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Jeffrey Doka
The Builder

I first saw the Builder while waiting for my bus at its Southgate stop. My eyes ached from coding ‘til two in the morning, so I slid down the bench and pulled up my hoodie for shade. How late would the 120 be today? Fifteen minutes? Twenty? Luckily, I was working a trash temp job and didn’t have to care much about Daly City Transit’s flexible commute times.

A flicker of movement registered through my half-closed eyes, and I shifted to make room for someone else on the bench. No one was there.

On the elementary school playground across from my stop, a tubby kid in a white polo and slacks, donning glasses thicker than my thumbs, ran toward a patch of pine trees and mud just beyond the rubber turf that blanketed the playground. He kept sprinting until he reached the border fence, hunkered down, and started digging through the rough soil. He worked his way through the top-layer of dirt and started piling lumps of reddish clay to his side.

Welp, kids were weird. I settled back into my slouch and dozed until the bus came. It arrived twenty five minutes late, exceeding even my low expectations.

When the recess bell echoed across the street the next day, the same kid was back in the mud. Now, he started harvesting some pine twigs and organizing them in neat rows beside his clay pile. A minute later, he was propping up a rough triangle with one hand and searching for a well-sized stick with the other to form a pyramid.

A few cars drifted past, and when I looked back, the kid was constructing another pyramid next to the first. Didn’t every kid have toys and LEGOs and stuff? Maybe his

dad was an avid do-it-yourselfer or something. Well, rolling up your own sleeves and doing things yourself was sometimes the safest bet.

My bus ran late, and another bell rang across the street. Their recess over, kids filtered back inside their school's gray walls, but the Builder was still at it. He added a final stick to connect the two pyramids before sprinting for the doors.

A minute passed, and fog softened the little clay spheres binding the pyramids together. Then, the morning winds rushed in from the bay as scheduled. Those feeble pyramids didn't stand a chance, and in moments, all his work lay in a scattered mess. I couldn't help but bark out an angry laugh.

It only took a few more days of watching the same thing for me to realize that this kid wasn't just goofing around. The Builder started every recess setting up his two support pyramids, and as he got faster at those, he was able to set up a third allowing him to balance some scaffolding a tier higher. After that, he'd use some spit and clay to form a lattice of tiny twigs threading between the main pillars of his construction.

He never got close to finishing before the bell rang, and he'd always have to start from scratch on the next day. Whether it was careless kids playing tag, a ham-fisted bully kicking it over, or just the late-morning gales, the creation never survived.

Well, that was how the world dealt with innovators. I should know. My name should have been pasted all over TechCrunch. I should have been in the tech hall of fame next to Marc Benioff and good ol Zuck, but it turned out the petty kids that knocked over the Builder's work all grew up to be VCs and NDA-infringing engineers.

A few weeks into the Builder's gauntlet, a freckled kid with orange hair flopped down across from him and started idly chatting. Occasionally, the new kid would help the

Builder clean up a pine twig or two and maybe hold a few sticks upright while the Builder laid in support. Sometimes other kids would pop up and the freckled kid would get distracted and knock over the portion of the construction they'd been working on. The Builder never complained; he just seemed thankful for the company. I could have told him it wouldn't be long before he lost that too.

All it took for the Freckles to leave was a pair of older kids playing keep-away with a tennis ball. After they laughed at the freckled kid for missing the first few tosses, he ran back to the Builder only to steal one of the Builder's pine support pillars. Freckles sprinted back to the older kids' game, swinging wildly at the ball soaring over his head with the Builder's stick. Typical.

I'd had big name people lining up at my door to work on my new language and assembly interpreter, but the second they got bigger paychecks and a chance to get their own names on patents I deserved... they disappeared. Did their conscience tug at them? Did it matter that their new bosses were psychopaths, and rarely made good on their promises? Nope. As long as they could guest lecture YCombinator's classes, chalk their names and extravagant job titles on the blackboard, and brag about how brilliant they were, they'd put up with anything.

When a dark-haired girl started helping the Builder, I knew she was the same type as the freckled kid. She was more proactive, sure, but the fact that other kids followed her into the pine enclosure where the Builder was working told me she was popular. The popular ones were always the first to turn on you.

The Builder took it all in stride. He only cast one surprised look at her and the pack of kids that had ducked through the branches behind her and resumed packing

handfuls of clay against the bases of all his support pillars. As the girl's friends realized that there wasn't going to be any entertainment from the Builder, they left. Only the dark-haired girl remained. She sat beside him to help pick bark off of a heap of pine branches.

To my and apparently the Builder's surprise, she showed up at the beginning of recess on the next day. He shyly pointed to another set of sticks that needed cleaning and she set to work beside him. She probably didn't realize that she'd just painted a target on the kid's back.

She'd left to find some bigger twigs for the construction supports when the first bully came. He stumbled through the trees feigning interest in the kids' work, but even from my bench I noticed him glance over his shoulder to ensure the girl was far enough away not to see.

The coast must have been clear because he smashed his foot into the center of the kid's construction. The Builder didn't shout or scream, he just lunged forward trying to catch some of the more precise twig work he'd just finished on the second tier.

He never saw the bully's second foot move to kick dust into his eyes.

The Builder yelped and jerked away, clapping his fingers over his eyes. The structure crumbled, and he crouched forward to shield any unbroken pieces.

I stood up at my bench, fists clenched, but the bully had already run back into the playground. The Builder calmly blinked the dirt out of his eyes and started repairing the damaged foundation. The bell was minutes away from ringing. What was the point?

The girl returned with a few thumb-thick branches in hand. She faltered when she met the Builder's red eyes. Saying nothing, she sat beside him and helped rebuild. The

Builder kept focusing on his work as if there'd been no interruption at all, but I still wondered if that little life lesson had sunk in. The world starts teaching us early.

The girl helped the Builder for the rest of the week, and I couldn't figure it out. What was in it for her? Was she making some sort of statement against the other kids? Could this be some sort of other popularity play? She always looked concerned or sad when someone picked on the Builder (usually when she wasn't in view), but after, she'd just continue helping him with his construction. The Builder didn't talk much as far as I could tell. He only seemed to murmur a few functional words to the girl when they huddled over a tricky balance between a few sticks or when they deliberated over an angle on some pine-needle lattice work.

The next Monday, she even ignored a pack of her friends chiding her and shouting her name to duck beneath some yellow tape fencing off a new addition being built into the school. She returned a few minutes later covered in mud and holding fistfuls of rich gray clay from the construction site. She marched past her goggling friends and thumped the glossy new clay in front of the Builder. His eyes lit up and they set to work with the new materials. I shook my head, impressed. Well, maybe she was just as curious as I was about the Builder's project.

That day, the lattice of twigs and needles lasted through the first few minutes of the morning winds. By the time I climbed on the bus, the structure had only half tipped over more from a structural imbalance than any weakness in the new clay.

As the weather started warming, the kids' efforts redoubled. They worked at a breakneck pace, and each day they progressed farther in the construction. At certain

angles, I could see curved lines and the makings of a form. I leaned forward on my bench, all thoughts of my temp job forgotten.

It was only a day later when it occurred to me. They were rushing because the summer holidays were close. The morning fog burned off by noon these days, and streaks of sunlight regularly pierced Daly City's morning gray haze. I didn't know what schedule the district here was on; they could only have weeks or even days left.

I frowned. There was nothing like deadlines to turn a team sour. Markus had left weeks before our prototype had been due, and he'd taken a bunch of my code with him. I'd shouted a bit too much and two more engineers left that month. It had been the beginning of the end. Would the Builder's little alliance fall apart as thoroughly as mine or as close to the finish line?

The kids still worked shoulder to shoulder, but real worry began to darken the Builder's eyes. Between phases of rebuilding today's construction from the remains of yesterday's, he'd glance over at the girl with concern. Could she be leaving school? Her parent's moving? Or was he just nervous that after a summer apart his friend wouldn't help him rebuild in the fall?

Whatever the worry, the looming future only pushed them to work faster. Their nimble hands flew over the structure, and their eyes never left their work. I remembered getting into flows like that, before all the people and backstabbing and drama. Just building for the sake of the project, the joy of the new thing I'd will into existence.

All the flaky kids and bullies now played elsewhere, ignoring the two kids like an old game that had lost its luster. More sharp lines grew discernable among the blend of sticks and needles. They were getting close.

A blast of stinking smoke blurred my view and made my mouth taste like diesel and soot. I coughed and looked up. My bus was pulling away. Temp job it was, but I needed the money.

I cursed and sprinted after the bus catching up to it on the next block. Covered in sweat I slumped into my seat and scolded myself. I knew better than to get caught up in a build again, especially one that wasn't my own. I was being an idiot to let my curiosity get the better of me. I knew how life worked, I knew the agony of watching something beautiful and new fade back into the old meaningless cruelties. I had learned one hard truth among all the lost projects, broken friendships, and tarnished joys. Nothing good ever remained.

I resolved to not visit that bus stop again. Yes. I would start walking to the 120 stop a few blocks further up the street. It would be easier that way.

I tried the next morning, I really did, but muscle memory kicked in once I left my apartment and I'd already walked halfway to my normal bus stop before catching my mistake. I almost turned around and walked all the way back anyways, but something kept my feet planted. If I left now, I'd never know what the Builder was constructing. I'd never figure out why he'd pushed through all that bullying and work. Cursing, I jogged the rest of the way to my stop.

The icy fog crept beneath my collar, and I shivered even as I reached my familiar bench. The lot was empty. Wait... was it Saturday? Or worse, had the school finally shut down for summer? The bell rang a moment later, and I laughed as I realized my mistake. I'd arrived twenty minutes early for the slowest bus on the Daly City route.

The kids set to work with staggering efficiency. They also must have somehow refined the girl's clay between classes because it now held up perfectly in the humid weather. The build looked like a practiced dance. Without looking up, the Builder held out a cleaned pine branch, and the girl seamlessly attached it to the supports. Their hands blurred over the construction and the little structure seemed to grow out of the earth itself, another tree in the grove.

Then, an advertisement for Facebook Messenger blocked my view. I jumped back reflexively before realizing that this was the 120—my ride. Impossibly, it had arrived on time. The driver jerked his chin at me, apparently trying to save me the effort of chasing him again, but I sat for a moment, uncertain.

A breath later, I waved the driver off. I'd compose an apology to my manager later.

The bus rumbled past, and when I waved the diesel smoke out of my eyes, the kids were standing. The structure had risen to almost match the Builder's height and they were both attaching pieces with the improved clay in a blur. They only had moments before the recess bell would ring.

They were both so engrossed, so focused on the build, that I saw it coalesce into a complete creation a moment before she did.

The trees, all the twigs, and the mid-morning light and the shadows of the pines—all of them combined to form lines that looked like they were suspended in mid-air over the dusty ground. The lines formed an ornate Chinese character. A name.

The Builder attached the last piece and stepped back.

The girl's hands clapped over her mouth, and she finally understood. Her name, wrought from hand-polished pine, hung in front of her, seemingly suspended midair. All that work, all those hours, all to say the simplest thing.

The Builder glanced up from his dust-caked hands and finally met her eyes. His fingers shook and his mouth twitched nervously, and he blushed from ear to ear.

I held my breath. Nothing moved. Only the faint hum of distant traffic stirred the silence.

The girl's shoulder shook. A sob.

Then, she pulled the Builder into a bone-crunching hug. Her shoulders shook again, and tears dotted the Builder's polo. They held each other for a full minute.

The recess bell rang.

They stepped away, and both studied their shoes. Still, as they hurried back to class, timely as always, they held hands the whole way.

Head bent in thought, I leaned against my resin bench. The next bus was at least forty minutes away. I studied the Builder's creation, and an icy knowledge settled in my stomach. I'd seen time and cruelty and pettiness erode my builds into nothing, and now I'd have to watch the edifice the Builder had constructed for her crumble as well. Even artifices made for the right reasons crumbled eventually. With the winds and fog like they were, I would witness everything from the first branch breaking off to the last sigh as the structure collapsed into a meaningless heap long before my next bus arrived.

Ten minutes passed. The fog congealed into a heavy drizzle, but the structure held. Minutes later the 29 bus blasted past in a swirl of wind and smoke, but the ornately wrought character remained hovering in midair, supported by the girl's pristine white clay

and the Builder's invisible lattice of sticks. Muddy water flowed in rivulets around the artifice's base, but her name remained immovable above it all.

When my bus finally arrived, I hopped to my feet, buoyed by an elation I couldn't explain.

Grinning like a moron, I hurried past the shuffling passengers to the back of my bus's window to get a final view of the structure. Still standing. I laughed aloud, drawing a few worried looks from my fellow commuters.

I didn't care.

The bus pulled away from the stop, and I pressed my nose against the back window's cold glass, not letting the structure out of my sight. I watched it until we turned a corner and the school disappeared from view.

From that day on, I walked the few extra blocks to the 120's next stop. Even on jogs or strolls around my neighborhood, I never passed that school or my old resin bench again. It was a build of my own, you see, formed out of the spit and clay and mud of my own memories, so that in my mind, at least, the artifice those two built would never fall.