

## Building blocks

“Billy, get your coat now. It’s cold outside. I don’t want you catching a cold.” Mom draped the coat over his shoulders.

“I’m getting a new brother! I can’t wait. What are you gonna name him, Mom? I think it should be Billy. No. Wait. That’d be kinda weird having another Billy running around. Or at least toddling around. Is he gonna be super smart, Mom? Like smarter than me? Is he gonna like rockets and space or is he gonna be like all those boring kids who would rather play kick the can than go watch the rockets lift off every Saturday? C’mon, Mom, tell me all the secrets.”

“Woah, sport. Hold your horses,” Dad intervened. “We don’t know any of that yet. I’m sure you’ll like him. He’s going to be great. Now if you would just put on your coat like your mother asks we can be going. And we’ve decided to name him Huxley. Let’s just get in the car and you’ll know all your answers in a couple hours.”

Huxley. *Huxley*. Huxley. His new brother. Would he be good at freeze tag or red rover? Would he even want to play? He could be like one of the gang. Richard and Harrison are brothers and that’s never been a problem. But doesn’t James have a brother? Yeah, yeah he does and the kid does nothing but hang inside and play video games all day. Huxley won’t be like that. No, Hux’ll be great. Just one of the gang that happens to live in the same house as him. Hux. Huxley. Huxley. *Huxley*.

It wasn't long before the large white building loomed in front of their old pickup. It was one of a hundred, a thousand, a million just like it all over the country. Any town big enough to have a grocery store had one. At first there were only a few and families had to drive hundreds of miles to get to one. That's why he was done "the old-fashioned way" or at least that's what Dad called it. He didn't come from one of the homemakers. In fact, he had never even been inside one of them. They seemed so cold. And white. He wondered if James remembered being inside one. He knew James came from one, but could anyone remember that far back?

A man in an all-white suit greeted them as the glass doors opened with a mechanical *swoosh*. He gave them all a firm handshake, even bending down to give Billy one as well. Billy had never been given a handshake before. The man's hand felt dry and icy. "Hello, you must be the Jameson's. Come in, come in. Let's get you started. Now, I see you have another one. Have we served your family before?"

Dad answered. "Um, no. We had Billy...the other way."

"That's fine. That's fine. We have many families who choose to use us only after experiencing many of the *unpleasantries* of the regular method." He looked Billy over. It was as if his gaze was a cold December wind that cut straight to his bones. Billy pulled his favorite denim jacket tighter.

"Though it would seem that you didn't have any unexpected problems. Therefore, you have my congratulations. Now before we really get started, there's some paperwork that I need you folks to sign. Barry, was it? You can go and play in our waiting room."

"But we want *Billy* to help pick out his new brother," Dad said.

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“Oh, of course, Mr. Jameson. Of course. We’ll make sure and get him back in here when all the magic really happens. But for now you have to dot some *t*’s and cross some *i*’s.”

“Okay, Billy, you heard what the man said. We’ll come get you soon,” Mom said.

“It’s just around the corner there,” the man called after him as he left the room.

The waiting room had glass walls and a hard, concrete floor. A few scattered blocks showed their lettered faces to the world. Stacking up a tower that was almost as tall as he was, stood a boy around the same age as Billy.

“Hey. I’m Billy.”

“Lorenzo.”

“That’s a cool name.”

“Thanks.”

“What are you working on?”

“What’s it look like?”

“Oh.” A few seconds ticked off from the clock on the far wall.

“You homedone?” Lorenzo asked.

“No, no. I was born the ‘old-fashioned way’ whatever that means.”

“So why’d your parents want a homedone? What’s wrong with you?”

“What do you mean?”

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“I mean what’s wrong with you? Doesn’t seem to be physical. Maybe you’re slow. That would explain a lot.”

“Hey!”

Dad walked in. “Billy, we got all the paperwork done. You can come on back now. Time to pick out your brother!” They started to walk back to the man’s office.

“I’m allergic to nuts. That’s what it was for me.” Lorenzo called out after them.

“I’m allergic to nuts,” he whispered, remembering that it was a secret. He reached down and pulled out the bottom block. The tower fell into a heap on the floor. Thirty blocks trying to spell out something, to say anything but it was all only gibberish.

“Daddy, what’s wrong with me?” Billy asked as they walked back.

“Wrong with you? Nothing’s wrong with you.”

“But Lorenzo said…”

“Never mind what that boy said. Young boys can be very cruel. You know that.”

“Yeah, yeah. You’re right, Dad. But why *is* Huxley going to be a homedone?”

“Don’t call them that. You know it’s rude. But it was a choice your mother and I made. Your birth wasn’t exactly pleasant for your mother. Greatest day of our lives, but painful. So we saved our money until we could have your brother here.”

“Ok, I guess that makes sense. So there wasn’t anything wrong with me?”

“No, never. You’re perfect just how you are.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Ah, okay, now that we’re all here,” the man began as soon as the pair walked back into the room, “we can pick out your new brother. Now were you thinking about a resemblance to your features? Or would you like to start from scratch?”

“Why don’t we start from scratch. I think that would be best,” Mom said.

“Ok, so a base model. Male. Finished height? Now you should know that we can’t guarantee a height, but we can be within two inches either way. That’s our guarantee.”

“Oh, I think he should be tall,” Mom said.

“But not too tall,” Dad interjected.

“I don’t want him to be taller than me. That would be terrible. He would be just like Harrison and lord it over me all the time.”

“Well then. About as tall as you. Let’s see, what are you? Five eight? Five nine? And you’re twelve...” He pulled out a chart.

“Thirteen.”

“Thirteen. Thirteen. And five nine. Looks like, yes. And take off a couple inches. Why don’t we make Huxley six foot even? That’s tall enough, don’t you think?”

“I think that’s just splendid. What do you think, honey?” Mom turned to Dad.

“I think that’ll be perfect.”

“Okay six foot then.” He marked it on his screen. “Now let’s see. There are a number of smaller features that we usually just defer to the features of the parents. Of course, we can change those things individually, but for the hundred or so features that I’m talking about it’s

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easier if we just use your existing template. I'm talking things like face shape, ear size, etc. Now is there anything you would like to see changed in your new son?"

"Cheekbones. I think he should have high cheekbones," Mom said.

"Yes, and no allergies. I'm lactose intolerant and it's such a pain," Dad added.

"Yes, yes, of course. High cheekbones are no problem at all. As for the allergy, you should already know, but here we make sure that none of our *little ones* have to suffer any problems like that. Allergies, genetic diseases, asthma, they're all things of the past. We cured them. Relics only for history books. And that's our guarantee. Now, anything else that I can do for you folks? Before we get down to the real nuts and bolts of the kid, I mean."

"Well, there is one thing," Billy began. "I mean I don't want to cause any trouble. And maybe it's too big an order."

"Nonsense. If you know someone who has a trait, then we can replicate it. It's nothing but the press of a few buttons."

"Ah right. Well then, could you, if it's not too hard, make him good at kick the can?"

"I can make him good at every game. Or none. I can make him the best kicker of cans this side of the Mississippi. I can make him the fastest runner in his class. I can make him a sharpshooter or a poet, a garbage man or a detective; I control all the variables with the swipe of a mouse." He was almost growling now. "I can make him a genius or an idiot, any trait good or bad, it's all here. Ones and zeros. Tell me, boy, do you think that a mere game is beyond me? Is anything beyond me?"

"N-n-n-no...sir. I'm sorry I-I-I didn't know."

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“Good. Now, good at kick the can. There we go. Now, is that all? Yes? Okay, well then, if that’s the case let’s get down to the aesthetics of the boy. Everybody likes this part.”

Noses were paraded in front of them: short, long, fat, narrow. This one could take a beating, that one was glass. This one looked regal, that one looked like a wizard would have it. Noses and noses. A few were brought around again. The roman nose, the squattish one, the one that was really long and skinny. Mom chose the squattish one.

“I really like how it sits on the face,” she said.

Then eyes. Beautiful eyes, brilliant eyes. Eyes that pierced into the soul and eyes that were glazed over. Galaxies of blue and green, exploding stars of yellow, tints of orange, trapped inside clear marbles. Oceans sloshed inside of one, the sky itself was netted in one. A cat peered out from the night, a deer in the headlights, hellish eyes, and innocent eyes. Ominous, unassuming, cold, trapped fire, it was all there. A seemingly endless parade of eyes, parade of people. What would his brother be like if he had these doe-like eyes? Would he run from a fight? What about these? Green with flecks of gold. They seem to pierce right through you. Would these make him a lawyer? How much is in the eyes, or is it nothing at all?

“I think he should have blue eyes,” Mom said.

“But do you really want to draw everyone’s attention away from the rest of his face?”  
Dad said.

“And to his eyes? Yes. Yes, I do.”

“I really think brown eyes would keep him from standing out unnecessarily.”

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“But I want him to stand out. My boys will be leaders. Blue.” She said, turning to the salesman. “We’ll have blue eyes.”

“Are you sure about this, honey?”

Mom shot him a look telling him that yes, she was sure. She turned back to the salesman, “Blue eyes, please. With just a hint of gold, like yellow autumn leaves floating on the Mediterranean.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Then it was hair color, then type. Wavy, curly, straight. Thick, thin. Blond, red or brown. Then skin tone. Then freckles or no? Choices choices. Should he have a baritone voice or an alto? Should he be able to sing or should his lips be built for the trumpet? Should he have runner’s legs or be built for an office? Did God have to think this much when he said to the dust “get up and walk”? And so the choices went on. More and more. Things you didn’t think about, things you barely thought about. Facial hair. Eyelashes. Lung size. It all was considered, weighed, and chosen.

“And I think that’s it. Yes. That was the last question. Thin lips. Right. And we’re done. Now is there anything else I can do?”

“No, no...my gosh we forgot his intelligence. How smart will the boy be? How’d we go and do a thing like that.”

“Oh, Mr. Jameson. I completely forgot that this was your first time. I apologize. No, we have a special program for intelligence. I’m sure you’re familiar with intelligence quotient? Yes? Good. Well, our program randomly selects a number from the scale. Now of course there’s a

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scarcity factor built in for the genius level IQ's, just as there is for those who are mentally challenged. Nothing too low, of course, but someone has to do the jobs that no one else wants.”

“You’re telling me that my boy could be *retarded*?” Dad roared.

“Sir, sir, please calm down. No, not at all. I’m just telling you how it all works. As soon as I hit finish, the program automatically selected his IQ. Huxley was given a 108. Just above average. Nothing too hard to handle, I’m sure. He’ll be able to get a very good job with a number like that.”

“Right, good,” Dad said, calming down. His face was burning, red pulsing over it like an angry dragon. “That’s fine.”

“Good, good. Now if everything else is handled....If you’ll wait back there in the waiting room, our technicians will bring out your new son very shortly. I’m glad I could help you with this process,” he called after them. The family had already ushered Dad out of the stuffy room.

The waiting room had changed in the time Billy had been gone. Lorenzo had left, and nothing spoke his absence more than the large block tower dominating the middle of the room. Every single block had been meticulously placed and now the monument stood there, garbled letters in rows and columns that seemed to make sense there. Dad fell into one of the chairs. The disruption caused a single block, the highest block of the tower, to teeter back and forth and then fall. It rolled to Billy’s feet.

“Do you still think this was the best idea, honey?” Dad asked.

“I do. I think our boy is going to be brilliant.”

“He had better be.”

A man in a suit walked into the room. He was holding a swathed bundle. “Mr. and Mrs. Jameson? Congratulations.” The man left. Oh, Huxley! He was beautiful. His tiny hands grasped at the air. Billy handed him the block that had fallen. Two itty bitty hands grasped it tight. Mom held him tight and peered into his face. His ocean blue eyes peered up into their faces.

“Oh, he’s gorgeous... just—honey? Honey, his eyes,” she said.

“Aren’t they just perfect? The way they look at you.”

“No, they aren’t perfect. There’s no specks of gold. None. It’s just blue. Empty blue.”

“Is it? Maybe the gold comes in later. Come on, babe. Let’s get out of here. I’m sick of this place.”

“No. We are not leaving until they fix this. Sir! Sir!” she said, running back into the salesman’s office. “Sir, I believe we specifically asked for blue eyes *with specks of gold*. Did we not? Yes. Well, this baby you brought out to us has no gold specks. I won’t accept it.”

“May I see it?” Dad handed Huxley over, reluctantly, as if severing one of his own limbs. The salesman peered into Huxley’s eyes. “I see what you mean. There is no yellow. It must’ve been a simple mistake. Well, that’s an easy fix.” The man clamped a hand over Huxley’s mouth, pinching his nose shut. “Every once in awhile this happens. I’ve already told the...”

“What are you doing? Stop that immediately!” Dad cried out as soon as he saw where the man’s hand was.

“Sir, we have to discard the mistakes. Otherwise, we face an increase in orphans and therefore, statistically homelessness. Besides, it’s a simple factory error. It happens occasionally,” the man said, backing away from Dad. Mom stepped between the two men.

“*Factory error?* That’s my son you have.”

“What’s the problem, dear? He’s got us another one in the oven so to speak,” Mom said.

“Are you out of your mind woman? He’s murdering your child.”

“That’s not my child. Not my Huxley. My Huxley has gold specks in his eyes.”

“You’re insane,” he said, shoving her out of the way. “Give me my son.”

Fear shone in the salesman’s eyes. No one had ever had a problem with the waste disposal before. “H-H-Here,” he stuttered out, handing Huxley over. But it was too late. Dad knew as soon as he could look down. The blue eyes were closed, the tiny chest didn’t move.

The block fell from two tiny hands and hit the carpet.