

A Good Hack

"It's never quite the same every time. You may say "I love you"

a certain way one year, and five years later the parlance of

the day, the culture, has moved on"

- Q-Tip, on rapping

The second person from the website I met in person was you. You were my hacking partner, and we chatted online:

Rawr: I feel like that villain from that kid's show set in Cyberspace

Cpt Murphy: Cyberchase...? Yeah, I watched that show for like 2 years of my life

Cpt Murphy: you know you're not making societally approved life choices when you're a villain on a TV show

Rawr: I loved cyberchase. Before I fell from innocence

Cpt Murphy: don't worry I'm right there with you

From the first time we chatted, when you said you were a hacker, I knew I wanted to figure you out. I wanted to put my hand in your brain and feel what it was that made you so smart and interesting. You wrote webcomics about cockroaches after the apocalypse which read like something ancient and fundamental. A Book of the Dead from a tribal religion.

We had doubts about hacking, knowing we were stepping over the boundary of what our parents specifically instructed us not to do. We did not know how "big a deal" it was. We did not know how anyone would react. You had vague political reasons for hacking, your principled

heart in free information. I wasn't sure why I hacked at the time, but now I think it was because of you. When we were almost finished with the hack, I invited you over to my house.

You were smaller than I thought, wearing a pair of almost miniature faded blue jeans and a green T shirt reading "Class of '09."

The rain came through the door like a pack of wet dogs. You looked like a wet dog, fur scuffed, ears bent out of place. You bent off your boots.

"Want to start?" I said, as you shook yourself off and slid a laptop out of your bag.

"Let's do this thing," I said. We crouch in front of the laptop on my couch like kids in front of a board game.

"See how our password cracker is doing." We infected a string of computers with a virus. The virus didn't stop the users from conducting any normal activities, just reserved a little memory to testing password combinations. You set up the system, I knew only the basics, and when the familiar display surged up I felt a little surprised.

"Oh yeah. Really good," I said, though I wasn't sure how good. I was a newcomer to all this stuff, pulling back the curtain on a world you'd occupied for years.

"Awesome," you said. "Yes." You high fived me, your hand slippery with food grease and a little sweat, like all true genius' hands.

We switched the computer on and off each other's laps, typing code and watching our efforts scroll onto the screen.

"I think I can work this," you finally tell me. You took the computer off my chest and your bitten down nails flicked over the keys in complicated patterns. The computer's light lay on our laps like a plate. Once you were done, you handed the laptop back to me.

“We’re in.” We gained access to the account of the site’s admin, the coder. We sat on the couch as the source code scrolled out like rain.

I met with you that awkward summer after high school, about a month after I was rejected from my first and second and third choice colleges. The day after I received the letters in those thin evil envelopes, my dad let me skip a day of school. I cried while watching endless reruns of *The Simpsons*. I kept myself alive with almond milk and potato chips, and I wished I could stick a needle in my arm so nutrition could be intravenously delivered into my system, like magic. I didn’t know I was allergic to corn syrup yet, and my stomach ached all the time. I thought it was muscle cramps. Companies don’t want the public to be aware of people with corn syrup allergies because then they might have to stop producing cheap candy.

Fortunately I got into both my safeties, so now my plan was to spend a year at a safety and transfer afterwards.

“Want to watch a movie?” I asked, navigating to a free movie website. The sound of the TV mixed with the sound of the rain. I sat down on the couch and you grabbed a bottle of champagne from the cabinet, poured two glasses nearly to the top.

“Congrats,” you said. “To a successful hack.”

“Cheers!” I said, and our glasses met like the echo of rain on the metal roof. I feel like I should ask you a question about hacking, something about your stepdad, who taught you to hack. I put on “Star Trek: The Next Generation,” because we both love “Star Trek.”

I took a sip of champagne, not bittersweet like other alcohol, but airy and light like some kind of fancy French dessert. That was the second or third time I drank champagne, once in high

school at my friend's rooftop house party, when everyone lay on towels on the roof, and once at a new year's house party. The host was this funny, crooked haired boy who shot the cork across the yard, supposedly on purpose. At moments like that one, and this one, I felt like a person surrounded by significant items, like a guard in the Lourve or the Tate.

You're laughing hard, snorting into the empty room, and I laugh at your laugh, and at Wharf, whose deep throat voice and preschool syntax we both think is funny.

Later, I ask if you want to go for a drive. We pound into the night, puddles spraying like monster guts. We are both drunk, but you are drunk, especially. We put on different radio stations and end up cycling through the same arrangement of pop songs. "Do you like this song?" you ask.

"I don't think anyone likes or dislikes this song," I say, simultaneously careless and hyperaware of what I will say, as I always am while drunk. "Everyone just knows it, you know?" I gun the engine and warp though the street river. "Some songs no one likes or dislikes, everyone just knows. You know?"

"I like this song OK," you say, nose pressed to the window like a dog.

"Well, I guess some people like this song. But there are a lot of songs it seems like no one really likes. They just play all the time, because they're nice. They're not offensive." The car breaks the surface of the water like a fin and I feel very alive.

"Well, I like this song," you say.

"What a great hack," I say, *a great hack*.

"An awesome hack. Thanks for your help with it."

“Remember how green lines of 1s and 0s, like, streamed out of computer programmers in *The Matrix*?” I said.

“Yeah, that’s what happens if you get good enough at computer programming,” you laugh and crank open the window.

“Yeah, that’s what all the people at Google can do. Anyways, where do you want to go?” I ask.

“I have an idea,” you say. “The ihop. I can show you a something cool there. Then we can go eat some pancakes.”

You order two buttermilk pancakes with whipped cream and strawberries, and I order a Belgian waffle. I forget to ask for no syrup, since I am allergic to high fructose corn syrup. Once the order arrived, only about half of the waffle was untainted by syrup and therefore edible.

My best friend in elementary and middle school was named Dessa. Dessa and I visited the ihop almost every week; we agreed the ihop was a place for sharing secrets. When I was a kid, I wanted to be a horse trainer. Dessa wanted to be a marine biologist. I would pretend to ride a horse, and she would pretend to ride a whale. In tenth grade we went to a party and got drunk for the first time. It wasn’t scary, because we left the basement where dance music throbbed and watched late night Sesame Street on the living room couch. Seventh grade we both joined IM and used chat speak peppered with emoticons. We created our own abbreviations, signals only we knew, and I found something inexpressibly intriguing about code, about how all those zeroes and ones worked. I read an article about coding in my mom’s National Geographic, and snuck the magazine up to my room. In eighth grade I lurked on coding forums, almost in secret. That’s where I first saw you. In ninth grade I taught myself html and css, and I became kind of famous,

I would post a design and instantly get forum praise, I started doing website design for money at sixteen. Dessa and I stopped hanging out after that, I started talking about web design too much, and she couldn't relate. I felt myself running towards something richer and better.

We came out of the restaurant and stood in front of the car. We hung out in the stars, and look at the satellites, the full moon, notice how warm the pavement is. Outside of the ihop, there is a river. The river vacuums dirt and feathers and shards of glass off the banks. The river pulls at everything, tugs leaves out of the air. I felt the water sucking at my skin, a slight pressure at the back of my hands like the holes in hot tubs. Whenever I went to the town pool my friends would just lounge in the hot tub, the holes sucking at our backs, and agree about things.

“Want to see something cool?” you ask. You help me down the sloping mounds to the water. You strike a match and toss it out into the water. The water spits a flower of fire that wanes to a shivering sheen. “It's natural,” you say. “There are oil deposits, natural oil deposits, under the banks.” You laugh.

I laugh. “How do you find this stuff out? How do you know these things?” You toss in another match and for a second half the water flashes. “You're brilliant. At least if we get arrested, we'll go down together.” You look like a scrawny, quick water animal, a mink or an otter, with that scruffy hair and predatory eyes.

“Can you imagine me in prison? I would need you. People would be afraid of you, they would think you were a shaman or something. Your tricks to set the river on fire.” I am feeling like I want to be in a car blindfolded while you drive to where ever you want.

You laugh that dull, almost sarcastic laugh, “huh huh huh.”

“You can be my prison wife. I’ll pay for your protection in firewire cables. I’ll make them in arts and crafts.” The water gushed down like praise, or wine. I could patch together some paper hearts and make valentines for every kid in the class. Dessa and I slipped a fresh plucked flower inside each of our Ironman valentines. My second grade teacher said it was “very romantic.” I loved valentine’s day, the formulaic fairness, the candy overflowing, sour patch kids fizzing my tongue like champagne.

“If anyone tries to shank us, we’ll just threaten to expose their embarrassing pictures,” you said.

I cracked up, spilling my laughter all over the pavement, doubled over. You were watching with a little, prideful smile. “Yeah, we’ll expose those pictures from post prom,” I gasp.

Once I spilled my guts to a sympathetic witty history teacher. I just wanted to talk about my grade on the essay, but I ended up defining myself as a “computer nerd.” I chatted and qualified the time I spent and the people I met online, while he put on a smile to encourage me to talk as long as I wanted. It hurts to think about it, now, how I dumped my emotions onto his lap. But I think I’d be willing to give my whole self up to you. It would feel like slide into the oil-water and be slicked with natural rainbows.

“You think people would be afraid of me in prison?” In freshman year of high school I wrote poems. Junior year I found them and crunched them to the bottom of the recycling. I wish I had them back.

I feel like grabbing your hand, but instead I say, “We should do another hack.”

“Of course,” you say. “We make a good team.”

“We should hack into the FBI,” I say. “We should hack into the files of the government branch that deals with alien stuff.”

“I need to hack into the company where my uncle used to work, actually. I think there’s some kind of scandal going on there. My stepdad says he thinks they’re dumping illegally into the river.” Your stepdad taught you how to hack and think critically and undermine the people in charge. You said you’re not sure your stepdad would approve, technically, of your hacking, but you think he would approve morally.

“I’ll help you. They’ll never suspect the kids.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll get ‘em. We’ll sic that password cracker on ‘em. The law is way too busy to care about hackers. How many hackers do you see in jail?” I slip my hand in yours for a second. It feels like the pages of an old book. I let it go.

When I was in middle school, Dessa and I cultivated handwriting with decorative loops and curls. In sixth or seventh grade my dad once read over my shoulder, as I wrote out my math homework.

“You have such cutesy handwriting,” he exclaimed at the little stars dotting the i’s.

He glanced down, then back at the page. “It looks really pretty,” he said, “But I think number 38 is wrong. Better check that one over.”

Once my dad tried to limit my non-schoolwork-related computer time to one hour a day. He paced up behind me, wearing shorts and black socks that made no noise. “Come on, now, time to get off the computer,” he would say, and squint at the screen interestedly, and stare at me holding a smile, and I would leave. Except after a while I started to log back on later in the day and he never said anything.

Once, after he wearily announced that it was time to log off, I said, “This is my job, Dad.”

My dad laughed and said, “I think doing well in school is your biggest job.” My dad likes to ask about my classes, especially my math and science classes. “What are you studying these days?” he’d ask, at dinner, and I would let him know, and he looked pleased for a second before continuing to eat. I liked science class pretty well, but my dad loves science too much. It tooks everything over, threatened to spill the banks of his thick lips. My mom switched the subject to a new movie in theaters no one really cared about. I sat in my chair and counted the different colors of food on my plate, orange carrots, green kale, white rice, tan chicken. I think my dad will never really change, he’ll become an old man who still wants to talk about the same things. Dessa, too, maybe. She’ll become an old woman who still wants to talk about the same things. Maybe I’ll grow up to always talk about the same things, too, but hopefully I’ll be doing that with you.

After the Star Trek you ask if I want to see a video. You pull up a video of the hacker Andrew Aurenheimer, the guy who went to jail for hacking AT&T. I squint at the screen as Aurenheimer talks with one finger in his hair, eyes flying back and forth like ping pong balls. He’s talking, extremely fast and earnestly, about free information. The philosophy of hacking, to “Bring big business back into the public sphere, to remind companies they’re still vulnerable.” He’s wearing a creased T-shirt with the name of some business or college and he looks excited like a squirrel in the middle of the road.

“He was high when he made this speech,” you say, “But that’s the concept behind Aurenheimer’s persona – public shock. Crossing social boundaries, personal boundaries.” You

watch wild man Aurenheimer, shifting your eyes and your position in the chair. I imagine you are thinking that Aurenheimer belonged in the wilderness with Socrates and Thoreau, with people who only have a few frenzied, limited ideas.

“That’s just,” you say, “That’s one of his last speeches, before he went to jail. Aurenheimer focused too much on publicity, on the shock value of hacking. I don’t want to be Aurenheimer, but you have to admit he’s honest and makes some interesting points. He’s a honest, principled person.”

“Hacking is a puzzle,” you say. “How do you cross that line?” you say, “How do you cross that line without becoming a criminal or a martyr?” We sat in silence for a while. “I don’t want to be Aurenheimer,” you say, and walk to the fridge. You take out two ice pops and offer one to me, strawberry. No corn syrup in ice pops, just juice and cane sugar. I feel awkward about people’s instant pity once they learn I can’t eat candy. So I’m glad I don’t have to mention it. It makes me feel more human. I want to be famous. I once met a famous eleven year old, another member of Dragonquest who made detailed, perfect artwork. She was a tiny, delicate person, with frizzy hair that sprouted every way like a plant. She made me feel like there wasn’t much to being famous, mostly being accepting, knowing how to take complements.

Halfway home we got pulled over for running a red light, the last yellow fading as we reached the empty intersection.

“Sorry, officer. It won’t happen again.”

“I’m going to give you a warning. Next time there will be a license suspension. You’re very lucky a car wasn’t in that intersection.” You are twenty and drunk, I am nineteen and drunk,

but also driving, and as we walk back to the car you stagger slightly. The officer starts to walk away, pauses and doubles back, face pinched.

“Come back toward the road. Do not step back into the car.” The police officer asks you to walk in a straight line. You waver slightly. “You too, designated driver.” I stare at the ground and work on placing one foot in front of the other, like a cat. I raise my eyebrows at you, and you shrug.

In the end, the police officers decide to Breathalyze us and it’s all over; we go to the station together. As you walk to the police car, you clean underneath your nails. But that’s how it is. Rawr and Captain Murphy. Captain Murphy and Rawr. I felt sick, the officers’ uniforms clicked like machines. They described in clipped, sincere voices the damage done, the riskiness of my actions. I wanted to ask the police officers if there was something I could do to make it up, mow their lawns or look after their pets during vacations. But you were there, so I was not afraid. I saw you looking out the window of the police car, slumped and yawning like a bored dog. You don’t even try to explain yourself, though you know you could explain yourself, beautifully, eloquently. I see it in your eyes.

You call your disappointed parents, who arrive with money to pay for your fine, qualifications and threats. And then I called my dad, and he was a little angry. “I worry about you, and now I have a reason to be worried,” he said, voice staticy and splintery over the phone, “I won’t always be here to bail you out. You know? You’re getting yourself in danger.” I could almost imagine his big lips sucked around the phone like a fish’s mouth. When he got to the station, he gave me the same lecture. He paced around the station, frowning at me sideways, like he didn’t have any right to judge me anymore.