

Hector the Hacker

a lesson in real life

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Hector wasn't worried about having to speak Spanish all the time. He spoke Spanish all the time in his house. He had spoken Spanish all his life.

He wasn't worried about being away from home. He had already visited the other side of the family for weeks at a time. These kind of visits were kind of normal within his family.

He wasn't worried about being out of the country. He had visited the other side of the family in their country several times, starting when he was much younger, and he was quite comfortable not being in the United States.

And he definitely wasn't worried about being with these people, a side of the family he had never visited at *their* home, but people—his grandparents, an aunt, and a couple of cousins almost his age—who had been to his house more than once. He liked them a lot.

He even knew that he was going to have his own room.

His only worry was staying connected. As with every other kid he knew, the net was life. Messaging, social networking, video streaming, music downloading, and games; the net was life. (But this precise thought had never occurred to Hector because if the net has been life all your life... it would be like asking people if they are conscious of needing air.)

Hector may not have noticed how electronic his life was, but he did know about places where you couldn't get a connection. This had happened to him once or twice; and he knew it was terrible. The one time he remembered best... it was a car trip through some mountains and there was no signal for "like" a half-an-hour. It was terrible.

So, anyway, Hector knew that he needed to know whether he could get a connection in his grandparents' town; and they assured him that he could. They themselves didn't have any sort of computer—even their TV didn't really work because they were sort of isolated and they didn't have

cable—but they knew that there was some sort of antenna in the town. Other people were (always) on the internet.

Since Hector could bring his tablet, he would go.

He was met at the airport. (That was a relief.) He saw that everyone was really happy to see him. During the long ride to his family’s home in the country, he found that he understood them fine. And he found their house to be humble, but clean and spacious; and the town was, too. And, though it had to be pointed out to him, Hector saw that the surrounding countryside was nice to look at.

But the best thing about the first few hours of his visit took place less than a minute after arriving at the house. Hector powered up his tablet, and found almost immediately that he could get a signal. (That was really a relief!) Immediately he did what he always did as soon as he got on: He checked on his “pages”; and he had messages; and he was happy; and he just had to share his joy with his family (not noticing that none of this made much sense to them); and he held up his tablet in triumph....

And then he dropped it.

It hit the ground and the sound was a “crack.”

Hector could not have picked it up faster—it was as though you can undo the drop if you pick it up fast enough. It was no use. The tablet did not look broken but it would not turn back on, not the first time Hector tried, not the tenth. It was gone.

“What do we do?” he said, “what do we do?”

His family understood that something had gone wrong—they understood that things could break and not look broken—but what could they do?

“Is there a place to fix these things?” No, there was not.

“Is there a place to buy a new one?” No, there was not, not in that town, not anywhere less than a day’s drive away. And even if it were sensible to make such a trip, there was no money to buy new a new tablet.

The family didn't have it. Hector didn't have it. And even if he did, he didn't have the codes and accounts that he needed in order to get connected.

“We have to do something!” he said.

But what was there to do?

Hector paced around for a while. He thought of what they could do. In some cases, he himself knew that this or that could not be done. In other cases, he asked and was not really surprised that this or that was not possible.

Certainly he thought of calling home—but he couldn't think of how this would help, not for many days. Many days!

He kept it to himself but he thought of going home—but as upset as he was he knew this was impractical and it would hurt the feelings of everyone around him.

Hector started to feel nervous. He wasn't really able to say why. This was a totally new situation. He had never been alone before, without other people at his fingertips. Certainly he did not feel threatened by anything—his family was all around him; they were great; and they were smiling—but still he felt confused and overwhelmed by the prospect of having to do things or even just sit and talk without “back-up.”

The evening was not good. Hector understood that he could not continue to talk about needing to get connected—he knew that if he did that he was going to look crazy—and so his family presumed the trouble had passed, and they proceeded to visit with him, in their living room, at the table, and afterwards. He had little to say and didn't notice this because he rarely had much to say most times when he was present for live conversations. Certainly, the family tried to get him to talk; they asked him questions; and talked to him about some of their plans for his visit. But Hector had mostly one-word answers to their questions; and he didn't have any questions of his own. Rather than question him about this—though it seemed odd—his family went on talking about other things. When he wasn't preoccupied with his own awful feelings, Hector did notice that there was a lot more talking than he was used to, and it seemed like something his

family was very used to. He added almost nothing, endured the evening, and somehow, maybe just tiredness, got the blessed relief of sleep.

His predicament reappeared moments after he woke up. Now he noticed that he felt a new terror for the number of days now before him. How many days before he could go home? He counted and recounted them several times. He started to feel sick.

Breakfast helped. The food was not bad.

Soon thereafter, however, he started to look around, and to feel that he was trapped. The house looked poorer than when he first got there. His family was still smiling but now this made him mad. (He did not know why.)

His cousin Rafael wanted to take him for a tour of the town. Of course, there was nothing else to do but go. Rafael pointed out any number of things, talked a lot, but Hector heard little and saw less.

He was back in his room before lunch.

Now a new feeling crept in—boredom. Hector recognized this one; it was familiar. In the past, the solution, the partial solution, was some device that had a screen. Now there was none. (And it never occurred to Hector, not for a moment, that it might be good to take a look at one of the books on the shelf in the room he now occupied.)

Within the boredom came a another terrible feeling. There is no one word to describe it. It is a feeling of being nobody because everyone else is going on with their lives, doing something, and they are NOT doing it with you. People are having all these cool experiences without you. (It does not occur to you that they hardly ever had any cool experiences when they were *with* you.) Your friends are making new friends; or, they are becoming better friends with each other than they ever were with you. (And some people might even be mad because they think that you are not bothering to send them messages to look at.) And there was nothing to do about it. By the time you get back, things will be different and it will be too late.

That second night was endless without TV. (They had a TV but they didn't put it on, and there was probably nothing on that you wanted to see anyway.) Then came blessed sleep.

The third day involved work. The work of the family had something to do with delivering fruit. A shipment had come in. There were boxes to be carried. Hector's grandfather tried to make him feel that he was actually "needed." Of course, Hector helped. What else did he have to do? Actually doing something a helpful distraction—the day went faster than yesterday—but it was nothing to look forward to doing tomorrow. Hector endured another sickly nervous night. For the first time in his life Hector thought he understood the appeal of drugs.

The next day there were more deliveries.

The next night there was another visitor. It was family friend from far away. His name was Emmanuel; he was older; and he was best remembered for his role in the war.

During the war, the civil war and the military occupation, Emmanuel had been a leading man of that town. It fell to him to represent the petitions of people and to speak up for what he called the "rights" of the many who felt abused. The conversation, at which Hector was present by default, evolved into a retelling of many stories that had not been heard for quite some time.

Emmanuel had to convince the authorities to let a man dig his well—which he did by bringing buckets to their station every day because they alone had water to spare.

Emmanuel had to stand in front of a squad who wanted to punish someone else, screaming that if they start killing the people, the rest of the people had nothing to lose. (This was actually a threat.)

Emmanuel had to... something about saving a puppy.

Hector paid little attention to the first several stories. He understood the words but he was not much used to listening and imagining... not ever.

But the stories continued; and, mostly because he had nothing else to do, Hector started giving them more attention.

In truth, there were like nothing he had ever listened to before, much less experienced.

Just then the stories turned to the survival of the Church. It took a while for Hector to figure out that by “the Church” no one was talking about the building. The building was closed. But people still had faith; and they needed to support each other in their faith.

Emmanuel told some stories about the excuses he used so that the authorities would not know that the people were gathered for preaching and prayer. One time, when the theme of the evening was forgiveness, he told the authorities that the people were gathered together because someone was angry.

Emmanuel talked about the special unity that was forged between the people because they had to risk something to support in each other in faith, and because they had to do so with secret gestures and words that became a sacred code.

Hector didn't see it coming but suddenly he asked a question. He surprised himself by speaking up but he was NOT aware that this was the first question-out-of-interest he had asked in his life.

He continued to participate in the conversation until it ended late into the night. He found himself thinking, imagining, drawing conclusions as he never had before. Somehow he felt more alive, even more alive than he remembered feeling on a ride at a theme park. He went to bed with ideas in his head, ideas about “things,” not the plight of himself.

The next morning he woke up feeling different. At breakfast he wanted to talk more about what he had heard, and what things were like during the war. He stayed at the table (not tablet) for quite a long time because, for now, the deliveries were done and his grandfather, his cousins, and he, did not need to get an early start.

Instead, in fact, his cousin Rafael suggested that they climb “the mountain.” That's what they called it, “the mountain.” It wasn't really a

mountain, but it was bigger than anything else Hector had ever climbed (actually, Hector had never climbed anything) and so a climb of the mountain seemed like a big deal. They would leave now, bring water, and be gone most of the day.

Hector felt funny feeling excited. (What was “excited”?) His cousin and he took off and, right outside the door, things were already different. The town looked different. Hector didn’t know it but, in terms of paying attention, he was seeing it for the first time. He noticed that it was quite different from his neighborhood, but it was hard for him to say how. Now he was interested in that town, life in that town; and he asked a couple of questions not realizing that he was asking about things he had already been told.

From the bottom of the mountain they could see the top, and it looked a lot farther to the top than Hector could imagine himself climbing. He was told there was time, and that he would make it; and so he set out on what was consciously the first adventure of his life. Mostly it was walking; within minutes it was work; and sometimes Hector had to use his hands. This made it a real “climb.” After an hour, or was it two, he began to have real doubts that he would make it, but he kept these thoughts to himself because his cousin seemed happy. Eventually, they got high enough to look back and see much; and this was inspiring. So Hector kept going. Finally, he could see that they were getting near to the top and he got really excited, more excited than he was tired. When they got to the top—it was almost a surprise—he wanted to yell, or cry, or both, but instead he said “yes!” in English.

The view from the top was great. Perhaps it wasn’t the most spectacular view in the whole world—Hector remembering seeing a program that was supposed to be about the most spectacular view in the world—but he was seeing this one with his own eyes. He was really there, really “out there,” and not just him looking at a screen that he could turn off and bring himself back to his home, his room, and his regular life. It was something Hector saw through his own hard work. The sheer effort of getting there was somehow symbolized in the view.

Hector wanted to talk about the climb for a while. Then he wanted to be quiet and just look. Now he felt he was seeing THE WORLD for the first time. It was captivating and produced in him all kinds of feelings he could not put into words.

But, at least for a moment, he wanted to put into words the fact that he had climbed “the mountain.” For the first time in many hours, he reached for the tablet that wasn’t there. There was a moment of frustration, for sure. But then the wind blew; and the world got his attention again; and he realized that he could “message” about this later. For now, it was better to take it in. After all, no text could express what he felt; no digital photo could show the fullness of what he was seeing. Take it in, he told himself. Remember. Remember for the rest of your life.

To Hector, no victory dinner had ever tasted so good. Of course, he wanted to talk about the battle, and the sights he had seen, and what it feels like to stand on the top of a mountain.

When the conversation at the table turned to other things, Hector turned with them. Now he was hearing more; his mind was working more; and he had questions, and even some comments based on life in America.

He went to bed both tired and happy.

The next day there was work in the house, big work. The family had long planned to add on to the house; they had enough property; and this was something they could do themselves. There was digging involved; and then blocks would be laid down; and then wood would appear. Hector was not so good with saws and hammers, but he had hands, and he could use a shovel and carry blocks. He worked hard; and he asked some questions, learned to do new things, and watched with pride as a room took shape. This gave him more to talk about at supper; and it helped him to again go to bed happy and tired. This went on for days.

As the visit continued there were other happy events. There were other jobs that taught Hector something and made him feel good for helping. There were other adventures—including learning how to swim! There were lots of conversations in which he learned that his family knew a lot more about the world than he did, even though he was supposed to be better educated. And, even though they would not have nearly the same opportunity to travel that he did, they were eager to visit many places, to have many diverse experiences, and to see snow. These conversations were the material of the average evening.

Now, at night, he didn't always go right to sleep. Sometimes he stayed awake thinking. He thought about home, of course, but not in the sense that he was desperate to get back. Rather, he thought about some things that he would enjoy doing, and seeing, and eating, and, most of all, talking about, once he got home. He started to think about some things that, maybe, he would enjoy learning about or learning to do, and some of the places he now wanted to go.

One afternoon, he picked up a book. He had seen it before. It had been on the shelf in his room from the first day he arrived. There was a somewhat interesting picture on the cover and—now—the title was interesting, too. The book was called *MAD: La Historia de un tour*. MAD, Hector found out, was Latin for “Museum for God,” and this, supposedly, was the story of a museum from the future. Hector didn't easily read Spanish but he started, and he stuck with it, and he found out that he kind of liked reading. It made him peaceful to hold a book; and he found out that with a book a person does not feel a rush to read. Taking his time, Hector started to make his way through the museum. It was interesting to find that he was being taken on a tour from his birth in darkness toward the light of seeing God. He read and tried to understand the many explanations that were offered him, and he started to feel he was “getting it” even as he also began to formulate some questions. Even apart from that book, Hector started to think about life. He started to look at things carefully, in quiet. He started to experience himself; and that was really something. What does it all mean? It has to mean something!

Hector had already struggled with MAD for three days when his cousin showed up with a version in English. “It was originally written in English,” Rafael explained.

“Where did you get this?” asked Hector, surprised.

“I downloaded it,” said Rafael, “with my friend's computer, who lives up the road.”

Now there was a silence. It had not occurred to Hector that he could use other people's computers to get to the net. He started to say as much, and almost started moving as if to say, “let's go.” But then he stopped. Instead, he said, “thank you for this book,” and, “maybe, sometime, your friend would let me check my messages.”

“Sure.”

Hector did check his messages, and he sent some, the very next day. But he did not ask to use anyone’s computer again until the day before he went home.

When he got home life was different. Now, like never before, Hector talked, and listened. He kept reading, and finished the tour of that museum and felt he learned a lot, and he even did something about his many questions. He continued reading, and thinking, and talking; and he even developed some interests and dreams. He began to presume to do things himself, because he wanted to, whether or not anyone else wanted to, and quite apart from the control of adults.

And, without making it a “rule” for himself, he hardly ever looked at his new tablet more than once a day.

Dear reader,

If perhaps you might like to visit *MAD: a museum from the future*, just go to www.thefaithkkit.org/panorama.