

Please Assemble by Paul j Rogers

The empty waiting room was all white, or all Wong, depending on how you look at it, and looking at it made me feel sick. This room, completely without furniture, was all white in terms of pigment — ivory floorboards, feta cheese walls. It was all Wong as it was the creation of those maddening deconstructivists Caspar & Wong, which, rather worryingly, was the only fact about this company my mind had retained, despite spending hours perusing their pretentious website. I probed my useless memory for more info, such as the number of employees or the current share price, yet the only information to materialise (in crisp Helvetica) was this: “Our deconstructivist headquarters, designed by Caspar & Wong, are located in the historic city centre within strides of the eco-friendly Park ’n’ Ride and a stone’s throw from the Organic Farmers’ Market. Throughout the day, the aroma of dark roast beans drifts along the wharf from Espresso Eva and invigorates all who rest in our office garden. For the team of dedicated professionals at Macfarlane Joseph, this building is much more than a workplace. It’s a lifestyle.”

Still loitering by the doorway, my fingertips brushed the name badge they’d given me, smudging the first “R” in “Renner”. The badge (or pen) must’ve been faulty as the ink had easily had enough time to dry. Enraged, I rummaged for tissues to wipe my fingers, but, of course, there were none. What kind of room was this anyway? Not only did it lack furniture and natural light, it also had no straight lines to speak of, and whether this set-up was Wong’s idea of feng-shui or Caspar’s idea of a joke I couldn’t be sure. At my last place (before they laid waste to our department), the sales team had been shoehorned into indigo steel booths. Yet here, at Macfarlane Joseph, the successful candidate for regional sales manager would soon, no doubt, be drafting reports and planning targets from inside a carbon fibre egg. That might impress some people, but my only interest was the pay cheque, which, after all, had been my sole reason for sliding into such unfamiliar skin most mornings since leaving university. (How does a graduate of modern poetry end up in sales, anyway?)

Fingers stretched apart, bat-like, my heels cracked on wood towards the cloth shapes at the centre of this windowless white womb. From a pace or two away, it became clear that the objects were large containers, chrome frames with linen panels, giant minimalist laundry bins arranged in a row on the floor. ‘Please Assemble’ was printed on laminated cards taped to each fold-back lid. I folded back the centre one and inside the bin were brightly coloured plastic shapes — frames, with interlocking joints, axles and wheels, adult Lego. When I folded back the canvas lids adjacent, the contents of the other bins were similar. My eyes flicked across the walls, neck now craning to examine the ceiling. The interview had begun, then. I was being assessed, hidden cameras, or perhaps the hiring committee were observing through the skin of these Wong-shaped walls.

The door sucked back inside its casing and there stood, neither in nor out of the room, a man so elastic he appeared to be held upright by the tension in his Windsor knot. This gangling marionette (he looked like a stick insect dressed for cricket) appeared more suited to a creative occupation, perhaps (like me) ending up in sales by a cruel twist of fate. As my thumbs strayed from belt hooks to waistline, I cursed the compulsive snacking and microwaved diet that’d so blighted my existence throughout these months of unemployment. After fingering his spectacles, my rival lolloped into the waiting room, all off-white linen and mustard silk, as if taking to the crease at Edgbaston as an unfancied gentleman amateur. Now at the bins, he spooned his quiff while I gawked at the anarchist symbol on his name badge that was pinned to his blazer upside down. It crossed my mind to ask for tissues — before

realising he'd erased his name with his thumbs. He must've brought his own marker pen, though, because that anarchy symbol he'd scrawled was luminous lemon. Ignoring my salutation, he caressed the farthest bin with an enormous leather brogue, announced his name was something Cruickshank, before locking onto a target at the far end of the room that only he could see, which he then made for in long strides.

As interesting as my eccentric rival was, and believe me he was fascinating, the time had come to get to grips with these bins. 'Please Assemble' the signs read. Well, assemble what? Just lay out all the parts and guess? But there was no other choice, so out from the middle bin came rods, hinges and levers, and before it was even half-empty it became clear there were many variables. Yes, this collection of pieces could be anything, and it now seemed certain that we, the interviewees, were supposed to set the goals. Yet whatever we created would be seen as a personal statement, a 3D model of our minds, our characters, our souls. Meanwhile, the committee would be evaluating, circling fives, or zeroes, scoring us for critical thinking and the ability to see tasks through. Worse, they could be evaluating us on temperament. They could be looking for signs of sexual deviancy.

My bin (there'd been no strategy behind choosing it) was now empty, an assortment of rhubarb, custard and slate grey pieces arranged, by size, across the floorboards. There were perhaps seventy or eighty separate parts, and the wheels, of which there were eight, suggested some kind of vehicle might be in order, although there was the potential to combine the wheels with rubber tracks to make a static belt drive. It seemed straightforward enough to snap the pieces together, assuming a concept had been chosen, yet it was difficult to visualise sundials or spaceships with acrylic smeared across my fingers. Without looking up (who knows why as they could see my every move, head down or not), I wiped my fingers on my jacket lining and then reached for the first piece, a moulded plastic right angle. Meanwhile, over in the corner Cruickshank paced in circles, muttering, making statements, statements that nobody else could possibly want to hear.

The door, once again, was sucked back inside its casing, and a shape charged at me in a flourish of runner bean raincoat flaps. This onrushing mass, with its inverted eyebrows, goblin's grin, and long wispy hair pulled back through a widow's peak, seemed, at first glance, to be highly suited to the cut and thrust of sales (unlike Cruickshank, who was still skulking in the corner). He was older, too, perhaps in his early thirties, but how that would affect his evaluation I couldn't be sure. A survival instinct got me to my feet, a need to be at eyelevel with this latest interloper. At two paces, his name badge was legible and the stench of liquor unmistakable. "Tristan Pfaff" read his badge, those alcoholic fumes (mixed with nicotine) possibly being Scotch. While massaging a component resembling a child's prosthetic arm, my eyeballs scanned the room, hunting for signs of a hidden camera or a one-way window concealed within a wall, but once again found nothing.

"Two-horse race," Pfaff said, nodding towards Cruickshank and flashing a little grin. He then whispered, rather loudly, that he'd seen his sort before, PhD types, both bulbs blown by unfinished research and poor nutrition. I wiped the grin from my lips and dropped to a squat to resume scheming. Much to my annoyance, Pfaff stood over me.

"What's the brief then?" Pfaff said.

"Not sure," I said, twisting a ball-and-socket articulator. "Just says, 'please assemble.'"

Pfaff squeezed an extra strong mint from its tube and rammed it through a gap in his crooked smirk, but he was kidding no one if he thought it'd hide that breath, which would require at least thirty minutes with a good hygienist.

"And what do you think it assembles into?" he said, surveying my pieces. "Looks like a rollercoaster that can mix martinis."

Upon telling him that the design was up to us and to check the parts inside his bin, his face twisted into an incredulous leer. Heels now tapping, he said he resented not being given an equal choice of bin and that the pieces I'd taken were only mine if he agreed so. There wasn't time for this. The clock was ticking, so I mumbled something about there being three bins and three of us and that I'd selected my bin without thought.

"Yet you selected the middle one," Pfaff said. "Neither the left nor the right but the middle."

With a toss of the head, he ran a comb through his hair while those bloodshot eyes damned me with their unwavering stare. It was then that the idea to build the "Espresso Eva Cappuccino Buggy" came to me. It would jive well with Macfarlane Joseph's website blurb, and the design, no bigger than a skateboard and styled on a moon buggy, would be a straightforward rolling chassis with diagonal cross members to secure the cups. Of course, there was no engine or means of navigation, so it would never actually work, but that didn't matter. For a finishing touch, if there was time, there seemed to be the right components to make an umbrella antenna for that E.V.A., lunar rover feel. Mindful that we were being observed, a fact that obviously hadn't dawned on Pfaff, I told him, with a congenial smile, that he could choose any bin he liked, as long as it was the left one or the right one.

Pfaff removed his raincoat with a dramatic shoulder shrug followed by an exact extraction of the upper limbs. He then snorted, snapped his tomato braces, flipped the lid of the bin to the right of the one I'd emptied, and then the wristwatch decorating the end of a pinstriped shirtsleeve disappeared inside, fingers, no doubt, rummaging amongst parts. The bin's contents didn't appear to please him because he released the lid with a look of disdain and moved to the left one. Now back on the floor (how degrading), I pushed my parts away from Pfaff, sliding back on woollen knees (only two suits, neither summer cotton) to grab the rhubarb-coloured wishbone I'd somehow left behind.

"Why don't I get any wheels?" Pfaff said.

He was looking my way. That was directed at me. Yet he must be handled with care, or we might get into an argument and then Cruickshank would be hired by default.

"The other parts look reasonable but there are no wheels," he said. "You can build anything with wheels. Clearly, I'm at a disadvantage."

"Try the other bin," I said, without looking up from assembling an A-frame.

"Not only did you start before me, but you have infinitely superior components."

"Then change bins," I said, head still down. "If that's okay with the other guy, that is."

The other guy, Cruickshank, had now drifted over to the bins, hands in pockets. He smiled and told Pfaff he was happy to swap, but Pfaff declined. He then told Pfaff he could have both bins and do whatever he saw fit with the contents.

"I really couldn't care less what's in either of them," Cruickshank said.

Pfaff flicked a glance in my direction, his right eyebrow shaped like a horizontal crotchet rest. That crank Cruickshank then turned and paced back the way he'd come, towards the far wall, eyes glued to his shoes as if counting strides. Certainly he was calculating something because after he'd reached the far wall he returned to the centre and then paced towards the right one. He then repeated this procedure, first with the left wall, and then the wall that framed the sliding door we'd entered through. Having seemingly just measured the distance from the bins to all four walls, he returned to the centre and stood alongside Pfaff, who'd now emptied the contents of the left and right bins to the floor.

"Thought so," Cruickshank said. "The bins aren't central, nowhere near in fact. If the centre was the bullseye then these bins are more like triple four."

"What on earth are you talking about?" Pfaff said, leering up from jumbled parts.

Cruickshank took a stride, like he was about to re-measure the distance to the right wall, but then stopped and turned to face us, spinning on one heel.

“So, who’s here for the interview?” Cruickshank said. “Or perhaps both of you are actors.”

He then pulled his lips into a grin without further explanation. As well as being an unwelcome distraction from assembling my moon bug’s axles, the absurd suggestion that the walls and bins weren’t equidistant was trumped only by the notion that Pfaff and I were actors. (Third-rate poet I might’ve been, third-rate actor another thing entirely.) Pfaff stopped rummaging through his mountain of parts, both bins’ contents now mixed in an unruly heap, and then scrutinised Cruickshank from brow to brogues, his red eyes first settling on Cruickshank’s boiled sweet socks (revealed by ankle-high trouser hems) and then his vintage blazer.

“What do you mean *actors*?” Pfaff said.

“They’re observing us right now,” Cruickshank said. “I wouldn’t put anything past them, would you?”

Pfaff began scanning walls for peepholes, one eyebrow curving upwards like a hook — hit for six, so it seemed, by the man in cricket clobber’s recent revelation. It was hardly news to me, though. Message boards hummed with warnings about Macfarlane Joseph’s interview techniques, the humiliating raps about customer service they’d get candidates to perform, the group discussions about race and gender after oiling interviewees with free Chablis. Those same message boards had formed the basis of my notion that the task was rigged, the room observed — a warped construct of social psychologists to justify their fat consultants’ fees. Cruickshank was wrong about there being actors here, though. Actors need to look the part to sell deception: the right clothes, a professional manner. If either of these two were actors, they’d been cast in the wrong production. Yes, I would gladly remove one of Cruickshank’s battered brogues and take a bite of it if he or Pfaff turned out to be actors.

“There are no cameras here,” Pfaff said. “There’s nowhere to hide one.”

“Correct,” said Cruickshank. “They’re watching through that wall.”

The wall he’d singled out was the far one, the one he’d spent most of his time loitering at. In case we were in any doubt about how he’d arrived at this conclusion, he smiled, took a few steps away from the empty bins, and then began to eliminate walls one-by-one — first the entrance wall as we’d seen behind it on the way in, next the wall on the left as that was shared with the cafeteria, and lastly the wall to the right as it had wave-shaped contours. That just left the far wall, he told us, which, incidentally, had a nice flat plane at its centre roughly the shape of a large window.

“What nonsense,” Pfaff said.

“All space is occupied,” Cruickshank said. “We live by the imprisonment of our geometry.”

Cruickshank grinned and held my eye, perhaps hoping I’d quiz him on his theories. But there was little chance of that because, let’s not forget, everything we said and did was being observed, so I told him I wasn’t an actor, was here for the interview, and that if he was too then maybe he should start building something, although he seemed to have given away all his parts. After that, I told Pfaff that Cruickshank was probably right about them observing us, although I couldn’t be sure from where. This, by the way, was in no way for Pfaff’s benefit as I was merely stating my position to the committee, the observers, because stumbling on pretending they weren’t there had now become impossible. Pfaff snapped his braces (I glimpsed his armpits; unlike me, he wasn’t sweating) and then he said to Cruickshank: “Why the anarchy badge? Some kind of hipster joke?”

Cruickshank smiled and as usual it was without any trace of warmth or empathy.

Pfaff, quite disgustingly revolving what remained of that mint over his tongue, moved closer to him, now just a pace or two away.

“What is it that you want here?” Pfaff said.

Cruickshank slid his hands into his pockets and, with a grin, said, “I’m not asking for anything.”

Pfaff looked at me, snorted, and then cast his eye over the walls and ceiling one more time. He then dropped to one knee, selected an armful of parts from the pile (the most versatile and interesting ones, I might add), and then dumped them in the space to my right. That he hadn’t taken all of them suggested he’d now accepted we were being observed and didn’t want to appear greedy. Cruickshank, who’d not so much as looked at the bins never mind the task components, produced a notebook from his cricket blazer, paced towards the far wall, and then sat underneath the panel he believed to be a one-way window, whereupon he began to scribble notes.

My buggy, now a six-wheeler with eight compartments, was taking shape nicely. Even the umbrella antenna now seemed doable, although I hadn’t figured out how to secure the hub to the shaft. Meanwhile, Cruickshank was still scribbling notes under the secret window while to my right Pfaff worked feverishly to systemise components, choosing to lay them flat in lines as I’d done. As I tightened bolts with the multifunction tool they’d given us, he began to bawl encouragement, praising my moon bug, imploring Cruickshank to visualise his concept, this pathetic ruse to impress the observers being as see-through as Cruickshank’s window from the inside.

“What’s that you’re building, Renner?” Pfaff said.

“I’m not sure I want to tell you,” I said, and then: “Okay, it’s a coffee cart. It’s the Espresso Eva Cappuccino Buggy, actually. Caffé macchiato ordered by app and delivered to your desk.”

“Nice idea,” Cruickshank said, looking up from his notebook.

“Thanks,” I said.

Pfaff, now on his feet, wasn’t so forthcoming with compliments, which wasn’t surprising as all he’d got to show for his effort was a lopsided tetrahedron. Whether the frame was doglegged because of the whiskey or he was naturally clumsy was hard to fathom. I asked him what he was building, but he brushed that off, pacing, instead, towards the empty bins (which were equidistant from the walls, unless, of course, you believed Cruickshank). Thumbs hooked behind braces, he then began to lecture about the need for teamwork — how we’d got the task all wrong, that the evaluators were looking for interpersonal skills as well as creativity. This task, he reasoned, was about leadership and compliance, the subtle interplay between sharing ideas and then executing them as a unit. Throughout this bombast, which was peppered with management jargon such as “getting the ball rolling” and “thinking outside the box”, he’d glance over at me from time to time, his default position being Cruickshank or, more accurately, the one-way window above his head.

As Pfaff’s spiel, mercifully, drew to a conclusion, Cruickshank got to his feet and, to my great surprise, said that he fully supported working together, although he wouldn’t attempt the given task as it was bourgeois gymnastics. He then informed us that he was a “vibes explorer”, had come to an interview for a job he didn’t want nor was qualified to do, and that although the bins and walls were equidistant in an actual sense, they weren’t equidistant in a psychogeographical one. Pfaff put a hand on Cruickshank’s shoulder and said: “Well, I’d still like to get you on board in some capacity, but, at present, I’m not sure

what.”

I pushed up from one knee to right myself. To hell with teamwork; Pfaff knew his tetrahedron wasn't worth tuppence and was trying to sabotage the task, a job being made easier for him by this lunatic Cruickshank who, by his own admission, was not here to secure employment and was only along for the vibes.

“You both seem more concerned with evaluating the evaluators,” I said, “which I find astonishing, assuming you want to be hired.”

“Nonsense, Renner,” Pfaff said. “The task says ‘please assemble’. We’re entitled to discuss amongst ourselves what that may mean.”

“But there are three of us and three bins,” I said. “I would’ve thought that it was obvious.”

Pfaff told me he valued my input and my time would soon come to give it, but right now he wanted to hear from Cruickshank, although I couldn't imagine why as he was talking about dismantling the storage bins and laying them on the floorboards like skinned hides. That Cruickshank had become complicit in Pfaff's skulduggery was a great disappointment, leaving me to presume he was either gullible or his objectives, murky as they were, somehow overlapped with those of that mint-sucking anaconda. Regardless, for the deft hand by which he'd manipulated this alliance (and many other devious twists and feints), Pfaff must score full points.

“So, we’re in agreement that we should work together,” Pfaff said to us. He then pivoted to face the one-way window and said, “Our new concept, The Wellbeing Cart, is needs focused. This remotely operated aisle crawler boosts productivity by monitoring staff health and diagnosing stress. In addition, it can dispense snacks, fruit juice and hot face towels. As the prototype will be full-sized, it'll require components from all three bins.”

You just couldn't make this up: Pfaff the health nut, Pfaff the philanthropist. I gazed at the reflected light wobbling on my left shoe, head shaking.

“I didn't agree to that,” Cruickshank said to him. “I said let's take the bins to pieces.”

“I'll get to that in a moment,” Pfaff said. “Renner, you're good at this assembly business so I want you involved. Here's the thing, though, we're gonna need those wheels.”

My buggy was finished although the umbrella antenna was unsatisfactory. Overall though, it was a sound concept and a good build. So good in fact that Tristan Pfaff had ripped off the idea, with a slight modification, and now expected me to dismantle it in order to make something larger, albeit virtually identical.

“Impossible,” I said. “This is finished. I've completed the task.”

“The task is to work together,” Pfaff said. “Anyway, you're outvoted.”

We both looked at Cruickshank, who was now busy arranging components into groups, probably to help with the assembly of Pfaff's new cart. Pfaff grinned. It then dawned on me that I was hugging my Espresso Eva Cappuccino Buggy, cradling the thing, keeping it, and its parts, from Pfaff and Cruickshank's newfound coalition. Pfaff's eyebrow curved into that hook again.

“Pfaff, you fucker,” I said through gritted teeth.

Surely now the gig was up. And that proved to be the case because the door sucked back inside its casing and a girl from HR clopped into the room on two-inch heels, whereupon she told Pfaff he'd made it to the next round, and then thanked me and Cruickshank for our time. Pfaff popped an extra strong mint into his mouth, offered me his hand (which I refused), then scooped his raincoat from the floor and was gone. The door slid across leaving me and Cruickshank alone inside this festering white boil. Slumping back against one of Casper's curves on Wong's right wall, I dropped to my haunches. Cruickshank, who'd not even looked at the HR girl a moment ago, finished up arranging task components

into subsets, and then he began to dismantle the bins, which he achieved by hacking at corner stitching with his penknife and then sliding out the poles.

“The task said ‘please assemble,’ ” he said. “Now it’s disassembled.”

So, all he’d ever wanted was to lay down the components and flatten out the bins. It really was an absurd sight and, head still in hands, I mumbled: “Brilliant, Cruickshank, brilliant. You might’ve said you weren’t helping Pfaff.”

“You’re better off out of it,” he said. “Today’s task was productive play, yet the prize at the end is just useless toil.”

“Fine sentiments,” I said, “though I’ve got student loans and I’m behind with my rent.”

“And was this what you wanted?” he said, gesturing towards the one-way window.

I wanted to live in a hot country and ride a motorbike without a helmet, go to dusty cafés, pen my purple stanzas. At night, Cruickshank, I’d like to hang out with a girl who had eyes as big as frisbees, and this beauty, this fiesta-loving firecracker, who made her own fusilli and used a brand of shower gel I’d never heard of, would want me as much as I wanted the dream she was part of. In the end, though, all I said was: “Want and need are two different things, Cruickshank.”

He nodded. He’d finished disassembly: all three bins skinned and laid out, poles in staggered alignment; rhubarb, custard and slate grey task components filling all remaining floor space.

“What now?” Cruickshank said.

“Well I don’t know about you,” I said, “but I’ve no plans to sniff coffee in their office garden.”

The vibes explorer rummaged inside his blazer and then produced his notebook.

“Let’s go for a walk,” he said.

“Why?” I said.

“Why not?” he said, scribbling something into the book on bended knee.

“Where?” I said.

“Anywhere,” he said, looking up with a grin.