

# Tipper's Two Drawers

## EDITOR'S NOTE:

*Berrie Heesen is an active contributor to the community of inquiry, philosophy for children, and the development of critical and creative thinking in children. His work with European educational reform and cross-border communication among children about philosophical issues makes an on-going contribution to philosophy and education.*

*We were saddened to learn that Berrie has recently had surgery to remove a brain tumor and is currently undergoing radiation treatment. Berrie's generous response to his condition is to continue to contribute to our understanding of life and philosophy. In that regard, he has contributed the following two stories for reflection and discussion with children and adults - Tipper's Two Drawers and Why Tipper is not Bald.*

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## Berrie Heesen

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**I**t has been a long time now since Tipper had to sort all his things into two drawers. Tipper can remember that time well. It was then that Uncle Berrie told him that this was 'Tipper's Problem' (from the book *Small but brave*, see below). Tipper had to sort his things into the two drawers of his desk in such a way that he would always know what was in which drawer. Tipper had thought and thought very hard indeed, trying to find ways to solve that. He worked it out in the end, but he decided never to tell anyone, ever. Tipper's solution was useful, and so Tipper himself knew what was in which drawer. It was no one else's business. Tipper knew other people well enough (grown-ups like to call this: judgement of character!). If he were to tell which solution he had found, then there were sure to be lots of individuals who wouldn't think it a good solution, who would think of something that could belong in either of the drawers. Tipper kept his lips sealed.

Now, Tipper walked in the park and thought about people. There were two kinds of people! Tipper used his drawers for nicely sorting all the people. Who doesn't, after all? Once, Uncle Berrie told Tipper that when he was a child, he had said that there were people and there were pencils. Uncle Berrie never said exactly what kind of people 'pencils' actually were, but Tipper got the idea. He saw pencils walking in the park.

Today, Tipper was walking in the park and thinking about sorting in quite a different way. There were two kinds of people, that much was very clear. Yesterday he had visited Uncle Berrie. It hadn't been a nice visit. Uncle Berrie was bald and had a great big cut on his head. In hospital, they

had sawed Uncle's skull open. Uncle even said that they had first drilled two holes and had then sawed his skull open between the holes.

Why? asked Tipper. Uncle liked thinking so much, and then surely you don't let doctors mess about in your brain.

Uncle had explained that here had been a tumour in his brain; a kind of lump which did not belong there and which had to be taken out. Uncle explained that it had been so bad that the lump had been pressing against his normal brain tissue and that had caused him to pass out (a difficult word for this is: an insult), which is why they had brought him to hospital. He had been completely unconscious and he did not even remember their bringing him to hospital by ambulance. Tipper knew that Uncle had been in hospital; he had been at Uncle's bedside and had given him a plastic boat. Uncle had laughed very loudly but had hardly said anything else.

Tipper had seen that they had sewn Uncle's head up again. There were all those black threads, the cut began in the middle of Uncle's forehead and ended just in front of his left ear. It was just as if Uncle were a pirate who had taken part in combat at sea, in a real sea battle. While boarding the enemy ship, Uncle had been dealt a hard blow on the head with a sharp sword. Uncle only needed to wear a black eye patch and he could have played the role of pirate captain in a film.

Uncle had cried a bit. Tears rolled from his eyes and down his cheeks. Tipper had never seen an uncle cry before. Tipper walked in the park and put people into his drawers. Tipper, his friends, his teachers, Tipper's parents, the lady next door and also Uncle's black nurse were all in the same drawer. Even his grandfather, who was already 60, was in this drawer. Uncle was in the other drawer. Tipper tried to think who else belonged in the same drawer as Uncle. This wasn't so easy. Tipper could only think of one. That was that man who had jumped off the roof of the Hilton Hotel in Amsterdam (transl.: the hotel famous for John Lennon and Yoko Ono staying one whole week in bed there). The man, Herman Brood, was a well-known Dutch rock and roll star. Brood had jumped off the roof himself. So, as he was going up in the lift or up the stairs to the top of the hotel, he had known that he was going to be dead very soon. It was at this moment that Tipper was able to put him into the drawer with Uncle.

Tipper is walking in the park, Uncle has told Tipper what he has heard. On Monday 23 July, Uncle was told by the surgeon who sawed into his skull and took the lump out, that it is a tumour that is malignant. That is what it is called. The doctor told Uncle that there are some very nasty cells in his brain. The doctor told him that he has between 6 months and 2 years left to live. Uncle told Tipper this and immediately afterwards Uncle shouted at the top of his voice: POP. A soap bubble bursting.

Uncle does not have long to live, that is certain, so the doctor said. That's how Uncle explained it to Tipper. Before Uncle talked to the doctor, Uncle had thought that he would reach sixty or seventy or eighty years of age. Uncle did not know whether he wanted to grow really old. Uncle could simply fantasize about what he would do when he was sixty. Where would he want to live? Uncle had just bought a house in France and Uncle fantasized about it a lot. How it would turn out, all the things he wanted to do there, later. Whether Uncle would see Tipper from time to

time? Tipper could do this too, said Uncle. He could simply fantasize about what he would do in 10 or 20 years time.

Try it, said Uncle. Imagine that you are 40. What do you think you will be doing? Tipper stared at the big zipper in Uncle's head and said that he didn't want to spend any of those years in hospital. At the same time Tipper saw the sword stuck into Uncle's head, as if the enemy hadn't wanted to pull it out. Uncle nodded and said that hospital was not nice, that sometimes he had spent half the night wandering around in the hospital because he had not been able to sleep. Luckily, it was a nice hospital, the AMC in Amsterdam, with a lot of art works on the walls (which sometimes looked better at night than during the day) and really high passageways with transparent ceilings, so that you could see the sky.

Now Uncle was one of a different kind, Uncle belonged with the people who know that they will not live long. Uncle said that of course you never know anything absolutely for certain. Tipper could be driving home with his parents and if he were unlucky, he could have a car accident. This was completely true. It could happen to anybody travelling by car. Whether it was Tipper or Uncle in the car, that didn't make any difference. The thing that Uncle could not do anymore was to imagine what life would be like in 10 years time, and that was why Uncle was now one of a different kind. Now Uncle belonged to the short-lived people who know for certain that they will live a short life. The other kind were the long-lived people who do not know for certain if they will live long, but who can still fantasize about it. That was the difference between the two kinds and Uncle said that this was a very big difference. Tipper thought to himself that he was glad to be one of the long-lived people. He didn't think much of the idea of knowing that it would end so soon.

Tipper walked in the park and looked from one drawer to the other. Uncle's drawer wasn't very well filled, who else belonged in that drawer? Uncle had explained that there were lots of people who had a bad tumour in the brain, but also in other parts of the body. Tipper realised that all those people who had been told by the doctor that they could only live for a couple of years more, that those people kept Uncle company.

Tipper didn't know those people. Tipper thought back to the visit to Granny in the old people's home (Tipper called this the Granny home) a year ago. He thought of the man and the woman who sat at Granny's table drinking coffee. The man looked very sick and he couldn't hold his cup properly. Outside, Tipper had said that the man was going to die very soon. Next week, Tipper supposed. Granny hadn't liked that one bit. Did the man at Granny's table belong in Uncle's drawer too? Tipper thought he did. He would ask Uncle.

*To be continued, Berrie Heesen*  
**Translation: Suzanne Greene**

Dates:

7 July admitted with insult to hospital

10 July to operating theater, operation took 5 hours (my birthday, incidentally)

17 July released from hospital, home again!

23 July consultation with the surgeon, result of tests: malignant

24 July first tennis match (yes, it's true: I lost) since operation

26 July 1 write this story: Tipper's two drawers

*From **Small but brave** (in Dutch *Klein maar dapper*, Damon 1996, in German *Klein aber clever*, Veriag an der Ruhr, 1998)*

## Tipper's problem

Tipper has to tidy up.

Tipper has displayed all his things on his bed.

There are lots of things.

There is a rubber ball, a multi-coloured shoelace, one of Uncle Ben's empty metal cigar cases, a wind-up toy from a McDonald's Happy Meal, a key ring with a photo of Tipper and his brother, a plastic orange, a gold fountain pen, a beautiful glistening stone, two dried horse chestnuts (he got from Auntie Martha in Mallorca), an imitation pyramid (he got from his next door neighbour from Egypt). And that isn't all. Everything has to be put into two drawers.

Tipper wants to sort all his things into the two drawers, but how?

First Tipper thought: in one he will put things that he has been given and in the other drawer the things that he has found himself. But for some things Tipper doesn't know where they came from anymore. Then Tipper had a different idea: one drawer for the things that can roll and one drawer for the things that can 't roll. But for some things it's not clear whether they can roll or not. And if Tipper looks for something he has to look in both drawers, because he will have forgotten whether it rolls or not.

No, it has to be very clear, so that Tipper knows right away in which drawer it is. That is Tipper's problem.

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