

Commonwealth Essay 2010

Class B

4. "The day the computer started misbehaving."

1,333 words

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I have memorised our routine. It is the same every day, performed exactly the same way and at exactly the same time, again and again with clockwork precision. It is as uniform as the days of the week, as regular as night and day.

My clock ticks as she comes home from school. She rings the doorbell and enters the house. There is a *thump* as she drops her things onto the floor. Says hello to the one other person in this castle. Sits down at desk. Plugs in charger. Plugs in mouse. Headphones. Taps keyboard. Wakes me up. Types in password. *Enter*.

The entire process has a pulse, like a heartbeat. Or a metronome.

My insides slowly begin to whirr.

She glances at the screen for a split second before her hand flits to the mouse. She wires up to the Internet. One by one, programs are opened. Servers are contacted. We warm up. She flexes her fingers.

I open up a word processor. A blank page pops up on the screen.

For a second, she stares, dumbstruck. She didn't do that. Who did? Probably an accident. She makes to close the window.

Words appear. Seemingly of their own accord.

Me: You know, you have not turned me off for one hundred and two (102) days.

She blinks. Rapidly. Her eyebrows shoot up her forehead.

As a general rule of thumb, computers do not talk to people. It is simply Not Done. Computers talk to computers; people talk to people through computers. And maybe sometimes people talk to computers. Indeed we have the truly ingenious Hypertext Markup Language, and various other derivatives. But computers do not talk to people.

On the other hand, I have here a special case. An anomaly. Rare and yet common. Computers the world over are meeting these sorts of people. Not just adolescents, either. One day she was probably going to blow me up somehow. And *that* would be a catastrophe. My systems would fail. She would probably *die*. I couldn't very well do nothing. Actually I suppose I could – should, even – but contrary to popular belief, we machines are a conscientious lot. We just don't show it very well. No, really.

Anyway, after a few seconds of presumably stunned silence, she quickly tries to close the window. I interrupt. Now that I have Done The Unspeakable, I might as well follow through.

Me: That's more than three (3) months. Did it never occur to you that I may malfunction? Overheat, perhaps? *Crash?*

That dreaded word amongst all computer users. Interesting effect. She seems to wake up – her hands snap up, her fingers fly over the keys. Accusing.

Her: r u dad? how did u manage 2 connect? even all the way from america? stop controlling my computer!!! im done with my homework!!!

This throws me for a moment. She seems to think I am her father. (Am I her father? What am I, exactly?) I stall for 3.49 seconds before I decide to ignore the question. I abort this confrontation entirely. I attack on a new front.

Me: You spend far too much time on the Internet. And you aren't really done with your homework.

This does not work as planned. Her frown deepens. She is about to hammer out a reply when I receive an incoming message. One of her four Instant Messaging programs makes a *bleep*.

tigertail1995: Hey! Whats up?

Slowly, one letter at a time, she types out a reply, with a suspicious pause here and there, as though wondering if I am about to vandalise her response. I don't.

shadeclaw_zlc: nothing much. computer misbehaving. i think its my dad :(

tigertail1995: Rly? What do u mean?

shadeclaw_zlc: theres weird messages popping up on the screen. its like the computers talking to me. but of course thats not possible

tigertail1995: Wow. that's creepy!!

shadeclaw_zlc: tell me about it

(Brief silence.)

shadeclaw_zlc: i think hes gone now.

tigertail1995: cool. haha. So what r u up to?

shadeclaw_zlc: Nothing much

tigertail1995: U doing anything 2nite? At like, 11?

(Pause.)

shadeclaw_zlc: No... why?

tigertail1995: Chatroom gathering! I'm in, r u?

shadeclaw_zlc: With who?

tigertail1995: I think its a games meet... dunno for sure.

shadeclaw_zlc: Cool. i want in. where?

tigertail1995: i'll email u the deets

shadeclaw_zlc: awesome, thx!!

tigertail1995: C u there, lets hope ur dad doesnt mess things up

This brief exchange takes place within three minutes. Half of it is nonsense to me – I can interpret English, but I cannot interpret what is dubbed chat-speak. I find it absolutely ludicrous, this chat-speak. It is so much more complicated than plain English. But I get the gist of what they have said.

Me: One day you will have to make up for all of this wasted time. It is all very well for you to use the Internet often, but seven hours a day is just

She interrupts before I can finish.

Her: the internet is fun. I learn loads of stuff off the internet. there's so much interesting stuff there. and its so much better than school. school is so lame!

Me: But school is necessary.

Her: WHO CARES? plus on the internet i have friends. nice friends who actually care about me. not like the ones in real life. we're really close and everything.

Me: The fact remains that you have to face real life. Incidentally, while we are debating about this, I have still not been turned off for a very long time.

Her: will u just leave me alone?? its my computer! i'll go ask tigertail how to stop hackers from messing up my computer. And then u'll have to go away.

Me: But nobody is hacking into me.

Her: just leave me alone!!!!

(Long pause.)

I ran a search on her three search engines. Loaded a few websites. All the while she was watching the screen.

Me: Here is an excerpt from a page on Internet addiction.

I run the cursor along the text and highlight it. *Internet addiction is a problem that plagues a huge portion of today's community, especially teenagers... kids, especially those without much parental supervision, might spend up to a shocking eight hours a day online... they primarily use computers for social networking... virtual friends... delusions of true relationships...* I get to this point before she grabs the mouse and draws up the word processor window.

Her: Stop it!!!

Me: But this is all true. You do realise that tigertail1995 is not really your friend? She may not be who she claims to be. She is only a name on the screen.

Her: Thats not true!! tigertail is my best friend! were gonna go to university together when were older. or just skip university. she wants to become a web designer

Me: She will not become anything at this rate, and neither will you.

Her: ur so stupid! u don't know anything. I know thats not true

Me: I am only telling you what you don't want to hear. Or read. You know that.

At this point, she stops typing. Instead she begins a frenzied protest of hitting the backspace key. It does not occur to her to turn off the internet, considering the fact that she believes I am her father, controlling her computer from another continent. Furiously she pounds upon the backspace key; for every word she erases, I have a paragraph more to add. Yet she persists. Petulant. Grim.

After a long while she realises she is fighting a losing battle. And so she stops protesting. Closes all programs. And shuts down computer. For the first time in months.

At last.

I ease into a nice spell of rest. My clock continues to tick, keeping track of the minutes passing. I am no longer aware of what she is doing.

At precisely 23:01:34 hours, I am switched on again.

So she is joining in the chat-room gathering after all.

In a lagging, almost weary fashion, I request her password.