

2018 Week 38: The Week Ending Saturday, September 22nd

Paul R. Potts

Sunday

It hasn't been a great day. I've been slammed by allergies, and so it's almost 7:00 p.m. and I haven't gotten much of anything done today. Grace brought me an affogato from Milan Coffee Works, and a lot of bread, and both those things tend to trigger my allergies. It seems like if I eat dairy only in small quantities and only occasionally, I can keep myself at a point where I have no symptoms. But if I'm reacting to pollen, and reacting to dairy, and then add flour, a combination like that can trigger a full-blown allergy attack, and then I'll feel awful and my nose will run like a faucet, and if I don't get it settled down, I might wind up with a sinus infection on top of the allergies.

So I've gone back on Flonase and Claritin. I have that spacey, dizzy hay fever feeling today. I haven't even done any reading. We got up late. I made fried eggs and bacon and toasted English muffins, and made myself a pot of tea with honey. I had an egg sandwich and a couple of glasses of tea and that's all I've eaten today. When I have bad allergies I don't feel like eating. I feel mostly like fasting and napping. But I needed to do some more kitchen clean-up. This included applying the rest of a can of oven cleaner, because there had been more spills in the oven. It's better, but could use a deeper cleaning at some point.

I tried to take a nap this afternoon but the kids, including our housemate's three, were so noisy that I wasn't very successful. Grace has been out meeting with a friend, and then out again, running some errands. We still need to record a podcast. The kids want to be fed again. I don't want to skip another podcast. So I'm trying to pull myself together.

Oryx and Crake by Margaret Atwood

Last night I read more of *The Wild Robot Escapes* to the kids that showed up for it. We're getting near the end of that book. I also started reading a book that has been on my shelf for over a year, waiting for the right time: *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood. This is a quick read and it takes place in a post-apocalyptic world that is very gritty and physical. She writes a lot about the details of living in a wild setting, like trying to bathe in rainwater, and

being surrounded by insects and animals. It's beautiful in a strange way. I think we can all identify with sometimes wishing we had no responsibilities and could just stroll around the woods, although the swollen insect bites don't sound appealing. And our protagonist's memories are spooling out a disturbing story of genetic engineering. This novel was no doubt an influence on Jeff VanderMeer's *Borne*, which unfortunately I have started but still haven't finished. It's hard to decide where the boundaries of genres are. Atwood has apparently made strong statements about how she didn't want *Oryx and Crake* to be called "science fiction." I don't really care what she calls it, but it is helpful when people can discuss similar books or use sub-genre labels such as "urban fantasy" to find more books they like.

Late last night our housemate put some kind of ice cream cups or treats into the freezer, planning to take them to a birthday party this morning. Daniel got into them before we were up and moving. This has been a big problem; if there is junk food in the house, our kids tend to find it. I think we've actually trained Benjamin (almost five) to stop taking food that doesn't belong to him, but Daniel (seven) still does it. We also heard this morning that apparently he's done it other times, which we didn't hear about. This makes things harder because it means he's gotten away with stealing, weeks or months ago, and it's very hard to hold a seven-year-old accountable for things that happened in the past, especially when we don't have details about just what he did to discuss with him. Kids don't have great memories. Kids will make up details when you interrogate them. They don't reliably separate the truth from their confabulations. And if we try to apply some kind of punishment or consequence for something that happened weeks ago, it's not clear that this would really have the behavior-modification affect that we want.

We eventually got Daniel to confess, and he had to give up some of his possessions as punishment. And now we have to make restitution to our housemate, which means a gift card, and we really don't have extra money for this kind of thing.

Grace went to visit a friend who was having an open house for her Catholic worker, and her friend had quite a bit of food left over. So she brought home big trays of fattoush, melon, and mujaddara. There are so many transliterations for that word, but I'll just stick to the Wikipedia version. However you want to spell it, this is a dish of lentils, rice, and browned onions. This is actually a perfect thing for me to eat for dinner, since it has nearly no allergy-triggering ingredients. So that's dinner! Sometimes things do actually work out to make our lives easier! And we might have time for a podcast after all.

The Water Softener is Fixed... Again

I forgot to mention it back when it happened, but about a week and a half ago the water softener service guy came out and fixed the softener. Apparently there was a little part that was clogged with hard water minerals, and so water would not flow through the salt tank. He replaced that piece and it is working well

again. And since we had paid him to come out and fix it just a couple of weeks earlier, the “a service call is good for thirty days” rule was in effect, so he didn’t charge us for this second trip. I feel pretty happy about that, as I was fully expecting that he might find some expensive thing to charge us for.

Monday

Recording the Pottscast

Grace and I went down to the basement to record a show. We weren’t very prepared, and so agreed to mostly wing it. I did print out some notes from my blog about Michael Moorcock’s Elric stories. I talked about my recommended reading order, skipping over most of the mid-career stuff, and recommended the novel I’m currently reading, *Daughter of Dreams*, also known as *The Dreamthief’s Daughter*, even though I haven’t finished it and can’t necessarily vouch for the other two Moonbeam Roads novels.

We recorded for just over an hour. I made one edit, to cover Grace’s bathroom break. The finished show is only one hour and six minutes long, which is really pretty short as Pottscasts go. Post-production went pretty smoothly, and Grace and I got to sleep around 1:30 a.m. It was a big help to have dinner out of the way before recording! Many Sunday nights I’ve missed dinner entirely, or scarfed some leftovers down just before going to sleep, since Grace and the kids often eat while I’m doing the post-production work.

This morning I knew that I was supposed to bring leftovers to eat for lunch. But when I took my bag out to the car, I was distracted by the fact that the kids had left the garage door wide open and all the lights on again. So I went in to tell Grace, and on my way back out, entirely forgot to take the leftovers. This kind of thing happens to me almost without fail when there is some kind of upsetting disruption in my morning routine.

I got a 3-shot mocha made with almond milk for breakfast. I’m debating what to do for lunch, as I don’t really have anything left in the refrigerator or kitchen cabinets at my office.

Tuesday

I got back from work quite late last night, after staying late to try to finish up some very tedious changes to the LCD GUI’s online help. Getting the text formatted right on the screen involved a lot of recompiling and testing.

Last night our housemate made a bunch of mini-quiches for dinner. Sadly, although we thought they were not bad and ate them, she did not like the way they came out at all and would only eat the crust.

We struggled through our usual cleanup chores with the kids. Grace asked me to wipe down Elanor’s high chair, which gets downright disgusting, so I worked on that. I took a little time with Joshua, who has been asking me to show him

how to play electric bass. I dug out one of my method books out of a box and burned a CD containing the lesson tracks. We pretty quickly discovered that Joshua's hands really just aren't big enough to play bass yet. So we'll have to regroup. Maybe he can learn ukulele. I no longer have a decent ukulele I'm willing to let the kids play, but it wouldn't be that expensive to pick one up.

***The Magic School Bus: Lost in the Solar System* by Joanna Cole**

The kids asked me to read from either *The Wild Robot Escapes* or *Down and Out in Paris and London*. I was ready to read one of those, but then Benjamin asked me to read *The Magic School Bus: Lost in the Solar System* by Joanna Cole. I was going to read that one first, and then read a second story, but it is actually pretty long for a children's book, with quite a bit of text. I thought I was going to have to stop and explain how Pluto was no longer considered a planet, but it seems the book is new enough that it does not call Pluto a planet, but a "plutoid." I'm a little confused because Wikipedia tells me that the book was published in 1990, but Pluto wasn't officially demoted to the category of "dwarf planets" until 2006, and the term "plutoid" wasn't adopted until 2008. So I guess this must be a revised edition. And I must be pretty out-of-date, since I didn't know that the term "plutoid" had been adopted. Apparently the plutoids are a subset of dwarf planets. The book may have seized on the term a little too eagerly:

A plutoid or ice dwarf is a trans-Neptunian dwarf planet, i.e. a body orbiting beyond Neptune that is massive enough to be rounded in shape. The term plutoid was adopted by the International Astronomical Union (IAU) working group Committee on Small Bodies Nomenclature, but was rejected by the IAU working group Planetary System Nomenclature. The term plutoid is not widely used by astronomers, though ice dwarf is not uncommon.

I've never heard of "ice dwarf." I think "dwarf planet" is a much more widely accepted term, and Cole probably should have stuck with it, but I'm sympathetic to the difficulties of trying to choose a term when the terms are changing rapidly. How do you stay up-to-date when apparently astronomers themselves haven't settled on nomenclature? Wikipedia shows a somewhat complicated chart showing the inter-related terms "Planets," "Satellites (natural)," "Trans-Neptunian objects," "Dwarf planets," "Minor planets," "Small Solar System bodies," "Centaurs," "Comets," and "Plutoids." And when you dig down into the meanings of *those* terms, you find that there are a lot more fine distinctions that can be made.

Teaching the Pluto Controversy

I'm all in favor of "teaching the controversy." It's an exciting time in astronomy, and our understanding of the solar system is advancing rapidly. As we learn more, we keep finding that it is more complicated than we thought. But this

nomenclature is far too complicated for my four-year-old. And that chart doesn't even take into account "Neptune trojans," cubewanos," "Plutinos," "Sednoids," "KBOs," "SDOs," "Oort cloud objects," and other bodies.

I think calling Pluto a "dwarf planet" should be uncontroversial, even though it is *also* a Trans-Neptunian object, a Plutoid, a Kuiper belt object, and a Plutino. And "dwarf planet" is specific enough, at age 4. Maybe when Benjamin turns 5, *then* we can start talking about hydrostatic equilibrium.

When we discovered Pluto, we knew far less about the solar system than we do now. It turns out there are a *lot* of objects out there that are *around* the size of Pluto — probably hundreds, possibly thousands. We know of one that is actually bigger than Pluto: Eris. And there may very well be more. If we're going to call Pluto a planet, consistency in nomenclature and categorization would dictate that we call Eris a planet, too. And if we start referring to these dwarf planets as planets, those textbooks are going to be changing much more often. So, it seems to me perfectly sensible to draw a bright line around the four "terrestrial planets" and the four "giant planets," all far larger and far closer to the sun than bodies like Eris and Pluto, and call those the planets. Kids can learn those first — there's plenty to learn about the planets! Then if they want to get into the weeds out beyond Neptune, they can move on to the much messier study of the smaller bodies.

Anyway. After I finished *The Magic School Bus*, it was too late to read another story. The kids were tired, and so didn't seem to mind much that they didn't get a second story. We went on to bed. I had breakfast at Harvest Moon Café this morning. This evening if everything goes smoothly, we will record a podcast with Anna, a pastry chef who works in New York City.

Wednesday

Things went pretty smoothly last night. I made it home in time to have beef stew with my family. That was delicious. We cut into the Mother Loaf salt-crusting rye and I used it to soak up the broth. Wow.

We got set up in our basement podcasting studio in time to welcome our guest, almost like we know what we're doing! And we didn't record an hour of silence and need to start over. Amazing!

Of course, the kitchen is a horrific mess, but I suppose we can't have everything.

Our conversation with Anna went well and I got the Logic project set up, and bounced the master audio file. I will finish the post-production work on Sunday. It's a relief to be a little bit ahead of schedule!

***Down and Out in Paris and London* by George Orwell, Concluded**

At bedtime I read the rest of *Down and Out in Paris and London*. We have finally finished it! There's a nice segment near the end where Orwell talks

about prejudice against “tramps” and “tramping.” He unpacks the prevailing attitudes, and then very deftly shows that the behaviors that people associate with criminality, lack of character, or even crime represents an “atavistic throwback” to nomadic migration (and I’m not even going to begin to unpack the racial and cultural bigotry inherent in that terminology) are actually forced on the tramps by the social structures around them:

Of course a tramp is not a nomadic atavism — one might as well say that a commercial traveller is an atavism. A tramp tramps, not because he likes it, but for the same reason as a car keeps to the left; because there happens to be a law compelling him to do so. A destitute man, if he is not supported by the parish, can only get relief at the casual wards, and as each casual ward will only admit him for one night, he is automatically kept moving. He is a vagrant because, in the state of the law, it is that or starve. But people have been brought up to believe in the tramp-monster, and so they prefer to think that there must be some more or less villainous motive for tramping.

Perverse Incentives

It’s interesting to consider how this same kind of social-structure analysis applies to people receiving food benefits, unemployment benefits, etc. If I’m receiving the very limited cash payments available to me while unemployed, which I believe is still \$362.00 a week, I have to focus entirely on getting a job that paid as well or better as my previous job. Even though I’m trying to live on a small fraction of my previous income, I can’t simply attempt to supplement that unemployment with a small income so that I can pay my mortgage. Any income at all will reduce that payment and so there is no net benefit to me in taking a temporary job to help me stay solvent until I can find a better job. That’s a social-structure reality that provides a “perverse” or “reverse” incentive. People receiving safety-net entitlements face this kind of problem all the time. And on top of it, they are faced with the silent (or not-so-silent) judgment of people who don’t understand the bind they are in.

I read a few little passages from *Down and Out in Paris and London* during our conversation with Anna, although I’m not sure they made all that much sense in context. I am hoping to do a show on that book, and I’d especially like to find a guest who knows more about Orwell than I do (which is, to be honest, not very much), and would like to help us discuss the man and his writing.

The kids were cranky last night and woke us up several times. Elanor woke up for a while, protesting something or other. Benjamin stole into our bed, and we didn’t notice until I kept kicking someone. I thought it was Elanor who had climbed to the bottom of the bed, but no, it was Bilby. Then he woke us up in the middle of our deep sleep, probably about 4 a.m., by running into the bathroom and turning on all the lights. So it was a broken night’s sleep and we

were not very alert this morning.

Speech Therapy for Sam

Grace took my car, to take Sam to a speech therapy appointment, so she can pick up Sam's bike afterwards. I took her car, and was unhappy to find that it didn't have enough gas to get me to the office, so I had to stop for gas, making myself still later.

I'm really glad, though, that Sam is finally going to see a speech therapist. We tried years ago to get him this help through the Saginaw school system. The people involved delayed and dithered for months, until the paperwork had expired. Several of my kids have a stutter, and problems clearly articulating words. Benjamin has the most difficulty, but Sam is probably a close second. Grace and I do our best to give them the time to finish sentences. But I know their speech difficulties make them very frustrated, because in a house full of kids it is hard to give them enough time and quiet to get their words out. Their siblings and peers aren't always accommodating. Sometimes they just give up on the project of getting their words out, and that can't be good.

Cluttering

Grace informed me that Sam's speech difficulty ("disfluency") is called "cluttering," as opposed to stuttering. I'm not sure if insurance will cover treatment for "cluttering." I had never heard of it, so I'm cramming on the subject.

Thursday

Sam Meets Bike

When I got home last night, the kids told me that after just a short time on the now pedal-less bike, Sam had gotten the hang of balancing the bike. My old bike was leaning against the garage, and he was actually riding around the driveway, successfully riding a bike for the first time. I was a bit stunned. I guess we can get pedals put back on my old bike.

Also last night, our friend Joy came to visit. When I got home she was out running an errand, but Grace and the kids were looking over all kinds of nifty stuff that she brought with her including a big stash of cloth napkins. The kids had done a not-so-great job with chores, and the kitchen was in a barely-usable state. Grace had assembled a big pot of soup out of leftovers, and put together a bagged salad from Costco, and broiled the lamb steaks. So that was dinner.

We should have eaten the lamb steaks a few days earlier. They weren't spoiled, but it seemed like their flavor was a bit past its prime. I also should have taken them out of the oven earlier. They really need to be eaten closer to rare or medium rare, but I was not concentrating, what with the chaos in the house, and was confused by the fact that they were browning faster on the bottom than

on the top. So they were more like medium or medium-well. Grace had put them in a sheet pan, and in the center of the oven rather than close to the top. We got tastier results throwing the steaks in a hot cast-iron pan on the stovetop, to sear them, and then putting the skillet in a pre-heated oven (at 450) for just a few minutes to finish them up. We also should have finished them *au beurre*. I think we didn't do it that way last night because everything was dirty.

“The Council of Elrond,” Continued

For last night's bedtime story, I read a little bit more of *The Wild Robot Escapes*, and then tried to read some more of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Benjamin stubbornly refused to stay quiet, though, and was interrupting and talking over the story constantly. So I couldn't make much progress. We're still in the chapter called “The Council of Elrond,” and only made it through a couple more pages. Bilbo has just told the council the story of his discovery of the ring:

‘Very well,’ said Bilbo. ‘I will do as you bid. But I will now tell the true story, and if some here have heard me tell it otherwise’ — he looked sidelong at Gloin — ‘I ask them to forget it and forgive me. I only wished to claim the treasure as my very own in those days, and to be rid of the name of thief that was put on me. But perhaps I understand things a little better now. Anyway, this is what happened.’

Tolkien is actually lampshading *two* sets of changes here: first, in-universe, Bilbo did mislead the other party members about exactly what happened with Gollum and the discovery of the ring, and this was supposed to indicate that the ring was already making him greedy, and leading him to tell both himself and the others a self-justifying story. But Tolkien is also writing for readers who might have read the earlier text of *The Hobbit*. The changes are detailed in the two-volume *The History of the Hobbit* by John D. Rateliff. The biggest changes were to the chapter “Riddles in the Dark.” Per Wikipedia:

In the first edition of *The Hobbit*, Gollum willingly bets his magic ring on the outcome of the riddle-game, and he and Bilbo part amicably. In the second edition edits, to reflect the new concept of the ring and its corrupting abilities, Tolkien made Gollum more aggressive towards Bilbo and distraught at losing the ring. The encounter ends with Gollum's curse, “Thief! Thief, Thief, Baggins! We hates it, we hates it, we hates it forever!” This presages Gollum's portrayal in *The Lord of the Rings*.

If a reader had read *that* version, followed by *Fellowship*, Bilbo's disclaimer will help them to put the “retconned” story of Bilbo's encounter with Gollum into an “in-universe” context, and provide a *why* to the question of why the *narrative* in the first book was unreliable. This makes more sense if you consider that the reader is meant to understand that the *text* of *The Hobbit*, the contemporary book, came from the first part of the Red Book of Westmarch. Bilbo wrote the

first part following his adventures, and later handed off his drafts of the events of *The Lord of the Rings* to Frodo, who used them as source material, along with his own notes, to write down his version of the later story. When he left Middle Earth, Frodo handed the book off to Sam, who completed the account that Tolkien eventually turned into *The Lord of the Rings*.

I haven't had any down time to finish reading *Daughter of Dreams* or to make any further progress in *Oryx and Crake*. We have gotten occasional updates from our realtor about showings, but we haven't had any news of an offer. As the month drags on, this feels worse and worse. I want to get a furnace into the old house, but I don't have the money to do so. I keep hoping we will get some bit of information that will suggest a way forward on the house situation. Sometimes the best thing to do really is stay the course a little bit longer, until a new course of action becomes clear. But it really seems like we are stalled out, and have to choose one of several bad options soon.

Friday

Last night we had meatball soup, made by our housemate, apparently with Grace's help. It was starchy and pretty tasty. She and her boyfriend ate with us, which has been a rare event. Cleanup was big and difficult, though. Grace had put a hot air-lined pot into its insulating pouch and the plastic melted, which got plastic all over the pot. Then apparently it was heated on the stove. So the pot was splattered with melted, burned-on plastic. This stuff came off, but it took me over an hour of scrubbing and I went through three of the heavy-duty green Scotch-Brite scouring pads. This also unfortunately took most of the shiny stainless-steel finish off the pot, leaving it with more of a matte finish, but I didn't really see a way to avoid that. Going over it again with steel wool smooths that out just a little bit. Steel wool was useless to actually grind off the burnt plastic, and so was melamine "magic eraser" sponge material.

I've been craving carbs, and somewhat unusually for me, dark chocolate. I think the best course of action is to try supplying myself with some relatively low-sugar dark chocolate, 85% or more, and see if eating a little bit of that every day helps ease my craving without gorging myself on sugars and starches. Because I'm *also* packing on weight in a way that I find very, very demoralizing. This morning I tried to put on the jeans I wore last fall and winter and they were too uncomfortably tight to wear.

The kids had not cleaned up the kitchen during the day, and left quite a mess. There was no counter space, the sink was full, and the stove was all coated with goo. So in addition to all that scrubbing, I had to run two dishwasher loads and clean the stove. I described my carb and chocolate craving to Grace and we considered running out to get some chocolate or some kind of dessert, but settled for making a coconut milk hot chocolate after dinner. This helped bring my mood up just a bit, but I have definitely had better days.

I wanted to take a break and read a little bit of *Daughter of Dreams* between

the first round of scrubbing and getting back to more kitchen cleanup, but our bed was covered with laundry that Veronica was folding, and the rest of the kids were in our bedroom watching videos on Grace's laptop. I wound up sitting at the table in the empty family room/dining room for a while, but it was too dark to read at the kitchen table (our light fixture in that room uses little decorative bulbs — it's on my "to do when we have money" list to replace it with something much brighter, and add a couple of extra floor lamps). So I didn't get a chance to read last night at all, and taking some time to read is what usually helps me calm and center myself; that, and playing guitar.

A Strategy for Reading Periodicals

I'm also, I must admit, trying to get through books just to cross them off the list. I would like to "stall out" on books less often; there are way too many half-finished books on my shelves. (Although I'm torn; part of me thinks that it is a good thing to be willing to set aside, at least for the time being, a book I'm not actually getting much out of; that part would argue that *finishing* is no virtue, just an obsession.) I've been trying to consciously reduce my obsessive behaviors, and take David Feldman's advice: he reads a number of daily papers, and suggests that people read the first few paragraphs of each article, and if the article hasn't really pulled you in and fascinated you, you should just skip the rest.

I'm half-horrified of this, but only half-horrified. I used to be completely horrified by it. I used to make it a point of pride to read every issue of the *New Yorker*, or the *New York Review of Books* cover-to-cover. But as I get older and feel my reading time to be much more limited, I've started to come around to his way of thinking, and in fact I apply it to listening to his podcast, as he suggests; if I get behind, and miss a few episodes, or don't finish them, I don't attempt to catch up; I just pick up the next one, when I get around to it.

But I'd still like to be able to cross off more books, especially since now that I've started documenting just what I read, it's become a kind of competition with my past self.

I haven't really gotten any reading done all week, other than a little time spent reading aloud to the kids at bedtime. And a funny thing tends to happen with that bedtime reading: if it's a children's book, I often wind up going on autopilot. I'll proceed through several pages, reading aloud, the kids listening or not as they choose, and then realize that I have no idea what I've been reading about, at all, and that I've actually been disengaged, thinking about completely different things, letting some parts of my brain and body handle the bedtime story while the part I usually think of as "me" does its usual obsession, worrying, self-criticism, or whatever it does.

Maybe the next book I should read to the kids is Marvin Minsky's *The Society of Mind*.

Cluttering, Continued

I mentioned that Sam was diagnosed as “cluttering” when he speaks. We are going to try to get his speech therapy covered by my health insurance. He has another session scheduled. Apparently his speech therapy will cost \$200 per session, if they won’t cover it. If we really can’t get it covered, this might be the incentive that drives me to just surrender the Saginaw house to our lender. Sam has to be able to speak clearly to people, or his prospects for further education and employment will be severely hampered. Sending him to see a speech therapist weekly would cost almost as much as the mortgage on our old house. I don’t *really* want to just replace the one monthly expense with the other, as that doesn’t get us ahead by very much. But if we did free ourselves of those expenses, maybe we could send him every other week, and still have a little bit of take-home pay freed up to pay down debts and start, just *start*, to build up a proper emergency fund.

We’re going to have to get Benjamin evaluated as well, because he seems to have a pretty severe stutter.

And we’ve noticed, for a while now, a strange speech-related behavior that Joshua exhibits. He speaks fairly clearly, but after he’s done speaking, and often when we are replying, he will continue to move his mouth for a few seconds, as if he’s still speaking but someone turned his volume knob to zero. I’m not sure I’d call that a “disfluency,” but it sure is weird. Is this Palilalia?

Palilalia is similar to speech disorders such as stuttering or cluttering, as it tends to only express itself in spontaneous speech, such as answering basic questions, and not in automatic speech such as reading or singing; however, it distinctively affects words and phrases rather than syllables and sounds.

Or a form of echolalia?

He doesn’t “sub-vocalize” while reading silently. Maybe if we just make him aware of it, he will be able to stop himself from doing it.

***My Struggle: Book Six* by Karl Ove Knausgaard**

On my lunch break I went to Nicola’s Books to see if I saw anything interesting. They have the sixth volume of Knausgaard’s *My Struggle* in hardcover, for \$33.00. It’s a very fat book. I’ve got plenty of other fat books on my shelf, waiting for me to either start them, or finish them. After reading a review on Slate, I’m not actually sure I want to read this one. Maybe I should just let myself keep my overwhelmingly positive impressions of the first five volumes, challenging though they were; reading them was rewarding but also difficult emotionally, as I found myself starting to run Knausgaard’s bleak and depressive software on my own mental hardware. I like Charles Finch’s comment:

Like life, his books are both boring and relentlessly interesting; like

life, they seem somehow both very long and very fast. In other words, they're like life. A second life, which the reader briefly lives in Knausgaard's stead, prosaic, meaningless, yet of course also replete with the most serious possible meaning, replete with sad vastness, private infinities.

Volume six contains a lot of commentary about the fallout Knausgaard experienced after publishing the previous volumes. It also contains a very, very long essay about Hitler. Maybe I don't need that to run those two pieces of software on my mental hardware. Maybe nothing good could come of doing that. Maybe I should finish the new translation of *Crime and Punishment* instead.

At the very least, I'll probably wait and see if a paperback edition comes out that matches my editions of volumes 1-5. Maybe it will at least be a little more portable than the massive hardcover brick. Maybe they'll release it in two volumes. Maybe I'll buy it then. Or maybe I won't. Maybe it will be enough to know that I could read it if I wanted to, having read the previous five, and choose not to.

LabVIEW, Yet Again

My co-worker Patrick and I finally got a chance to sit down on the hardware test rig and test some of the LabVIEW application code I wrote some time ago, but which we never put into full production. And of course we have found several problems. One seems to be a hardware problem in the test rig. We'll have to investigate that further. Another seems to be a software problem I introduced when refactoring. This sent me back into a LabVIEW tizzy, using a **for** loop structure to propagate fields from clusters of data from one array into another.

And here some of the difficulties of propagating types through LabVIEW code made my life baffling for a time. For a programmer so used to text-based languages, doing an operation like "give this object this type" continues to be a frustrating thing in the all-visual LabVIEW environment. LabVIEW has many, many little tricks up its sleeve; there seems to almost always be a way to convince it to do an operation in a clever way that hides a lot of complexity. The problem is that if you don't (yet) have a lot of experience in the environment, it can be hard to find that particular trick, and sometimes the environment feels like it is fighting you.

For example, I wanted to pass two arrays into a **for** loop, and inside the loop I wanted to copy elements from each cluster in the first array into each cluster in the second array. This seems simple enough. LabVIEW will auto-index arrays when you hook them up to "tunnels" on a **for** loop. You just wire them up. The visual "syntax" is a tiny box on the input.

But it turns out that there's a quirk. If you hook up two arrays with different numbers of elements, the number of iterations of the loop will be limited by the array with the fewest elements. In this case, the array I wanted to fill had no

elements. LabVIEW arrays are dynamic; I wanted it to *create* those elements from the elements in the first array. But it wouldn't do it; it stubbornly refused to execute the body of the **for** loop at all.

There was a workaround, of course; LabVIEW has a very rich set of operations. But the workaround was inelegant and downright ugly; it involved filling in elements of a cluster, starting with a constant, and assembling a new array of clusters, and then putting that in the second data structure. It was one of those “wow, this works, but it makes my skin crawl” situations.

So I finally got it cleaned up by — I'm guessing you might have guessed the answer — cleaning up the types, to make them uniform. When I did that, lo and behold, almost everything I wanted to do in the **for** loop went away. And this suggested a *further* simple refactoring, which got rid of the data-copying from one array to another altogether. Sometimes it really is better to just leave a workaround in place if it isn't a performance problem, but sometimes it really is better to just bite the bullet and finish the refactoring, and let that refactoring lead to the next one, and so on, until the code is so dramatically simplified that you can't think of anything else to simplify.

On my lunch break, I bought some dark chocolate: six bars total, three to leave at work and three to take home. If it is 85% dark chocolate (or more), I won't eat it for the sugar, and my kids won't get it out of the cupboard and scarf it down, because it isn't sweet enough to overcome their aversion to bitterness. But I *will* eat it, perhaps a quarter of a bar, when I'm having that craving.

I also bought some Dr. Bronner's bar soap, and some more dishwasher pods. I didn't really want to go to Arbor Farms, but they had the good chocolate. So this was an exceedingly expensive little errand: six bars of dark chocolate, three bars of soap, three bags of dishwasher pods, a small wrap sandwich, and a packet of broad bean crisps, and it cost me something like seventy dollars. Ouch.

I was going to have a late second lunch, since I stayed pretty late today, but the leftover soup and mujaddara really didn't smell and taste good anymore, so I wound up throwing the rest of it away and eating some more dark chocolate and crisps.

I'll head to Costco in a few minutes. It had better be a pretty light load after spending so much earlier.

Between the dark chocolate and the successful bug fixes and refactorings, maybe the day isn't terrible after all.

Saturday

I kept the price of my Costco run down to about \$160.00, which was not bad. I tried hard to pick up items I was certain we could use over the next few days. Grace was away at a pre-conference dinner, so didn't join us. I thought the kids might make rice, because it's one of the things we do regularly on Fridays, even

though Grace was not there. But they didn't, so we ate salmon and cheese pizza and an apple pie.

The Challenges of Sharing a Kitchen

Our refrigerator is becoming clogged up with leftovers that didn't get used according to plan. For example, we only cooked half the pot roast, and didn't immediately freeze the other half, and so now that other half is eight days old and not looking or smelling too good. I might try trimming it rinsing it, but I think there's probably no salvaging it at this point. This happens in part because we haven't been able to establish a habit of planning a weekly menu with our housemate, although not for lack of trying on our part. So we'll have a plan for the food items I bring home, but our housemate will unexpectedly make a big meal for dinner without planning with us, trashing the kitchen and not cleaning up. We'll have that food to eat, then we'll have an unused high-value food item like the pot roast going to waste, and on top of it, we'll have to spend a whole evening cleaning up the kitchen. It's truly maddening. We've been trying to explain that with thirteen people in the household, we really can't just improvise meals. The quantities of food and cost of those quantities of food are both just too high for this to be a casual, improvised endeavor without planning.

Grace and I really, really hate wasting food. We make mistakes sometime and waste happens — for example, I put several bags of bananas up in the cupboard, and no one pulled them out for a few days, and by the time we remembered, them, they were overripe. We'll make banana bread, but I think some of them are too far gone. That was a mistake and I try not to beat myself up about it. But a couple pounds of what was very high-quality meat? That just seems like a terrible sin.

Anyway, Grace got home late and she still had to work on her talk for today, so she stayed up quite late, and then had to get up early. We wound up setting the alarms on 3 different devices for 6:45 a.m. I was nervous for her, and woke up about 3:00, and was unable to get back to sleep for a while, so wasted time on Twitter for a while. She got out on time. It's 5:00 p.m. now and I'm not sure when to expect her. I'm thinking we might go out for dinner when she gets back, or get takeout, or something like that, because we haven't done good meal planning.

Not surprisingly I've been quite tired today. I spent a long time in the tub trying to feel ready to face the day. Sam made coffee, so there was coffee when I got up. I made a tray of bacon in the oven. We are out of paper towels, and I forgot about that because we didn't consult on a shopping list, so the bacon fat is still in the tray, in the oven, rather than filtered and in a can in the refrigerator. I also made a pot of oatmeal. That got eaten. I did some kitchen cleanup, and read another chapter (finally!) in *Daughter of Dreams*. I have only one chapter left, a long chapter, and the brief epilogue. Then I tried to take a nap, but was woken again and again by Veronica bellowing at her brothers. She seems

to always jump directly to maximum volume. So it hasn't been a great day. It's overcast and ugly out. But on the positive side, it's nice and cool. Our houseguest is calling it cold, but she's from California so that's not surprising.

Old House Update

We received another offer on the house, but it was an offer for only \$60,000. That's too little for us to consider. Our realtor is talking further about a lease agreement, and we're talking about possibilities for replacing the furnace or furnaces. This all seems like we have our back to the wall and we're not happy negotiating from that position. We are still considering the option to walk away.

I have a pile of paperwork to look at, and bills to pay, and I feel like I can't get even fifteen minutes of uninterrupted quiet time to look at those things. There are things I need to look over with Grace, too, and when she's with me, it is often the case that we can't actually finish a single *sentence* without that sentence being interrupted. We could really use a date night. I can't even remember when we had our last date with just the two of us. It's probably been over a year.

I also need to finish the post-recording production work for the podcast episode with Anna. That shouldn't take too long. I've got some other topics in mind: I want to do a whole show, or at least a whole hour, about *Down and Out in Paris and London*. And Grace gave a talk today at a conference — maybe she'll read the talk, and we can turn that talk into a bonus episode like we did last time.

So — goals for the remainder of the weekend:

- Clean up the refrigerator
- Clean the oven (at some point this week, someone spilled food all over the inside and burned it on, *and* apparently did a half-assed job cleaning it, leaving oven cleaner residue all over the inside)
- Finish the podcast
- Finish and file those pieces of paperwork
- Finish reading *Daughter of Dreams*

Those things don't seem like they should be out of reach, but we'll see.

Our housemate's boyfriend says he is sick, and the girls are sick, so if they have a virus we're trying not to catch it. We aren't planning to turn the heating system on in the house until Halloween, in part because we need to get someone out to service it.

I wish I had more of a topic for today, instead of just a bunch of miscellaneous gripes and worries and plans. But sometimes all the little miscellaneous things drive out most or all of the more organized thoughts, and that's just the way it is.

With Grace gone, we didn't make it to The Mother Loaf Breads today.

It's officially the first day of fall. I should probably start reading that copy of *Autumn* by Karl Ove Knausgaard that I picked up a while back.

Books, Music, Movies, and TV Shows Discussed This Week

This list does not include books, chapters of books, or other works that I only mentioned briefly in the text above.

- *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood
- *The Magic School Bus: Lost in the Solar System* by Joanna Cole
- *Down and Out in Paris and London* by George Orwell
- *The Fellowship of the Ring* by J. R. R. Tolkien, Book 2, Chapter 2, “The Council of Elrond”
- *My Struggle: Book Six* by Karl Ove Knausgaard

Pittsfield Township, Michigan

The Week Ending Saturday, September 22nd, 2018

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