

LOOKING THROUGH MY SPYGLASS

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When I was little—which is actually now, but a writer needs perspective—people said that computers came from China. They would be delivered to your door in the wee hours, when the light is still gray and smeared with shadows, because it has not yet washed its face. In the dark before day breaks, blaring sounds reverberate and the headlights pierce through the glass pane so vividly. I peep from under the covers to check if the window is still there, and my wall isn't torn down, like in the movies when they turn on the projectors and yell "FBI" before blasting in. I hate this time of the day—night, really—when I feel exposed to the street and monsters lurk in my room. Maybe that's why they call it "daybreak," because it's short for "breaking and entering." I think about things like this, because at school we have to spell out everything and we get points for saying "Dedicated Private Server" instead of "DPS," which is confusing because none of your friends understand what you are saying and your ratings drop.

Anyhow, it's hard to sleep when you're expecting your first computer. For a few days, I ran to the window each time a truck choked on our front step. Mom and Dad didn't choose drone delivery, for reasons that took an entire evening to explain, but which I can't report here because, when they embark on using their profound educative voices, I switch my batteries to saving mode, and go dark. A drone would have been faster, even possibly delivering to my window.

Yet, drones should only fly when children sleep. They frighten me a little when I walk to school. Uncle John, who watches out for me, gave me a hawk; she perches on my shoulder and scares away anything flying around. During school hours, she sleeps in the courtyard tree, the one preserved for first grade show and tell. We aren't supposed to know what a tree is, like so many other things. Our teacher, Ms. Milton, enjoys old pictures, like a hawk on a tree. I am not sure why her Coast Guard boyfriend comes in for tree lessons, but Dad said it makes sense, and I didn't ask why. I wanted to look like I understood in front of Mom, who blooms in such a pretty smile when she feels I am smart.

I walk to school alone, with my hawk on my shoulder; I will soon own my personal computer; Those are clear signs that I am all grown up. The computer is coming from some Dotorg place that my teacher recommended. At home, my parents kept repeating in a comforting tone of voice:

“Don’t get your hopes up, Buddy, these *Dotorg* items probably are surplus or older machines, and we will have to see what we can even do with it.”

I nod in all seriousness, well aware of the health problem that plagues our neighborhood. I was never ill, but I gather that the plague comes from taking medicines and I understand not to trust a dotorg. My father went on saying:

“Don’t worry; we’ll make it work enough for you.”

“Enough” was upsetting, but I smoothly surfed over it; when you negotiate, you must take things one at a time. I was slightly vexed, but not too concerned. I would outsmart him soon *enough*.

I already know quite a lot about digital systems. My friend Evans and I have figured out how to bypass App subscriptions, which is vital since we don’t have much money. Evans is moving up in the gaming world by mowing lawns for a few Dollars at a time, which seemed like the best way to earn more of those 99c subscriptions that grab you a Dollar each time. Apps will forever feel to me like a freshly mowed stripe cutting through tall grass.

Ms. Milton, whom we nicknamed Ms. Laundromat because she smells of soap and seems on a mission to brainwash us, noticed our effort. She said we had good “apptitudes,” then recommended us for the program. She also said that I had a bit of an “attitude,” and confusion started right then. My parents were happy with #1 but displeased with #2. Seems to me those are two representations of the same word. When I am bored at school, I fiddle with my neighbor Lili’s pocket mirror and notice some pretty interesting stuff. Take the word “attitude,” for instance, place a mirror at the base of the letters and you will see lines changing direction. pp becomes dd, which often sounds alike tt, depending on who pronounces it.

There is not a huge lot to do in first grade; they start us slow, so as not to overheat our new brains, especially in winter, when school days are the longest. Adults who grew up in the time of the diesel engine carry the concept of the slow, careful start for fear of burning fuses. But I have been running mine for a while already and I wouldn't mind going a bit faster. JC, who had to redo first grade because he was busy with other things last year, is a great resource. His full name is Julius Caesar, but he's going to be a DJ when he grows up and wants to start branding early. He knows the whole school system and told me that next year, when we'll move to second grade A-mendment, they'll teach us to fire a gun. I found that pretty cool and was excited to tell my parents at dinner. Dad went "ballistic," which made me laugh aloud, and things got out of control. I could not explain that the word was funny, because Dad grabbed his telephone, saying he had not heard anything that insane in his entire life and was determined to speak with the School Principal this minute. Mom, who keeps herself pretty well informed, calmly intervened, declaring that nothing coming from JC was to be taken seriously—shall I take good note of that, and no, I did not need to write it down to remember. It is amazing how Mom can run parallel conversations, write at the same time, and know if I am listening. Olympic qualification! Between my parents and me, I have no doubt we could write a rocket launching program if this computer ever arrives. Even if it's an old-fashioned hard top with plastic raised keys, we are going to fire up that machine, you will not believe it!

Meanwhile, I'm sitting on the stairs, waiting. It has been almost a week. How, in this day and age...

My aunt Avana is expecting too, a new cousin, and it's taking just as long, but frankly, it it's much less exciting.

Oh, but wait... I understand now! It has arrived, probably when I was at school or asleep, but they hid it until my birthday. I cannot believe this. No matter how science progresses, parents are still up to their old tricks. The patience it takes to be a child! I already know the computer's name: Godo. I was walking to the school library yesterday when I noticed a poster for the antique theater club. The picture showed a guy sitting in a garbage can, looking bored; I stopped to read the title: "Waiting for Godot." Sixth graders must have chosen that play because of the garbage cans. In our neighborhood, we don't pick garbage cans up after collection day because we use the trash shacks to store our bikes. I often play slalom-gliding around trash barrels when I run back from

school. Thinking of that theater poster and me endlessly in standby, made me almost want to sign up. They invite first graders on stage sometimes and I am a natural at waiting.

I notice every detail, when I circulate in our neighborhood. I never miss a new tag; I look for them, when the paint is sharp and fresh. Except for tags, art is mostly rectangular. I noticed that last summer, when my parents took me to Europe. To introduce me to culture, they said. "Culture" means that one eats twice a day in restaurants that serve food that actually came from cultivated fields. Adults are crazy about it. After the trip, they fussed all autumn long with their friends, speaking of all the kilos they gained, but the food, you know, was amazing! For me, art was really the best part of Europe; it is everywhere in the streets and still often printed on paper. Everything is represented, glued to any surface you can imagine: walls, buses, cars, lampposts, trees, subway corridors, doors! Giant posters and tiny flyers pasted on top of each other, layered since WW2, and everything is nicely photographed. One looks into someone's bathroom, showing the toothbrushes very big, the shampoo foaming like whipped cream. Another might be peoples' panties, or how to vote, all you can eat with perfect shapes and bright colors, every object in one's closet is inventoried, and somewhere in the midst, an aircraft is taking off. I even saw a refrigerator on a lounge chair under palm trees—but I figure that came from pasting over and the rain blurring the seams.

In Europe, they also keep fairy tale castles in parks to represent the old times, but it's not very well organized. They do not have rides or movie characters, and you cannot touch anything. So, it's not really fun. I preferred the art in the streets. I had noticed that rectangular peculiarity about art before, when I accompanied my grandmother to the museum. She keeps things so clean in her house that she needs to see a little dust once in a while. As I am too young for community service, I was volunteered for the museum on Fridays. To pass time there, I invented a game. As we walk very slow, a little to the right, then a little to the left, I play blind team. Half-way into the first hall, I close my eyes and pretend we are looking for our way and Grannydad is my guide. Afterwards, we have an ice cream together and chat a lot, which is pretty cool.

Mom is Ruth. Dad calls her our queen. He is Jamal, which she says means beautiful and handsome, and goes well with Dad. I am something else, and a shade in between that is not listed at the paint store. I verified that when Mrs. Gandolfini, our neighbor who sometimes watches my friend Almedeia and me, took so long to choose a new color for

her living room. I had time not to find me, though I did find emojis yellow, Spiderman red, and Smurf blue. Almedeia wrote notes on the back of the little square cards. People will be nicely surprised to find them everywhere, like vertical fortune cookies. Picking colors seems so stressful to adults; they should ask us children, who don't have a problem with colors.

I will probably be back to the old paint store with swatches next year, still waiting for my computer, having nothing to do but paint walls. My parents don't let me customize their machines, and my child tablet has no capacity. A standard tablet is like spending one's life in a prefabricated modular hotel room, alone, without even an avatar. Maybe it's freedom I am expecting.

Grandpa David has a way of throwing his arms up in the air, looking very tired, and saying: "if things were not complicated enough!" It seems to be his favorite sentence. Mom claims he has said that since she decided to marry Dad, which I cannot personally confirm because my world had not started yet. Each time Grandpa pronounces that phrase and Dad is around, my father takes him away: "David, let's go fix your car: I have a bit of time" or "David, isn't your car due for tune up?" Grandpa grins, pats my dad's shoulder, and says: "you're a good man, Jamal." For some reason, this drives Mom through the roof—oh, can she be mad! She shouts at Dad: "stop entertaining his stereotypes!" and turns to scolding her father: "you know better!" The men tiptoe out together and I often stick to their heels, away from the storm. What Mom doesn't know is that they don't work on the car. They just chat about the books they read, about politics, about their students, things at the university, or the games.... In the beginning, they would sit in the car, but one summer, when it was particularly hot, David brought two folding chairs and they sat in the garage shade. Then they just kept doing it. They hide the chairs behind the tool cabinet. Shortly before it's time to return home, Dad asks:

"We'd better keep this car running for you, David. Any idea?"

And Grandpa answers:

"I think it's the ignition. I brought a spare spark plug, but don't worry, I'll stop by the mechanics tomorrow."

If it came to be known that Jamal and David were doing stereotypes together in the garage, that might be disastrous. They are hiding something from Mom, and it cannot just be sitting on plastic chairs and chatting leisurely, can it? "Stereotypes" is a tough one that I have not been able to figure out, so far. I refrained from looking it up on the family tablet, or at school, for fear it might trigger a report to my parents or the school librarian. It did just that when Evans and I looked up "steroids" because we were tired of finishing last in the gym class. I feel it is my responsibility to keep my family safe, and I cannot let anyone suspect that I am investigating. The whole affair should be kept discreet.

The only thing that works in Grandpa's automobile is the stereo; it still has a knob-dial to listen to a public radio. My Dad showed David the built-in plug, behind the cover he never lifted, even hooked up his hand-held device there, but Grandpa waved his hand:

"Ye, ye, I know, but why would I care? This old wreck is the only place where my students can't reach me, and I like my radio."

There is no trunk in the car either, since it was converted to electric, so David does not grocery shop, about which Mom also rolls her eyes and says:

"Please, give me a break: you can fit three bags on the back seat, and one in front."

I see that he is a little lonely since Grandma passed away and the doorbell singing makes him smile; sometimes the delivery kid is one of his students or a neighborhood teen. He gives them a good tip:

"Every bit helps when you're young," then he pats my head.

I have verified that he knew speaking robots existed who could keep him company.

"But you see, an interactive robot is a little bit like speaking to yourself in a mirror."

His answer puzzled me because no humanoid I know resembles Grandpa.

Still, Mom worries. At the hairdresser, on Saturdays, she crashes on the padded chair:

“My husband and father are driving me crazy!”

A chorus of women sigh and complain together, sometimes bringing their hands to their hearts. When grownup women go wash their heads, it clearly stresses them out, with risk of heart failure. Don't wash your hair if you want to live long. So why do they insist on training us since birth by washing our head regularly, which clearly does not work? Mom, who is a brain scientist by profession, should know better.

In my family, we also have Min-Joo, Pedro, Mike, Gertrud, Avannah, Kiki, and Chan. Everyone's closet is a voyage. Clothes have different shapes, colors, perfumes, with all sorts of letters on the labels. I travel long distances from closet to closet, and from keypad to screens that have intriguing sounds and graphics. We top the United Nations on Thanksgiving. I put this all in my memory... Yes, feeding my memory chip, this is what I'm going to ask for New Year!

While waiting, I actively prepare for my computer. Baby computers, like others, are fed formulas. I am making a list of the programs and codes I want. Mom and Dad read them and seem interested:

“It's going to keep you busy for a while.”

The list is rather long, indeed. At this afternoon's recess, I ran out of ideas and hung out with JC for entertainment. A girl, walking by with a friend, whispered:

“My dad said he is not the sharpest knife in the drawer!”

JC jolted back:

“Want to see my knife in my drawers?”

They shrieked and screamed and squealed, yelling “rude, disgusting,” so loud that I had to run and cover my ears. On top of it all, the school bell whistled, and everyone started running through the courtyard, shouting. A nightmare. This is why people have to wear hearing aids later in life, first grade presents serious health hazards.

I lamented all the way back home. It had been the two longest days of my life, and my computer had still not arrived.

It is going to be a long, long week. I have given up hope, in desperation. Should I start a hunger strike? Well, I'll see what's for dinner tonight. Meanwhile, our front doorbell rings, and of course I am the one supposed to answer. What a day! I drag my feet downstairs, mumbling... A funny little man in a green uniform, with an antenna on his headset, asks me if there is an adult signature at home? Lennie goes to fetch one. Lennie is our dog. Her fur is fluffy and soft. She is very smart; she will handle it.

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