

## On Walking Alone

My worn sneakers, usually so silent, clip-clop like horses' hooves on the cold tile floor. The hall is deserted but brightly lit, the salmon-splattered walls remind me of my place, and the droning buzz of the fluorescent lamps is all I hear. I walk alone, jacket in hand, backpack on back, solidarity in mind.

\*\*\*

I've been using GitHub (technically a "version control repository," un-technically an "online storage and collaborative space for programmers") for many of my coding projects. I've seen some of the coolest open-source projects begin on GitHub, from FontAwesome to Flatabulous to Facebook bots. Freelancer projects for the most part.

The problem is that I have no one to code with, and a collaboration-centered platform is quite colorless without, well, collaboration. I've joined a few organizations on GitHub that I've *felt* I've belonged to: the Barlow Programming Club, the Barlow Robotics Programming Team (which I've never officially joined outside of GitHub), and a group named "Lamfam," which I made preemptively for the scores of future coders I saw in my family's future. The "Lam fam[ily]." Unfortunately, it hasn't caught on. Every time I try to introduce my sisters to coding, they push it ever further away from themselves.

(This non-persuasiveness exists past programming. Bowling, Rubik's cubing, math practice — anything I try to impose on them is a struggle. But programming *should* be different. It's intriguing, rewarding, gives a job potential — I can't believe they *aren't* intrigued.)

So, I often sit alone at my 8-year old Acer Aspire laptop, its fan constantly blasting overheated air back at me until I sweat, the extruding battery pack putting the base of the computer at an angle. It can barely load Facebook because of the media content and Dictionary.com for the weight of its advertisements. But the 32-bit processor can handle the simple programs I run (so long as the algorithms I write are optimized). Sometimes I simply sit there for a good fraction of the day, typing furiously (in the productive sense) for the first hour and debugging furiously (in the angry sense) for the rest before I realize that my mistake can be avoided with a simpler program flow. Then I totally refactor the program, and then I discover another bug, and this infinite cycle of fury and revision occurs over and over and over...

I like to think that this redundancy and ill-planned process would be eliminated if I had a friend to help me. Someone there for me. The high school has only a few prospective programmers, but they don't share the same interests as me. Everything they write is about gaming and graphics. Not much practical and logical. I like logical.

A man from Texas once reached out to me to help him with his project. I had made a helpful edit to one of his answers on a programming Q&A site, StackOverflow, and after checking my profile he decided that I would be a good candidate to help him realize a business application he had planned out. Alas, my parents deemed him "sketchy" (because he had a supposedly "generic name" and he could be trying to

take advantage of me in some way) and told me not to work with him, and my connection with the one source of success was taken away.

\*\*\*

I haven't always been a programming fanatic. If not for a single book that my mom brought home that fateful day in June of 2013, the end of my sixth grade — the *HTML 4 For Dummies* reference from 1999 — I would likely have ended up a completely different, programming-less person today. Had I not decided to look into that book, outdated and technical and adult-oriented as it was, or had I received the book a year earlier and been turned away from programming for its apparent difficulty, or had my dad not set up that first webpage with me through a Notepad editor, I would never have entered this obsession.

Or I might have picked up programming from another programmer, out of its sheer awesomeness. The great fields of mathematics that I consider myself somewhat fluent in are very similar to the language of code, after all. But that is beside the point.

The point is that I chose to sit at a computer for hours a day, shut away in my upstairs room during the summer, learning the secrets of the coding world with every passing day. I chose this over my friendships, which crumbled over the years as my academic and intellectual spheres dominated. Although I did enter some teams in high school, they are without exception based on the the individual. I chose cross country and bowling and math team and the programming club, the calculated scores of all of which (except the latter) are some composite form of the individual members' performances.

There may be many possible hypotheses for this social divergence into my own secluded sector. Firstly, I am socially awkward. My most fundamental teachings emphasize the skill of modesty, and it has evolved into some form of self-deprecation in me. Secondly, I love math and the academic fields in general. Sure, plenty of people "like school" — but, to my knowledge, a near-majority of those only do so to the ends of a "good college," a "good job," and perhaps a "good life."

I suppose my cultural separation, my status of being an "ABC" ("American-Born Chinese") in a primarily Caucasian school sets me apart physically, and the cultural views of my family — those old-world values of hard work and humility — often fall into discord with more modern, American views.

But is culture really something that can take the blame? Sure, there are those awkward moments when my obviously un-American side takes ahold of me. The time when I spoke of "Yurope-ee-en" rather than "Your-o-pee-an" in my world geography class last year will never slip from my mind.

When I returned from school that day, I asked my parents to pronounce the word in question. "Yurope-ee-en." No, I told them. It's "Your-o-pee-an." "Yurope-ee-en?" No! Augh! "Like saying 'euro,' the currency, and then 'peeing' without the 'g.'" "Yurope-een." No, no, no! "What's the difference?"

What is the difference? I was laughed at for mispronouncing a word in class in a way that I had previously always thought was correct. One that my family had always thought was correct. But I had shame — my parents didn't. Granted, they were both plopped into the American education system in high school with little if any knowledge of English at all, and they learned through trial and error. Because, at the beginning, what could they do? Endure the shame or endure illiteracy in America?

The interesting thing is that I'm not afraid of it. At least, I tell myself to be fearless. But every time I get some extra attention for my ineptitude to relate to cultural allusions that all of my peers seem to understand ("Lookie here! Jon doesn't know what 'mom jeans' here!" "God! Jon doesn't know who Sinatra is!") I feel a pang of upset.

I know it's a bit silly. I know I chose a path of relative solidarity, one much less-exposed to mainstream American culture. I know that I chose to program computers and speed-solve Rubik's cubes instead of improving my social know-how. I used to applaud myself for taking time away from the unnecessary business of socializing to apply myself practically by coding useful programs. Yet I quiver from the after-effects and wonder ... was it all worth it?

\*\*\*

Perhaps it's better to consider the reverse. Say I fit the stereotype of the "perfect American teenager," someone you'd imagine as highly cultured and relatable. Not Chinese. Not awkward. Not willingly held hostage by math problems and logic-based programming puzzles.

It's just so easy to fit in. To be engulfed by a movement, to go with the flow.

A small company like YouTube wouldn't turn up the multi-billion dollar offer by a tech goliath like Google, fighting its way upstream as others cheat it of its intellectual property. Rather, it goes with the flow, morphing itself into the trend of Google-ization.

This story isn't unique amongst small technology startups, nor is it uncommon for ordinary people. Teenagers, pliable and arrogant at the same time, are the worst. Hormonal human teenagers are known to almost unconditionally follow the orders of a tight clique (an inexplicably extreme phenomenon known as "peer pressure") or a controlling significant other.

But I'm selfish and stubborn. And I've grown up outside the influence of strong social pressures.

What many people just seem to accept I question. Simply the necessity of having such a strict pronunciation of the word "European" is one thing. (It goes back to my mom's question, "What's the difference?" Does it really matter? Can the US not embrace diversity of intonation as well as diversity of race and gender?) The stereotypes of being a "nerd," "geek," or "tryhard" are other preconceptions that I have issues with. The third is particularly troubling — can't we toil our way to success without others criticizing our *hard work*? Where is the sense in that?

Although I can't tell the intentions of others for sure, I like to believe that these stereotypes are the remnants of elementary- and middle-school immaturity. After reading and watching too many episodes of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and thinking that it's okay to pick on the weak, it's not difficult to imagine that many youngsters will follow suit. The stereotypical unathletic, "four-eyed," computer-toting "geek" or "nerd" (the difference between which is a long and hard-fought battle that I will not get into detail about) seems to fit this role of bully-ee perfectly. However, the degree that this stereotype has infected the minds of so many children and pervaded American culture in general is disgusting, albeit harmless.

And over the course of high school, I've developed another particularly controversial position against the institution of prom. Yes, an institution. It's much more than an event in modern culture, but the epitome of the high school dream that I never found myself included in. It's not just that I want to evade prom (although this is certainly a part of it, due to my social shortcomings), but I have a stinging gut feeling against it. I believe that school is for the education of its students. Take those needless, expensive, romantic adventures out as you would rip out a leech and the benefits of its absence on school will be felt almost immediately. Better yet, high school dates in private, away from teacher supervisors, and quite possibly for *free*, will become the norm — a likely cheaper alternative that doesn't waste fundraising efforts toward a short-term goal and takes away the "show-off-your-date" superficiality that prom exemplifies.

Otherwise, (as American society inevitably has proceeded,) you get prom. That sticky money drain that I've begun to think of as a night of broken piggy banks and hearts.

Sometimes it's just interesting to take an opposing stance to all of society. As if you can be right and everyone else is wrong, to be a righteous devil's advocate. (Of course, take this with a pinch of salt, because certain expressions of this — driving the wrong side on a highway, for example — is known to cause injury.)

I mean, it's not an uncommon theme in allegorical novels. George Orwell's renowned book *1984* recalls the terror of the Red Scare, in which Julia and Winston are the only ones to realize the horrors of the totalitarian government they live within. Similarly, Montag and Clarisse are the only ones in the modern city of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* to notice the positive joy in books in a positively un-joyous society.

Of course, it's simple to tell that they're the righteous ones, what with them filling the roles of protagonist and the reader as the undeniably removed spectator to their absurd, dystopian worlds. But sometimes it's not as clear-cut as it is in these two novels. Returning to the Orwellian universe, the majority of *Animal Farm* seems quite ordinary. Sure, the farm animals might be able to talk and they fight occasionally, but that's nothing out of the ordinary. The pigs take charge. They make some mistakes. But only when the image of the pigs playing cards raucously with the humans at the conclusion of the novel infiltrates the readers' minds, it's too late. It's all over; the previous farm order of peace and comfort, albeit subjected to human rule, is replaced by a group of conspiring, power-hungry pig leadership. Just because nothing had seemed out of the ordinary. No one found enough distance from the group to discover the plot before it went too far.

Not to say that we are in a time of international or existential crisis, bordering on all-out nuclear war as Orwell's America had been in the Cold War of the mid-twentieth century. The Bay of Pigs incident was not yesterday; the Cuban Missile Crisis will not happen tomorrow; but today — or *any* day, in fact — can be the day to realize the curiosities in our world, whether helpful or disastrous.

\*\*\*

In a metacognitive burst the other day, I announced to my younger sister that I've grown up to be "sardonic, satirical, sarcastic, and cynical." I considered adding "sometimes sadistic" in there (who can always hold back his or her laughter watching the inevitably injury-prone "funny fail" videos on Facebook?) to keep the alliteration going but refrained from doing so.

I understand why I walk alone so often in the hallways, and why I code by myself so often. I chose to play Devil's advocate — a "rebel," if you will. It's interesting to consider an alternative universe in which our society is more STEM-inclined than our humanities-biased curriculum at my high school. Then I might be that rebellious author, writing dramas and socializing with imaginary friends, while my "friends" would be stuck in their homes, coding together on GitHub without me. One thing won't change, however. I'll still walk alone in those quiet hallways, salmon-splattered walls and whispering fluorescent light-tubes mocking me all the while.

It's fun to gamble against societal expectations, even if I know I'll often lose. I'm a bit lonely but I'm free. I try to be a peculiar case with my eyes peeled, my mind sardonic, satirical, sarcastic, cynical, sometimes a little sadistic. I'm watching the world as it isn't for many. Are you?