

18

by
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courting

Have you heard of the Collatz conjecture?

No?

It's my favourite maths problem of all time.

And do you know why?

Because...it's one of the most simplest and most complexest puzzles ever.

And it's also a bit magic.

Yeah, seriously.

I'm not actually that clever...like maths clever but when I was about twelve I found a book in my dad's shed called ' $3x + 1$ ' and I asked him about it.

Now, the thing about my dad was...he never liked talking to me. Ever.

Even as a kid, mum kicked the ball round the garden, while dad sat in his shed and drank tea.

But when I asked him about *that* book...ooo-wee....his eyes lit up like the Blackpool tower. I'd never seen him so animated.

He was chattin' for hours, gettin more and more hyped.

I could tell mum was shocked but she didn't say nothin.

She just quietly disappeared into her Sunday gardening.

For the first time ever, he let me sit in his favourite chair and...get this...he smiled!

I remember counting his teeth and trying to work out if they were more brownie-yellow or yellowy-brown.

Listen up, son. You start with a number, any number, and if it's even you divide it by 2 and if it's odd you times it by 3 then add 1. Whatever number you choose you always end up with 1. And that, my boy, is the Collatz conjecture.

It. Blew. My. Mind.

Every day after school I'd dash my bag on the floor, run through the house and head straight to the shed, tryin out new numbers, while dad sat in the corner, pipe in mouth with a big grin on his face.

I don't think I played out or watched one bit of telly that spring.

When they eventually split up and dad left, mum burnt the shed down and the book went with it.

I was gutted. Cried for weeks.

It wasn't that I missed my dad being there. Because he wasn't really.

But I knew that book was the only thing that kept us together and when that went...I knew I'd never see him again.

(Cont.)

(Cont.)

(Pause)

18.

(Pause)

That was the last number I ever tried with him.

(Pause)

It takes 20 operations to get from 18 to 1.

(Pause)

I'd forgotten about that until now.

So please...from the bottom of my heart...

...can I have that mega 18-pack toilet roll?