantly: "Where's Rick? Why isn't he with you?"

"That's what I want you to see. Look."

And there the boy was, standing riveted before a display in a section of the mall it had not crossed Paul's mind to make for.

But why did I not think of toys? After all, in some ways he has become a child again. . . .

Hastening in Kelly's wake, he wondered what could have broken through that armor of remoteness. It must be something special, for there were as many adults and even teenagers, normally contemptuous of childish things, as there were children gathered here. A smiling salesman was putting his wares through their paces.

And quite some paces they were.

They were performing under an arch bearing the name thinkertoy in brightly colored letters, on a display one part of which modeled a modern city block with buildings of various heights; another, a medieval castle with donjon, moat, and curtain wall; another, an icebound coastline lapped by miniature waves. All over these were roaming little machines, some with wheels, some arms and/or legs, some tentacles, some hooks and suckers for hauling themselves up cliffs or trees or vertical walls. Occasionally they came to an obstacle they could neither surmount nor traverse, whereupon, seemingly of their own volition, they repaired to a heap of miscellaneous parts at the side of the display, disconnected part of their or another's current fitments, plugged in replacements and renewed their progress. Now and then the onlookers clapped and laughed at some particularly ingenious configuration, such as a scaling-ladder. Also there were a pair of video screens showing other actions they were capable of. Paul found himself fascinated along with all the rest.

"Excuse me."

A tentative voice. The salesman deployed his broadest beam.

"Suppose you change things around."

Rick? Could it be. . . ? Yes, it was Rick who had spoken! This was fantastic!

"You mean like shifting things to new places? They keep right on going. They learn in moments. For instance—" He reached for a handful of the spare parts, then checked.

"No, kid, you can do it. Dump 'em wherever you like. When they bump into one of these bits they'll recognize it, remember it's in the wrong place, collect it, and return it to store. You'll see."

The little machines performed as predicted, watched by Rick with total attention. Meantime the man continued his spiel, while two pretty girls took station beside a credit-card reader in anticipation of impending sales.

"But you haven't seen a fraction of what Thinkertoys can do! You can find out more from the screens here, and our full-color literature." On cue, the girls fanned brilliant leaflets like oversize poker hands. "You can discover how much more fun, how much more fulfilling for adults too is life with Thinkertoys around! Want your Thinkertoy to answer your phone, and that includes videophones by the way, with any of a hundred voices and identities? Make 'em up yourself or use the ones supplied. Want your games console or computer to play against you in exactly the style of your favorite partner, only he or she is not available? Easy! Just record a sample of the games you've played together. Your Thinkertoy will analyze and duplicate anybody's style to grandmaster level and beyond. Want to integrate your computer with your stereo, your stereo with your TV, your TV with your phone—so you can call home and tell the VCR to record a program you only just found out about? Your phone with your cooker, your microwave, your refrigerator? It's done for you! And as for what two or more of these little pals can do, it's astonishing! Two Thinkertoys working together can open an icebox or freezer, read the labels on the stored food, or if unlabeled show it to a videophone for you to identify, then locate the recipe you name and prepare it against your return home, substituting if need be alternative ingredients of equal or superior quality. Thinkertoys retrieve from awkward places. They clean tirelessly and unobtrusively. They hide in corners when not required and reactivate instantly on hearing their names. No need to connect them to wires or cables, though that is an option. They communicate like portable phones, and with ultrasound, and with infrared—"

"Say!" one of the listeners burst out. "If they do all these things why call them toys?"

"They're for playing with," was the suave rejoinder. "Most people don't have enough fun in their lives. Thinkertoys are designed to put the fun back in living! And ..." His voice dropped to a confidential

level, though everyone in the small crowd still heard every syllable. "To be absolutely frank, our company was intending to introduce a family model, what you might call a more sober design, just to do dull things like help out around the house. But then this new chip came out, the very latest most sophisticated kind, and we found we could pack all these features in as well, and . . . okay, I'll let you in on the secret. Thinkertoys work so well, people buy them for their kids and wind up using them themselves, so they have to come back and buy another, catch?"

He flashed a mouthful of excellently cared-for teeth, and several people chuckled at his engaging blatancy.

"Of course," he added, "it makes sense to save yourself the second trip, and these young ladies will be pleased to show you our double packs at a net savings of fifteen percent. And of course all Thinkertoys are fully guaranteed."

"Dad," Kelly whispered, "are you going to buy one for Rick?"

The things weren't cheap, especially with the full kit of parts warranted to permit access anywhere in any house or apartment. However, the sight of Rick showing animation for the first time since he came home from the hospital. . . .

He hadn't spent the insurance he had had on Lisa, meaning to invest it until the kids were of college age. But this was a special case. Just how special became plain when, instead of showing his customary indifference, Rick made a careful selection of the optional extras. As he put his credit card away Paul's heart felt light for the first time since his wife's death.

"What's got into you?" demanded Carlos Gomez when they met during lunch break. Carlos was the firm's computer manager, and as personnel supervisor Paul worked closely with him, but they had been drawn together most of all because Belita Gomez had been a good friend of Lisa, and immensely supportive since the tragedy. It was she who most often gave Rick and Kelly a ride home from school.

"What do you mean?"

"You're looking cheerful for a change."

Paul explained, with the aid of some of Thinkertoy's promotional literature that he had in his pocket. Studying it, Carlos gave a soft whistle.

"I'd heard they were working on stuff like this, but I didn't know it was on the market. And for kids, yet! There must be something wrong with it."

Paul blinked. "What makes you so sure? I haven't noticed anything wrong. In fact the opposite. Kelly has been so anxious to help Rick get better, and this is the first real chance she's had. First thing they had to do when they switched the gizmo on was choose a name for it, and they settled on Marmaduke and that was the first time I've heard Rick show any sign of amusement since . . . Well, recently. But I swear I heard him chuckle.

"Then they settled down to try out everything in the manual, and I had to take supper to Rick's room for them and eventually become the heavy father at midnight. And today I've let them stay home from school, just for once, because . . . well, because of the change it's worked on my son." He sounded almost belligerent. "And you immediately conclude something is wrong? I think it's all extremely right!"

"Cool it," Carlos sighed. "I didn't mean wrong from your kids' point of view. I meant from the point of view of what they originally intended the things to do. Maybe they're fine for home use but no good for autopiloting an airliner or controlling an industrial plant."

"You ever heard of this operation before? No? Then what makes you so positive?"

"Just the sort of things a Thinkertoy is capable of, on its own or in conjunction with others. Paul, a chip like that simply isn't the sort you develop for the toy market."

"During the Cold War, didn't the Soviets buy gaming machines intended for Las Vegas because that way they got their hands on electronics that were otherwise under ban?"

"Sure, but those aren't exactly toys. The gambling market operates in the billion-dollar league. Even the biggest hits in the toy market arrive one season, thrive for another, and fade away the next. Exceptions exist, like Barbie dolls, but have you seen a Peppervine doll lately? Or a Captain Carapace?"

So I can't help wondering what the intended application was for these things. I guess I'll ask around. Mind if I keep this?" He tapped the stiff polychrome paper of the advertising flyer.

Paul shrugged and nodded. But he felt annoyed with Carlos. He had spent months in a nonstop condition of worry; thought it was ended; and now found himself given a reason to start worrying all over again.

He was still further alarmed when he arrived home to find Kelly alone in the kitchen defrosting food for supper.

"What's Rick doing?" he demanded. "Never tell me he's bored with Marmaduke already!"

Wrestling with a too-tough plastic cover, she shook her head. "No, it's just that we've done everything in the manual that we can—you need some extra connectors to wire up the kitchen, like the oven and the broiler, and he didn't pick them up—and . . . Well, you better ask him yourself. He lost me halfway. Ah!"—as the obstinate cover finally peeled back.

"He'll lose me sooner than that," Paul sighed, and headed for his son's room.

The boy was seated contemplatively before his computer. Marmaduke squatted beside the keyboard, or rather its torso, devoid of the attachments. The screen showed mazy lines.

"Circuit diagram?" Paul hazarded.

"Mm-hm"—without looking around.

"Something wrong? Kelly said you can do everything in the manual except jobs you need special parts for."

"Mm-hm."

"So—uh—are you running an autodiagnostic?"

"Trying to. I can't get it to run properly."

"I was talking to Carlos Gomez over lunch. You know, our computer manager. He seemed very interested in these Thinkertoys. How about downloading it to him and seeing if he can help?"

"Nope." The boy's tone held the first hint of determination his father could recall since the crash. "I think I know what's wrong and I'd rather fix it myself."

He rose stiffly from his chair, as though he had been there all day.

"I'm hungry," he added. "What's Kelly fixing? Smells good."

Paul had to wait a moment before following him downstairs. His eyes were blurred with tears.

The following day Kelly said she wanted to go to school. Rick didn't. He wanted to finish solving his problem and thought he could. Unwilling to risk an argument that might make him late for work, Paul exacted a promise that he would certainly attend the next day, and was astonished and delighted when the Thinkertoy appeared unexpectedly on the breakfast counter in a quasi-humanoid configuration with two arms, two legs and one head, threw up a smart salute and shouted, "You got it, Mister Admiral, sir!"

His son had often made jokes like that, way back when . . .

In the car, he hoped Kelly's detachment might thaw, but it didn't. Drawing up before her school, he ventured, "Buying Marmaduke seems to have been a bright idea, hm?"

With her customary abnormal gravity she shrugged. "Too soon to say."

And was gone, not pausing to kiss him goodbye.

That, though, had become the pattern.

Carlos was not in the office today—on a trip, Paul learned, to inspect a batch of expensive gear being offered second-hand at a bargain price. The seller, a bankrupt arms company, had been a casualty of the end of the Cold War. He resolved to phone him at home tonight if Rick hadn't sorted out his problem. Two days off school were enough.

And of course if there really was something wrong with Marmaduke they could always return him—it—on Saturday, under guarantee.

But, Kelly declared as soon as he entered the house, that wasn't going to be necessary. Pleased, more than a little proud of his son, who had been a real computer whiz before the accident and seemed to be recovering at last, he headed upstairs.

"Rick! Kelly tells me you figured it out," he said heartily.

"Mm-hm." The screen was a crawl with lines like yesterday, but this time the boy was using his mouse rather as though he was in Draw mode, marking a dot here and a dot there and leaving the computer to connect them.

Paul hesitated, aware that he understood far less about computers than his son, but finally ventured, "Are you repairing Marmaduke?"

"Yup."

"I didn't know you could. I mean, not on the sort of gear you have."

"He's designed that way. To be fixed in the field."

"Field?"

"Away from the shop. It's a really dense chip in there. You can write to it with real tiny currents. Amazing stuff. 'Course, reprogramming it would be a different matter."

"You're not—uh—doing that?"

"Nah. Just cleaning it up. Getting rid of some junk."

"So what exactly did you find wrong?"

Rick leaned back and stretched.

"It got damaged. Like my brain . . . Say, I'm hungry."

And after they'd eaten, he carried his plate to the sink, announcing, "Okay, well, if I got to go to school in the morning I better make sure Marmaduke is one hundred percent. See you later."

After a pause, Kelly's mood softened enough for her to concede, "I guess you were right, what you said about Marmaduke."

That was as far as she was prepared to go, but Paul passed his most relaxed evening in a long, long while.

Around ten-thirty Rick decided he was satisfied, emerged yawning from his room, took a shower, and retired peacefully to bed. Kelly decided to do the same. As she headed for the stairs there was a soft scuttling noise.

"What's that?" Paul exclaimed.

"Marmaduke, of course, this time with all his wits about him. You turning in too?"

"In a little while. I want to call Carlos, see if he's home yet—Just a moment! Do I need to set the answering machine as usual or has Marmaduke been programmed to switch it on?"

"Better than that," the Thinkertoy replied. It was perching on the newel post of the banister. "I can act as one, using whichever phone is nearest and adjusting the outgoing message to correspond with the current situation. I shall memorize your usual bedtime and rising time with allowance for weekends, but in addition I can take calls whenever the house is unoccupied and give the other party your estimated time of return. Let me know if ever you would like these parameters changed. By the way, I can also control a modem and a fax and reprogram your VCR in response to a phone call—but you've read the brochure. At least I hope you have."

"You forgot to mention," Kelly murmured, "that we've fixed you to sound like me, or Rick, or Dad, or Donald Duck, according to who the caller wants to talk to. The Donald Duck one is for telephone solicitors. In case you're interested, Dad, the voice he's using right now is a three-way mix of all of us. I told Rick it would be kind of suitable."

For a second Paul was stunned. Then he chuckled.

"Marmaduke, I think you are going to be a distinct asset to the Walker household. Good night!"

He reached for the phone. They only had the regular kind. Videophones were still very expensive, even though it was clear from the Thinkertoy literature the manufacturers took it for granted that if you could afford one you could afford the other.

Moments later Belita Gomez's drowsy voice sounded in his ear.

"No, Paul, Carlos isn't home yet. He called to say he'd closed the deal and they were all going to a restaurant. Want him to call back?"

"Don't even give him a message. It can wait until morning. The kids are in bed and I'm about to follow their example. *Buenas noches.*"

"I'm *in* bed. G'night."

Later there was the faintest beep from the phone bell, cut off so quickly it was barely audible.

Whereafter, to the accompaniment of a yawning noise: "Hello."

In a whisper: "Paul, this is Carlos. Sorry to call so late. I'll try and keep it short but you need to hear this. 'Fraid I got to keep my voice down. Belita's asleep and I don't want to disturb her."

A deep breath.

"At this company where I went today, after we agreed on a figure, I stuck around for dinner with the guys I was mainly dealing with. I happened to ask whether they knew anything about Thinkertoys. I hit pay dirt. Remember I said those chips weren't developed for the toy market even if the toys do double as home appliances? Well, this company I was at used to be in arms back in the Cold War period, and this guy says yes, he knows who made them, though he wouldn't give a name, but he did tell me what they were intended for. Sabotage! Plant 'em behind enemy lines, or leave 'em during a retreat, and they activate and start wrecking everything in reach. Electronics first, naturally—they have built-in jamming capacity. But they can start fires and foul up bearings and unscrew closed valves in chemical plants, even loosen tacks in stair carpet so people break their necks. . . . They're supposed to have been rendered harmless. Some kind of inactivation program. But this guy I was talking to: he says the security is lousy and you can get around it in an hour, or sooner if you automate the job, and the word's out on the net and you want to guess who's buying? The Sword Arm of the Lord, that's who, hoping to destroy black-owned businesses, and the Islamic League for Female Decency, and the Choosers of the Slain, and—Shit, I think I woke Belita after all. Talk to you in the morning. 'Bye."

The connection broke.

Whereupon Marmaduke went on about its proper business, the liberty for which Rick had restored.

"Sorry, *querida*—didn't mean to wake you."

"It's okay, I wasn't really asleep. . . . Who were you talking to at this hour?"

Sitting on the edge of the bed to remove his shoes: "Paul. Paul Walker. I learned something about those Thinkertoys that couldn't wait for morning."

"If it was that urgent why didn't you call from the car?"

"His home number is unlisted and I don't have it in the car memory."

"Ah-yah ..." Belita was struggling to keep her eyes open. Then, with a sudden start: "What do you mean, it couldn't wait until morning? It'll have to anyway, won't it?"

Carlos, unfastening his tie, checked and glanced at his wife. "I don't get you," he said after a pause. She forced herself to sit up against the pillows. "You got his answering machine, right?"

"No! I talked to Paul—"

"But he called here about ten-thirty to ask if you were home yet. When I told him no he said the kids were in bed and he was going to turn in as well. Ever know him forget to set his answering machine?"

Carlos was staring. "But I know his message! He never changes it. I must have heard it a hundred times. . . . Oh my God."

"What is it?" Belita was alarmed into full wakeful-ness now.

Feverishly he retrieved the Thinkertoy advertisement from his jacket. "Yes, I'm right," he muttered. "One of the things they can do is impersonate their owner on the phone."

"You mean carry on a conversation that can fool the caller?"

"No, that's the Turing test and no machine has passed it yet. But it could exploit the Eliza principle. That goes right back to the early days, but it's still used and it can sure as hell fool people, especially if they're under stress and their guard is down. . . . 'Lita, I got to go check that the Walkers are okay."

"But why should they not be?"

He told her. Before he finished she was out of bed and scrambling into whatever clothes she could reach.

Kelly and Rick, in pajamas and barefoot, stood hand in hand before their house, waiting. Hearing a car approach, they disregarded it. There were still a few people returning home even at this time, and they were concealed in the shadow of a clump of bushes.

Just as Carlos braked, there came a faint whooshing sound from the kitchen, which lay partly below the bathroom but mainly below Paul's room, the one that had been his and Lisa's. An orange glow followed, and a crackling noise. The house was largely timber-built. Later it was established that Marmaduke had loosened the valve on a cylinder of propane and ignited the leak, as it was designed to, by short-circuiting its powerpack.

The glow revealed the children.

"*Madre de dios!*" Belita exclaimed. "But what are Rick and Kelly doing out here? And where's Paul?"

"Save your breath!" Carlos was frantically escaping his safety belt. "Blast away on the horn! Rouse everyone you can! Call 911!"

"Carlos, don't do anything foolish—"

But he was already rushing towards the porch. Kelly and Rick recognized him and seemed to scowl and mutter. Suspicion burgeoned but he had no time. He reached the door.

It was locked. Suspicion grew brighter and fiercer like the fire within. But he still had no time. In the car he kept a baseball bat for security. He ran back for it. Thus armed, he smashed a glass panel alongside the door and managed to reach the inside lock.

By now lights were coming on, windows being flung open as the car horn shattered the night silence. Slamming shut the kitchen door, which he found open, gained Carlos a few more precious moments before heat and smoke made the stairway impassable. Three at a time he dashed up it.

The front door was not the only one that was locked.

Suspicion approached certainty, but still he had no time. He smashed the flimsy jamb, found Paul sleepily approaching the window, aroused by the horn, dragged him down the stairs and staggering into the garden. . . .

With seconds to spare. Like a puff of breath from a dragon, the gas cylinder burst and blew out all the house's doors and windows. Flame erupted through the ceiling under Paul's room.

Distant but closing fast, sirens wailed.

Paul collapsed, choking from a lungful of smoke, but Carlos managed to retain his feet. Gasping, he found himself confronting Rick and Kelly. Their faces were stony and frustrated. He whispered, "You knew, didn't you?"

Impassivity.

"Paul said you spent most of your time scrolling around the net. That must be how you found out. I guess the Thinkertoy display at the mall must have been pretty widely advertised. And like the guy said, the protection that was supposed to make the chips harmless could be easily erased."

He stood back, hands on hips, ignoring Belita, who clearly wanted to fuss over the children. He barely registered that Paul was albeit unsteadily regaining his feet. Before his friend could speak:

"But why?" Carlos pleaded.

The children exchanged glances. At length Rick gave a shrug.

"He was driving."

After which Belita's importunities could no longer be ignored.

Paul Walker was afraid of his children.

As those three words made clear, he had good reason.

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About the author:

John Brunner was one of the finest living science fiction writers. He died suddenly of a stroke on the Friday morning of the World Science Fiction Convention in Glasgow, Scotland in 1995, shocking the community. He was the author of many first-rate science fiction stories and novels throughout a career that began when he was seventeen in the 1950s. Brunner was known for his vast, encyclopedic knowledge; his clever logical extrapolations; his clean, sharp style in the tradition of Asimov and his peer Robert Silverberg; and his complex plots. His ability at characterization was underrated. Among his SF masterpieces are *The Squares of the City*, *Telepath*, *Stand on Zanzibar*, and *The Shockwave Rider*. His last stories appeared in 1996. This story was written at the request of Roger Zelazny who, at the time of Brunner's death in 1995, was assembling an original anthology in honor of Jack Williamson. The book was completed by Jim Frenkel and *The Williamson Effect* was published in 1996. But Brunner died before he could write his afterword to the story, explaining its exact relation to Williamson and his work. He must have had something clever in mind (he always did), but now we'll never know precisely what. What is clear is that Williamson was a pioneer, in investigating the idea of robots as a possible threat to human life, in such novels as *The Humanoids*. But this piece particularly reminds me of Williamson's sharp and nasty little story about children and robots, "Jamboree." Insight into human psychology is essential to the punch. And it packs a real punch.