

Continue

Rob Garner

After packing up at my locker, I jumped on my bike and sped off for work. A few minutes later, I pulled into the parking lot of Player One, the local game and computer store in town. Player One was one of those independent stores that started out selling gimmick items like card, dice, and board games but had grown to accommodate computers, gaming consoles, arcade machines, and, of course, video games.

As I stepped inside, I couldn't help but smile. I had always been more relaxed around technology, which made me feel like I wasn't just at a store, but like I was visiting my grandparents' house. I waved to Mick, the owner, as I walked to the break room to put away my bike and drop off my backpack. Mick had lived up in North County his whole life and had inherited the store from his father. Mick had introduced computers and video games to the store's shelves, and he'd even chosen the name Player One to fit the sudden change. A likeable guy, Mick got along with all his customers. Working for him was a pleasure as well, since he'd give his employees discounts so we wouldn't go and buy from Walmart or the new GameStop they'd just built onto the strip mall down the street. Mick hated big chain box stores.

"Heya, Jacks," he called out as I walked out of the break room. "Can you take a look at the Galaga machine in the play area? Either I'm crazy or that fire button has been sticking again."

"Sure thing, Mick," I said. Walking over to the machine, I began my shift.

The clock struck seven o'clock, ending

my work for the day. As I was leaving, Mick called me over. "Found a package in my P.O. box today, Jacks. Did you have more parts mailed to me again?"

I sighed, knowing he was going to give me "The Talk" again.

"Look, Mick. You know why I have to mail things to your P.O. box. My dad hates that I got into all this 'computer stuff' as he puts it. He even took a package I'd been hiding and smashed the parts in front of me." I stood my ground as I waited for Mick to give me the package. Mick sighed in defeat as he handed the parts to me.

"Just be careful okay? If the old man heats up again, I gave you the back door key to the shop."

I nodded and took the heavy package from Mick's hands. Moving outside, I strapped it onto my bike with a series of bungee cords and started off toward home. I made sure not to take any of my usual shortcuts since those involved going off-road and I couldn't risk anything in this package falling out or being damaged.

As I pulled up to the house, I reached into my backpack and pulled out the garage door opener. I opened the door and wheeled my bike inside, setting it on its usual rack. I did a quick check of the house to make sure my dad was home. I peeked inside and saw him sitting in his office doing paperwork. That would keep him distracted long enough for me to get some of my own work done. With a smile, I closed the door to the garage and untied the bungee cords on my bike, releasing the package I'd gotten from Mick.

I set the package on the long nearby workbench. The garage had at one point been my dad's workshop. Ever since he'd lost nerve control in his hand, though, he rarely if ever went in there, so I began using it for my own projects.

I began unboxing the computer parts from the package, taking special care not to damage any of them. Next, I reached below the bench and pulled out a prototype laptop I'd been building from scratch for the last several months. Finding the right parts to build a working computer from the ground up would have been a small nightmare, but thanks to Mick's resources the search hadn't been terribly hard. Thankfully, my paychecks from Player One had been able to cover the cost. All it still needed was a battery and some casing. My last shipment contained a variety of computer batteries that had looked like they'd fit. Now it was just a matter of seeing which ones would attach and how long they'd last on a full charge. I eagerly got to work as the sun began to set behind the neighborhood houses.

One might wonder why I was so intent on building this computer. When I had just turned eight, my mom took me to Player One so she could get her laptop repaired. I assume her plan was to have me distracted by the board games and arcade machines so I'd stay out of the way while Mick worked. It must have surprised her when I sat attentive at the counter and watched Mick take the computer apart. The whole process of it all captured my interest. He'd even stop and point out what he was doing, explaining each computer part in full detail so I could follow along. The real thing that amazed me was when Mick put the computer back together. I still find it incredible how all those little pieces come together to create such powerful tools. Ever since that day, technology has held an almost magical fascination for me.

Of course, not everyone in my fam-

ily saw this as a good thing. My mom was excited that I had found my passion so quickly, and she would often help me in getting materials for projects like building a solar panel, a little robot, and even an RC car. My dad, on the other hand, hated all of it. He was one of those kids who played sports in high school and college and fully expected his son to follow in his footsteps. He liked to claim he could have gone professional had a rival pitcher not destroyed his knee with a 102 mile an hour fastball during his college days. He seemed to think he'd somehow failed and could find redemption only by making sure his son was a better athlete than he was. It didn't help that he'd lost two jobs because the companies he worked for had begun to automate their offices and his name had appeared on top of the layoff lists both times.

As I was making the finishing touches on a battery that seemed like it fit, I heard my dad call from inside. "Jackson! Are you messing around with that stupid computer crap again?"

I quickly moved the prototype back under the workbench and hid it behind the box of batteries. "No, Dad! Just doing homework while I have some natural light left!" I yelled back as I pulled my homework out of my backpack. I slid my calculus book out of my bag and began solving problems.

I was already well into my assignment when the door to the garage flew open and he stepped out to confirm what I said. His left leg limped a little from his college injury as he surveyed the whole workbench to make sure I wasn't trying to fool him.

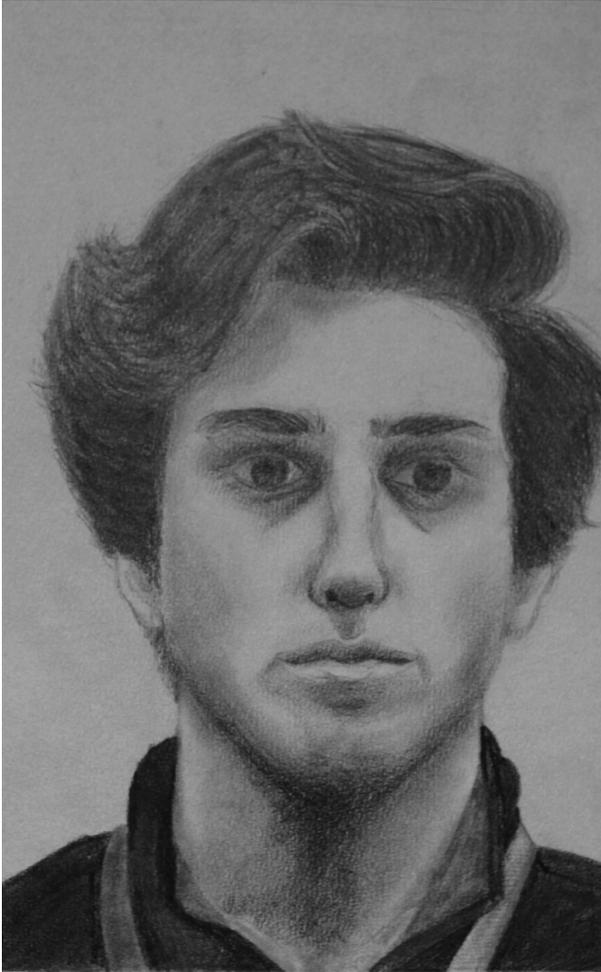
"Fine," he said as he walked over to me. "You don't seem to be lying this time. Make sure you go running before it gets too dark out." With that, he turned back and went inside.

I groaned as I resumed my homework, not wanting to risk getting caught again. My

computer was so close to being finished. I couldn't lose it all now.

I whizzed through the rest of Calculus without a problem. I never understood why other kids complained about that class so much. It came fairly easily to me. I was one of the only kids in the class who didn't use a calculator for a lifeline. As I worked through the next few subjects, I could hear tonight's Lansing Lugnuts game coming from the TV inside. I hoped they would lose tonight only because if they played poorly then I wouldn't get called inside to watch.

About twenty minutes later, I closed my Psychology textbook with a heavy sigh. Looking up, I saw the my photo of Mom on the garage wall. It had been almost three years since she'd died, and my dad had only



sketch | Jackson DuCharme

gotten worse about things with her gone. I knew he still cared about me on some level, but he tried to live through both me and my sister. She'd wised up to him and hadn't come home since moving off to college, leaving me to fight this battle without her or mom around.

Before the sun went down, I did go out for a run like I was told. I didn't mind going out to run every now and then, but there were other things I thought would have been a better use of my time. I enjoyed running solely because I was alone and could get lost inside my own thoughts. Any other time, and my dad would watch me like a hawk and comment on every small mistake in my form and execution. If he found any such mistakes, I had to keep repeating the drill over and over again until he deemed it correct.

As I moved through the neighborhood, my mind was focused on what I'd do once I got home. If that prototype I was making worked, I was hoping Mick would feature it in the store and my friends would ask about my building one for them. That would create a second flow of income outside of my paychecks from work, plus there were several scholarships for young inventors that I could take advantage of to get a good scholarship for college. I broke into a smile as the endorphins in my head got me on a runner's high. My head was overflowing with all the possibilities that could happen if I was able to make this project a success. I began to feel as if my computer could become better than anything Apple or Microsoft could create.

I was so wrapped up in plans for the future I hadn't thought about what was happening at home while I was gone. When I got back after that run, I was going to have to seriously rethink those plans.

I got back just as it was getting dark and went up to my bedroom to take a shower. As

I was pulling my hoodie off, I heard the garage door slam again downstairs and heavy footsteps pounding through the house. The door to my room flew open, and my dad was standing there holding my computer.

“I knew you were bullshitting me! This is the sixth time I’ve caught you screwing around with some techno gaming shit when you could have been putting your time into something productive! You are pissing away your talent!” he said as he took the computer in both of his hands and slammed it to the floor.

I barely had time to scream as it broke into multiple pieces right in front of me. I looked and saw the rage in my dad’s eyes and I knew that I had crossed some line in his mind. As he walked towards me, red in the face, I dashed past him and ran for the garage, not wanting to know what would happen if he caught up to me. Snagging my backpack off the table, I quickly mounted my bike and took off.

As I pedaled into the night, I could still hear him screaming from two blocks away. Without thinking, I made my way towards Player One, my only safe haven. Steering into the rear parking lot, I fished in my bag for the key and unlocked the door. The entire store was dark. I didn’t want to risk turning on the lights, so I pulled out my phone and, using the low light from the screen, locked the back door behind me and moved into the break room. Throwing my bike to the floor, I walked over to the couch and curled up. My mind was a mixed bag of fury directed at my father and how I’d let him find my project, and sorrow that something I had spent so many months working on, had been destroyed in less than a minute. In my anger, I shot my leg out to kick the armrest of the couch. As I did, my foot hit something that wasn’t there before. I turned my flashlight on again and found a set of PJs, a blanket, and a pillow sitting on the couch along with a note

from Mick.

“Hey Jacks,” it read, “if you’re reading this, then there’s a good chance you really got your dad pissed this time. My wife and I left these here for you just in case you needed a place to stay for the night. If I find you here in the morning, we can go to the police and explain what happened. See you then.”

I let out a sigh as I ran through Mick’s note. It was good to know that I had at least one person in my corner right now. I changed into the spare clothes and spread out the blanket. As I lay there on the couch, I looked over to see the Pac-Man machine Mick had installed in the break room for the employees to use. Pac-Man had just died on the demo screen and it was displaying the message “Continue?” in big blue letters. I couldn’t help but force a smile at that bitter irony. Whenever a game character died, they could always respawn and everything would be alright. If things were going to keep going the way they were for me, then I didn’t think continuing would be an option.

I could already tell that a lot of things were going to be different after tonight. I’d lost the project that had been my passion for nearly a year and that I’d been planning my future around, I’d run away from home to get away from a crazy father who was probably looking for me right now just so he could scream at me about how I was pissing away all my talent because I wanted to play computer games instead of going to the gym. As I felt myself drifting off to an exhausted sleep, I wondered if continuing was possible for me. I was so tired, I wasn’t even able to dream. All I saw was an unending black void.

I woke up later that night to the sound of the break room door opening. Not knowing who it was, I quickly hid further under the blankets. It wasn’t until the figure was standing over me that I heard his voice and sighed with relief.

“Jacks?” said Mick. “Is that you?”

“Yeah...” I said meekly as I poked my head out. “You were right. My dad found the computer and destroyed it. Now he’s furious, and I don’t think I can go home for awhile until he calms down.”

Mick sighed and sat down next to me on the couch. “Here, Jacks,” he said as he handed me a lunch bag. “Your dad called me up and demanded to know where you were. I told him I didn’t know, but I figured you’d obviously come here. After he left, I packed you some food and came here. My wife thinks I’m just here to pick up some late night deliveries.” I took the bag and greedily tore into the sandwiches, not realizing how hungry I had been until now.

“Thanks, Mick,” I said through a mouthful of baloney. “It’s good to know I’ve got at least one friend in this world...”

As I finished eating, Mick went back out to the main part of the store and began rummaging through some boxes. He came back with a new box of computer parts and set them on the couch next to me.

“Look... You can give up here, Jacks, or go back home and face your dad. You’ve made it clear to me that working with computers and technology is your passion, so go out there and do it. If your dad tries to stop you, you have to stand up to him.”

I looked up at him and shook my head. “I can’t though, Mick. Once he starts screaming like that, nothing can change his mind.”

At this, Mick sat down next to me and stared off at the Pac-Man machine which had just started playing a new demo round. “Jacks... You’ve heard the story about how I brought all this business to Player One by adding electronics to the shelves right?”

I nodded my head.

“Well, would you believe me if I told you that my dad refused to let me do it?”

“What?” I asked as I sat up. “Why would he have said no? You making that business

change was what saved the store from closing.” The very possibility that Player One could have been anything else besides an electronics store boggled my mind. After all, if it hadn’t, I wouldn’t be the person I was today. I sat there with a blank stare as I processed this new information.

Mick chuckled as he got up and opened the door to look out on the dimly lit store. “The place WAS in danger of closing, but my dad refused to make changes to it. He didn’t want to be remembered as a guy who changed who he was just so he could make an extra dollar or two. He was stubborn like that. We fought a long and hard battle with each other until he gave up and said I could take over the store and make the changes I thought would be for the best. I agreed and changed the ownership, the stock, even the name of the place. And you know what? Fifteen years later I’m still in business.”

I stood up and thought over what I’d just been told. I’d never met Mick’s dad, but I knew what Mick was trying to pull with that story. “If you’re trying to inspire me with that, that only works in John Hughes films,” I said flatly.

After a moment, we burst out laughing. Then Mick turned back to me, smiling. “Maybe, but take it to heart. I was able to accomplish my dream of keeping the store alive by standing up to my dad. You can make him see your side of things if you just sit him down and talk to him.”

I groaned as I sat on the couch. He was right, of course. I had never had the courage to talk back to him because he was, after all, my father, and, over the years, I’d gotten it drilled into me that I had to respect him. Talking back or retaliating was seen as a sign of disrespecting him and usually made the situation worse than it was.

“Look... spend the rest of the night here and go home in the morning. The old man might have calmed down by then. Sit him

down and talk to him face to face.” Mick picked up the box and put it in my lap. “And when all that’s done, you can rebuild your computer. I’m certain you can salvage some parts from what’s not broken and you already know how the pieces go together. Just repeat the process.” He chuckled a bit. “It’ll be like you’re the machine. Plus if you ever need any help, he opened the door and gestured to the Player One store, “You always know where you can find me”.

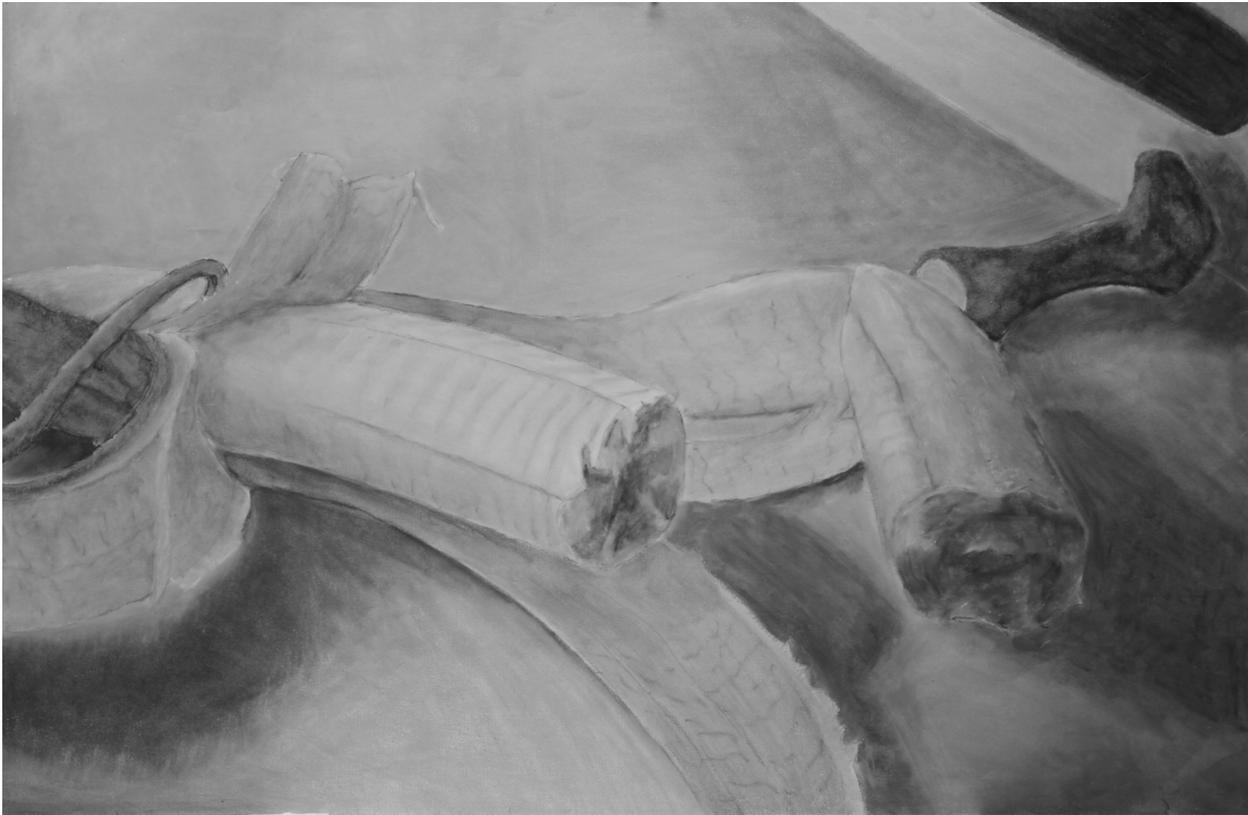
We both smiled as I took the box and set it next to my clothes on the floor. If there was one thing Mick was good at outside of computer repairs, he knew how to make you feel good about yourself. He was like a cool TV dad whose sage advice and life stories could help you find the inspiration to get through almost any rough situation.

Mick moved my bike over the couch, walked back to the door and flashed a grin at

me as he opened it. “You’re gonna be alright, Jacks, I can feel it.” With that, he closed the door and left the shop. I curled back up on the couch and pretty soon I was floating off to sleep again.

When I woke up the next morning, I got dressed and walked my bike outside, carrying the new box of parts. As I pedaled home, I mulled over last night’s conversation in my mind and the possibilities of how everything could go wrong. What if my dad wouldn’t listen again? What if he would agree with me then forget making the promise? The list kept going through my head as I pulled up the driveway and walked onto the porch. I hesitated only once as I lifted my hand to the door. Then I let my face show my determination and I walked inside.

I found him in the living room, staring silently at the TV from his easy chair. He



pastel | Jack Nikolai

didn't notice me walk in, so I had a few moments to analyze the situation before I did anything. He was wearing a ratty old t-shirt and pajama pants. A few empty bags of chips sat next to him on the floor, and I could see the grease on his fingers. The shadows under his eyes and the bloodshot color of them

“Hey Dad. I think we need to have a talk.”

Our talk began with me mostly asking him questions and not receiving any answers outside of some grunts of acknowledgement and the occasional shake of his head. As I tried to get through to him, his silence slowly

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photo | Peter Michalski

tipped me off to the fact that he'd been up all night. The old man usually kept himself well-groomed so people would always see the best side of him. He looked alone, almost as if he had this aura of defeat and had resigned himself to some unknown fate. He'd chosen to give up. Feeling pity for him, I walked over and sat on the couch next to him. Her looked up, and his eyes registered some surprise at seeing me there. I smiled gently and, taking his hand I looked him in the eyes and said,

began to give way until he eventually broke down into tears. It was the first time I think I ever saw him cry.

“Jackson, you're a great kid, and I'm proud of you for all that you've accomplished, but... why do you bury yourself in all those screens?!” He got up and started pacing the room, lost in his growing rant. “With that body of yours, you could be a champion. If you push yourself you could turn into a fucking beast on the field!”, I began to fidget

as my resolve wavered. I already knew where this would be going and part of me was ready to stop and let things happen. Sadly, that old fearful side of me was winning out as he went on.

“If I’d had the opportunities you’d had back when I was your age, I’d have been playing in the major leagues before I was done with college. Instead... what do YOU do?! You sit in the garage and play grab-ass with computers! You are wasting your life away son! I know what the problem is. I was too fucking soft on you when you were a kid. I should have been out there pushing you, but your Mother kept saying”—he switched to an annoying high-pitched voice he used when he impersonated someone he thought was whining—“oh, you’re being too rough on him! Back off! Let him play with his toys!”

To this day, I can’t explain what happened next. As soon as he began insulting

mom, something inside me just snapped. I suddenly stood up and noticed how much taller I was compared to my dad. He turned just in time to see me move forward and shove him into the nearby wall. He hit it with a hard thud and fell to the floor. When he looked up, I saw the rage in his eyes, but there was something else. Something like... fear.

“Never insult Mom,” I said quietly, my own rage burning inside me. Without waiting for a reply, I walked to my room and saw my prototype sitting there on the floor, still broken. With a sigh, I gently picked up the pieces and walked back to the garage. I set them down on the workbench and, after a quick analysis of what was broken, I pulled out my box of spare parts. Deep down, I knew things between my dad and I would never be the same, but that didn’t matter right now. All I could do was continue.

