

TOOTHPASTE

Andrew McFarland Campbell

Many years ago, when I was the youngest in the family, I remember playing with a tube of toothpaste. I must have been about a year and a half old, so it couldn't really have been any later than 1977. In those days toothpaste came in the traditional metal tubes with the screw caps.

This tube of toothpaste wasn't at home. It was in the supermarket, J&J Foods in King's Square. I was in the child's seat in a shopping trolley, and I was not happy. My two older brothers were there, and my Dad was there too. But my Mum wasn't. Even though Mum was safely at home, barely five minutes' drive away, I missed her. I have always been close to my mother – I apologise for the cliché, but it's true – and I knew she wasn't well. I was fussing because I wanted to be with her.

I remember my oldest brother, Matthew, was walking on one side of the trolley. At the age of eight he was helping Dad do the shopping, walking a few feet ahead, collecting things he knew we needed. Martin, my other brother, was on the other side, a four-year-old boy trying to help his Dad, trying to be his older brother. But I was in the middle, in the child's seat. And I missed Mum. I wanted to be with her.

We were near a shelf, and I was able to reach out and grab something – the tube of toothpaste. I took it out of its cardboard box and started to squeeze it. This was to be my first introduction to one of the fundamental laws of the Universe, a law that trumps the most sincere environmentalist. Entropy increases.

In my hand the tube felt metallic and cool. As I squeezed it I could feel the paste flow inside it. After a good few squeezes I wanted to put the tube back the way it was, uncrumpled and smooth. I did what any thinking toddler would do. I squeezed it

TOOTHPASTE

some more, assuming that would even it out. Of course all that happened was it got more crumpled. I cried.



I remember my Mum crying about that time as well. It was just me and her. She was standing outside the car, holding me in her arms. We were on a country road, overlooking a huge field. “Oh Mummy, Mummy,” my Mum was crying. I suppose it was then that I realised that my Mummy had a mummy herself, even if she wasn’t here. I didn’t realise the significance of the rows of rectangular stones standing in the field though.



Years later, I understood why Mum was crying. She told me she had only seen Dad crying once. And he was crying about that thing too.

