

We Have the Technology

As a teenager, I developed this weird limp. Whenever I had a medical problem – and there were many by this stage – my mother would take me to see Doctor Mark, the handsome young Irish doctor down the road, whose boyish good looks I found both attractive and intimidating. Thanks to his Aryan bone structure and Hollywood teeth, telling Doctor Mark about my bad skin, anxiety attacks and back pain – all while wearing a food-encrusted orthodontic plate – was humiliating and made me feel repulsive. But I figured there was no other option.

‘What seems to be the problem?’ Doctor Mark asked.

Mum nodded to cue me, so I started to mumble about my limp: a crazy peg-legged walk that had only developed in the last six months. Walking used to be an automatic task that didn’t require any thought, but now it was a gruelling, self-conscious ordeal just to get from my locker to the tuckshop. As I hobbled through the school quadrangle, I could feel my brain straining to move my legs. Jocks with names like Adam and Jonathan would yell out and laugh at me. I kept my head down to avoid making eye contact, which meant I had a bird’s eye view of how weird my stride had become; it was the drunken waltz of a demented pirate. After a day of limping like this, my back would be sore, my knees inflamed. This limp was ruining my life, but I didn’t tell Doctor Mark that.

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‘I have a limp,’ I said.

Doctor Mark nodded as I answered his questions. ‘Well, I’ll need to see this for myself,’ he said, rolling up his sleeves. There wasn’t enough space to walk up and down in his office, so the three of us went outside to the carpark, and Doctor Mark told me to parade for him in the disabled zone. As I walked back and forth in a staggered rhythm, Doctor Mark and Mum observed me, concerned, whispering questions to each other. *How long has he been walking like this? Is this normal, doctor?* Cars pulled up and passengers watched the display encouragingly, rallying for this young Chinese amputee who was clearly giving his new prosthesis a test run.

When we sat back down in his office, the news was grim.

‘What you have,’ Doctor Mark said, ‘is a disease.’ He explained that my condition was a result of the muscles and bones in my leg growing at different rates. This was apparently common in adolescent boys experiencing growth spurts and, in most cases, eventually sorted itself out. On one hand, I should have felt better hearing all this; it didn’t sound especially serious. On the other hand, I was diseased. As I took in the news, I slouched in my chair. Mum scowled at me and gave Doctor Mark a pleading look.

‘You know, Ben,’ Doctor Mark said, grinning at Mum. ‘You can always make these things worse with a bad posture.’ At that, I immediately straightened up; not so much for my back’s sake, but because I wanted Doctor Mark to like me.

As soon as we got home, I sat down at the computer and immediately started slouching again. My mother bristled. ‘You know what’s ruined your back?’ she said. ‘It’s not just that limp. It’s all that *slouching*. You’re always sitting in front of your *boxes*

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and slouching.’ By ‘boxes,’ Mum meant the various oblong obsessions that had apparently corrupted me over the years. There were magazines and novels to begin with, and then the Walkmans, video games, televisions and computers that had infiltrated my life, reducing to an empty shell the child she had raised and loved. ‘See, you’re even slouching now,’ she said. ‘And you don’t even notice it. Also, you *never* talk to me anymore. You’re always talking to that *box*.’

If the computer was ruining my back, she said, then my Walkman would ruin my hearing – although we both acknowledged that I did have weirdly excessive ear-wax, which Doctor Mark drained at least once a year, which probably affected my hearing. The Walkman was a recent purchase, a state-of-the-art Sony model with a mega-bass function. I kept it on at all hours, even at bedtime, when I’d lie in bed and listen to the Austereo broadcast of *Doctor Feelgood*, a late-night sex-advice program. Doctor Feelgood – whose real name was, incredibly, Sally Cockburn – was frank and unflinching. Women would phone in about their yeast infections, and married truckies called in with disturbing tales of having sex with other men in roadside toilets. In the morning, I’d wake up, curled around my Walkman, my back cracking, sore and twisted.

‘You see,’ Mum would say, watching me hobble into the bathroom, my headphones still plugged in. ‘You’re doing this to yourself.’

‘That’s not true,’ I said. ‘Don’t you remember what Doctor Mark said? I’m *diseased*.’

As I brushed my teeth and listened to my Walkman, I realised that Mum simply didn’t understand the joys of technology. She came from a different era entirely, and from a Malaysian town

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where they sent telegrams via monkeys; where she came from, feral dogs and homeless children delivered the mail. Hers was a generation that had embraced the television and the telephone and seemed content to leave it at that. In a way, I felt sorry for her.

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Years later, when all the children had left home, Mum was left on her own in a house full of technology she didn't know how to use. Old computer hard-drives were stacked up in the study, beige metal slabs useful to her only as paperweights. We feared she would go crazy with loneliness and tried implementing a telephone roster. Each of us would speak to her once a week – five children, one for each weekday – by phone, the only piece of technology with which she was comfortable. Eventually, though, we became lazy. Mum would fall out of the loop, missing out on emails about our lives, and would only find out about our plans at the very last minute.

‘Why does everyone “email” nowadays?’ she said. ‘Or this SMS. No one has time to pick up the phone and call their mother? One day, you’ll think to yourself: “Oh, maybe I should call Mum! On the telephone like a normal person!” But hello! Jenny is *dead*! Yes! You will have a dead mother. Then how will you feel? Not even knowing your own mother is dead! You will feel so awful, I cannot even imagine. You will *vomit* from guilt. My dead body will stink up the house. That is how dead I will be. *Stinky dead*, because no one calls Mummy.’

We took this as our cue to introduce her to the world of mobile phones, and bought her a simple prepaid Nokia that was cheap to run and easy to use. We were all on the same network, so she could call us for free and vice versa. To our surprise, she

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took to the new technology easily. ‘Oh, this is all you have to do to make an SMS?’ she said, punching in numbers that magically became letters. ‘Even someone with *brain damage* could use this.’

And so, while media commentators discussed the death of the English language at the hands of text-messaging youth, my mother’s communication became more creative and avant-garde. Her texts were laced with flurries of capital letters, improvised messes of punctuation, and obsolete German characters like ß. On our birthdays, we would get SMSes recounting our births – ‘*All my discomfort ööö ... And painful memories ÖÖÖ*’ – the unlauted Os like a line of female mouths screaming in labour. She once sent me an outburst about an unhelpful shop assistant: ‘*Yeap! HE is a very STINGkyt stupid Cunt! Lll,MUM?*’

The Ls were her sign-off. They stood for ‘love.’

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The internet was trickier. It had been decades since my mother had used a typewriter, and it took a long time for her to understand the difference between Shift and Caps Lock.

‘And this,’ I said, guiding her hand, ‘is a mouse.’

‘Mouse?’ she said. She let go of it, then took notes in her exercise book, drawing a cartoon mouse with the Chinese character for ‘mouse’ on top. ‘Oh, I see,’ she said. ‘Because it has a *tail!* Hello, *mousey!*’

She started petting it, then drew a tail in the notebook.

‘Stop that,’ I said. ‘You’re getting distracted.’

‘You don’t understand! If I don’t write it down, I’ll never *learn!*’

‘When you’re writing stuff down, you’re not looking at the *screen.*’

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I showed her how the mouse controlled an arrow on the screen.

‘And why do I want this “arrow”?’ she asked. ‘What does this arrow do, exactly?’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘it points to things.’

Many computer concepts, I soon realised, were pretty abstract. When we checked her email, she would ask confounding questions, Sphinx-like riddles that melted my brain. What *was* the internet? Was Google a part of the internet? What was the difference between Facebook and Google? Was Facebook controlled by the mouse? Does everyone on Facebook use the same mouse? What was the difference between sending an email and being online? Was she online *now*? As someone who used these technologies every day, I didn’t know how to answer these questions.

‘So I just *goo-goo* this?’ she asked, when we loaded Google. *Goo-goo*, we both knew, was a crude and childish Cantonese term for penis.

‘Yes, Mum, very funny.’

‘*Goo-goo*,’ she said again, laughing.

Then, after a while, as we read through her emails, Mum began to slouch.

‘You’re slouching,’ I said. ‘This is why you have back pain – you slouch.’

At that, she stretched out and started singing.

‘Well, I’m bored now. I’m not in the mood.’ She brightened up. ‘I’m going to boil an egg!’

In the kitchen, as she started boiling eggs, she asked me to print out all her emails – every single one.

‘But they’re already in your computer,’ I said.

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‘Well, I can’t *read* them on the computer now, can I?’

I went back to the computer and sat down. Now it was my turn to slouch.

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Every time I go home to visit Mum, I try to incorporate a computer lesson. We seem to be making modest progress. She might not have time to compose emails herself, but she reads all the news we send her, and I’d like to think she now feels more included in our lives. Miraculously, she now prefers SMSes to phone calls for simple messages. The next step is to have her use Skype for face-to-face video chats.

During one session, I tried to show her how simple it was to video-chat with my sister Tammy, who was 100 kilometres away. Mum took careful notes the whole time I was setting up and, once we were online, took photos of the monitor, telling Tammy to smile. When we started to experience some audio feedback, I strapped a pair of headphones on her.

‘Don’t these things make you go deaf?’ she asked. ‘I remember what your Walkman did to you. Now it’s that iPod.’

‘I’m pretty sure you’ll survive,’ I said.

After about a minute with the headphones, she became flustered. ‘My ears are hot,’ she said to Tammy, before turning to me. ‘It feels like something bit them, like some *insect*. Are your ears hot? Mine are *very hot*.’ Then she started rubbing her lower back.

At precisely 4.30 p.m., Mum terminated the chat session. *The Bold & The Beautiful* was on, a show she referred to as *Staring, Staring*. (‘See,’ she’d explain, ‘the whole episode, they just keep talking and staring at each other. *Staring, Staring*; so much staring.’)

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‘So we’re just giving up on the computer lesson, then?’

‘I’m not really in the mood anymore,’ she said. ‘My back hurts; my ears are hot. I’ve been sitting down too much. And look: *Staring*, *Staring* is starting.’

As we sat down in front of the television, Mum leaned back against her latest purchase: an electronic massage device for her sore back, an orange latex cushion with rotating metal hands inside. When she switched it on, the hands groped out, pressing against the latex skin. It looked to me like a foetus trying to claw its way out of the womb. Hours passed. We swapped seats so I could give the massage chair a go. After we’d watched the news, two current-affairs programs and *Dancing with the Stars*, it was nearly time to go to bed. She continued to watch TV until she passed out, and I worked on my laptop until the battery died, both of us massaging our poor, atrophied muscles with the latest in domestic engineering. We hadn’t done anything all day but stare at boxes.