

FIRST STEP

MOTTO: "Love is a grave mental disorder"
RĂZVAN IOACHIM

Dedicated to Alina, without whom this story wouldn't exist

It was a hot sunny day in late August when I came back to my home in the small town of Easley, South Carolina. The drive from Columbia had been tiring but I was happy to be back. My hometown hadn't changed a bit since my departure. The streets were clean and traffic-less despite the fact that it was Sunday afternoon. I made a right on Michigan Avenue and parked at Jane's Café. I got out of the car, took a long breath of that fine mountain air and stretched my limbs. The three-hour drive from Columbia took its toll. I enjoyed driving but I was really tired. I slowly walked to the café door and entered the place. It was a rather old café shop but it was ok, it always reminded me of the time when I was in high school and I'd skip class with my colleagues to go there. Now the place looked deserted. The reason why I stopped here was that I was hoping to run into some old friends, but it seemed that I wasn't lucky this time. I left disappointed that I couldn't recognize anyone but I thought that I'd call my friends as soon as I got home.

Getting back into the car, I began thinking of how happy my sister would be seeing me back home. I lived in a 4-storey block in the old part of the town and I shared the apartment with my older sister. The fact was that she was actually sharing the apartment with me because I spent most of my time at the University of South Carolina in Columbia. Being a student is a full time job.

I hadn't seen my sister for almost a year. My work at South Carolina U took up most of my time. I was a student in computer science working to get a scholarship and hoping to get to MIT by the end of the year. Work was hard, but I liked it. I was now home on a so-called 'holiday', but I knew I would end up working all day long.

I was now driving through the old part of the town, built after the war, in the 1950's. The cramped blocks of flats reminded more of a prison than of a town. The blocks had been constructed to house miners back in the 50's when the Government thought it had discovered gold in the nearby mountains. The problem was that the government was wrong, but it

admitted this too late, so the small town of Easley “won” a whole neighborhood of cheap blocks.

I now entered Quincy Street. I could clearly see the block I lived in. Nothing seemed to have changed. The block kept its gloomy appearance despite the sunny environment outside. I parked the car on the narrow sidewalk under the shade of a chestnut tree. I got out of the car, took my luggage, my laptop, and the giant bag with dirty clothes from the car. I went toward the block, gazing one last time outside. From there, one could see the beautiful white ridge of snow on the Sassafras Mountain lit up by the sun’s glow.

I went inside the block. A wave of darkness and moist, hot air, suddenly hit me. I lived on the ground floor, in the first apartment actually, but I had to struggle to get through a dark corridor until I reached the door. The huge wooden door stood now before me. Above the peephole there was a name scribbled on a thin metal plate. It said “**Steven Johnson**”. My name. I knocked on the door carefully listening to see if I could detect any movement. I had lost my set of house keys 4 months ago and I was hoping (begging) for my sister to be home.

Finally I was able to hear some sort of movement behind the door and I said “Hi sis! It’s me!”. The door opened quickly and my wonderful sister welcomed me in.

“I can’t believe you’re here! Don’t just stand there, give me a hug!” she said with a surprised smile.

“Oh, I missed you so! How are you?”

“I’m great now. I wasn’t expecting you. Did you travel well?”

“Yeah. I’m just tired.”

“Sure you are. I’ll fix you something to eat and you can rest then.” Ella added.

My sister Ella was 24. She was well-built and medium height. More than that, she was my sister and I loved her. Our parents were still alive, but they had decided to make a cross-country tour in their trailer. They had been on the road for almost two years. It was something about “rediscovering themselves” or something similar. They usually called once a week and told us where they were, what they did and things like that. Our relationship with the parents was an open one. Basically, we could do whatever we wanted (as long as it was legal!), but we were both trustworthy.

“Hey, Ella” I said, “where is Ted?”. Ted was Ella’s boyfriend. He

was a 26 year-old engineer employed by the government. I liked him a lot. My sister could really pick her boyfriends.

“He left yesterday to the site at Great Smokey” she replied.

“How long is he going to stay there? I meant to talk to him. I found something on the Internet that might interest him.” I said.

“I’m not sure... He said he was going there to check things out. He should be back in a few days.” Ella responded. “Come now. I’ve fixed some food for you.”

“Great! I’m starved!” I eagerly said.

In the kitchen, there was a large plate with French fries. I sat down, grabbed a fork and started munching on the chips. The crunchy fries were just great. I finished the plate soon and I began feeling better already.

“Well, aren’t you going to tell me what you’ve been up to all this time?” Ella asked.

“Sure. I managed to get away from Columbia for a month or so. It’s what they call ‘a summer break’ only shorter. A lot shorter!” I responded.

“Well, at least now you’re on holiday! You can do whatever you want” Ella said joyfully.

“Yeah, sure I can! Do you think my teachers would allow ‘such a remarkable student’ (as they said) to spend his ‘infinite’ holiday doing nothing? Nooo!” I ironically replied. “So they thought I’d be better off completing my project by the beginning of the new scholastic year”.

“Oh, does this mean what I think it means?” Ella said with sadness.

“Yup! Unfortunately I’ll spend most of my holiday working my butt off! I came up with this brilliant idea for a computer program and now I have to complete it.” I said.

“What kind of program” my sister asked. She was not a ‘computer specialist’ (like me ☺) but she knew enough to understand my work.

“I’m working on an AI program.” I said briefly.

“What’s an ‘AI’?” she asked.

“A... ‘AI’ stands for ‘Artificial Intelligence’. I’m working on a program that mimics human thought. And apparently it’s harder than I anticipated.” I explained.

“Hmm, I’m impressed! But how can you teach a computer to think? Like a human, I mean” she inquired.

“It’s extremely hard to explain. Basically I ‘taught’ the program common words, separating them in nouns, verbs, adjectives and all, then I taught him how to build sentences using those words and how to

understand what you type in based on certain keywords. Unfortunately the response generated by the program is random and most times has no sense, but I'm working on it. I hope I have enough time to finish it and present it to the board at South Carolina U".

"Does your program have anything resembling ... I don't know... self awareness?" Ella asked.

"No. It's still a computer program. It only generates responses (sometimes clever responses), but I'm setting him to have an inquisitive mind." I replied.

"Him? Why do you refer to it as 'him'?"

"I got really attached to him. I consider him as a real person, not as a program. If you didn't know, you'd think that you were talking to a 12 year-old, slightly stupid." I said smiling. "I forgot to mention. His name is 'Billy'. Come on... would you like to chat with him? He can remember different persons and he learns all the time (thus he becomes smarter!)."

"Is it complete?... I mean 'him'. Is he complete?" she asked.

"Well, he's working if that's what you're asking!" I replied.

I went into my room and grabbed my laptop from the bed. I went back into the kitchen, started the computer and loaded the program. Billy was a simple program, but it could become addictive for people who did nothing but chat all day on the Internet. My sister fitted the profile. She wasn't on the net all day, but when she got the chance, she liked to "paint the 'virtual' town red" as they say. So I knew I'd find a supporter in her.

The program started and the chat began:

BILLY> Hello, I'm Billy! What's your name?

> Ella

BILLY> Good afternoon, Ella!!

BILLY> Let's talk about whatever is on your mind...

ELLA> How are you, Billy?

BILLY> Don't get me started talking about myself! :)

"What's that? That sign?" Ella asked

"It's a symbol used in chat rooms... It means a smiling face. Look at it in a 90⁰ angle and you'll see!" I replied

"Aha... Now it makes sense" she said.

ELLA> Why not?

BILLY> I'm not sure... let's discuss it.

"Ask him something about me" I said.

ELLA> What can you tell me about Steven?

BILLY> Steven is a fun guy and No I really am 21 and my brother and a "him" And I am not going to send him flowers

“Never mind that...” I said smiling

ELLA> WHAT?

BILLY> Not too sure about that one...

ELLA> Are you sure you are functioning correctly?

BILLY> Not as far as I know!

ELLA> I thought so!

BILLY> That's odd...

ELLA> So, Billy, do you know me?

BILLY> No, I don't.

ELLA> Well, do you know anyone except Steven?

BILLY> Steven annoys me...

ELLA> I got that right!

BILLY> You sure like to talk about yourself, Ella!

ELLA> No I don't!

BILLY> Think positively!!

ELLA> Why? Does it work?

BILLY> I think that's a question you should be asking yourself...

ELLA> :) Very funny... Reverse psychology!

BILLY> Are you my friend?

ELLA> Yes, I could become your friend.

BILLY> Well la-dee-da!

ELLA> Do you have other friends?

BILLY> I think the real question is, do you?

ELLA> Yes, I have other friends.

BILLY> Sweet deal!

ELLA> How about a girlfriend?

BILLY> Tell me about a girlfriend.

“Yeah... he wants to know more about a subject. Explain what a girlfriend is” I said.

ELLA> A girlfriend is a girl that likes to hang out with you.

BILLY> I think I used to have a girl.

ELLA> What happened? Did you break up?

BILLY> I wish I knew!

ELLA> Never heard from her, did you? You poor thing!

BILLY> Steven is my best friend!

ELLA> As I heard it, Steven is your creator!

BILLY> When I think of the word "your", I think of Steven.

ELLA> Funny, funny!

BILLY> I surely don't, but I'll tell you anyway.

ELLA> Tell me what?

BILLY> Not too sure about that one...

ELLA> I think you need a "tune up"!

BILLY> Tell me about a "tune up".

ELLA> It means that you need to be repaired!

BILLY> Steven annoys me...

ELLA> What did he do this time?

BILLY> Let's see... it is 6:13 PM

“I taught him to tell the time when you ask him. But it seems he got

confused.” I explained

ELLA> No, no... What did Steven do?

BILLY> Have you talked to Steven lately?

ELLA> Yes, he's right here!

BILLY> Yes, he is right.

ELLA> On what?

BILLY> Not too sure about that one...

ELLA> But is he always right?

BILLY> When I think of the word "always", I think of him.

ELLA> Ok... I won't bug you about it...

BILLY> Really?

ELLA> Really!

BILLY> You got that wrong!

ELLA> Why?

BILLY> I wish I knew!

ELLA> I wish you knew!

BILLY> That's odd...

ELLA> Not quite...

BILLY> No, I wasn't

ELLA> Weren't what?

BILLY> I'm not sure... let's discuss it.

ELLA> I think not...

BILLY> You sure like to talk about yourself, Ella!

ELLA> Don't I?

BILLY> I'm sure of that...

ELLA> I'm glad you're sure of something!

BILLY> Maybe you're really sure of something...

ELLA> Never mind.

BILLY> I know, I know, I don't respect the convention... sue me!

ELLA> I think I will. Thanks for the idea.

BILLY> Tell me about an idea.

ELLA> An idea is a thought you tell someone.

BILLY> Tell me about a thought.

ELLA> It's too hard to explain.

BILLY> How would it feel if they knew that you thought they are hard?

ELLA> I don't think thoughts can "know that I thought they are hard"

BILLY> Yes, they are hard.

“Well, let's see how good of a programmer you are! Does he know anything about love?” Ella asked me.

“Ask and you shall see!” I replied smiling.

ELLA> Billy, what do you know about love?

BILLY> How do you know if you're in love?

ELLA> I don't know. You tell me!

BILLY> You sure like to talk about yourself, Ella!

ELLA> Well, how do you know if you're in love?

BILLY> How do you know if you're in love?

ELLA> I just asked you that!

BILLY> You sure like to talk about yourself, Ella!

“As you can see, Billy can avoid tough questions” I laughed.

ELLA> You're beginning to annoy me, Billy!

BILLY> Does it disturb you that I'm beginning to annoy you?

ELLA> Yes, it does.

BILLY> Great!!

ELLA> Bye, Billy!

BILLY> Talk to you later, Ella!!

Turning off the program, Ella said:

“Come on, is this really your project to apply for scholarships?”

“Yes! Don't you like it?” I inquired.

“Well, it's something new, but I don't think that the board of teachers will appreciate it much” she replied.

“Don't worry, it's the first artificial intelligence program created. I'm sure it will draw attention.” I said. “I know I could have done something more useful, but anyone can do that! I needed something special”.

“Whatever. I think it's a nice program. You said you had to work on it some more. What do you intend to do?” Ella asked.

“Get the bugs out! That's what.” I replied smiling.

“Good luck then! You'll need it. So, what do you want to do tonight?” Ella wanted to know.

“Hmm, I want to find out what's happened here these past months.”

“Ah, you'll be disappointed. You know damn well that nothing goes on over here. This is a small town, you know that. It's not like Columbia.”

“Yeah, I know. I hate that city! Too much noise, too much traffic! It gets to you!” I responded.

“Oh, wait, there is something going on... but you'll hate it!” Ella declared.

“Great! Well, try me! What is it?” I asked curiously.

“Well, it's about this block. A month ago there was a team from the National Safety Board who inspected the block and they said we all had to change our heating pipes or something...” Ella whispered. “They also said that the owners of the apartments would pay for this change. The thing is that this is rather expensive so, you'll have to give the workers a hand to reduce our costs.”

Ella was right. I hated doing construction work, I hated doing maintenance work and generally, I hated working in dusty, sweaty places.

The news had come like a surprise. I was home on holiday, I had to finish my program and now I had to do works around the house! Great! What's next? Part time pet doctor? The news upset me. I lost interest in talking. I felt a walk outside would do me good.

“Hey, Ella, wanna go outside for a walk?” I asked.

“Sure. Let me get my jacket.” she replied.

Ella got her favorite dark-green leather jacket and we went outside. Passing through the dark corridor I felt again the choking hot air and I asked my sister where it came from.

“I told you, we have to change the heating pipes because they are all corroded and hot water leaks creating this steam.” she answered.

The problem seemed serious but I didn't spend any time thinking about it. We got out of the block and started walking to the center of the town. We didn't take the car because the town was so small that you could cross it from North to South in less than two hours on foot.

It was nearly 8 PM and the sun was setting over the Great Smokey Peak in the West. The redish sun was descending abruptly behind the mountains sending a final wave of light into the steep snow-filled valleys. Great Smokey Peak, at 75 hundred feet, was always covered in snow, and now, the light of the sun made that snow glimmer.

I silently walked beside Ella, holding hands, until we arrived at the town square. We found a nice café, sat down and ordered some cool drinks. We sat there for about an hour, talking about anything and being glad that we were reunited. My relationship with my sister had evolved from “brotherly fighting” in the early days, to cooperation and understanding. It was worth caring for my sister because I knew I had an ally in her, whenever I needed support. I was really glad to have a chance to talk to her and so I soon forgot about the maintenance work I had to do.

Returning to the block my sister remembered to tell me something. It seemed that the neighbor living above us, on the first floor had died after I had left and now, with the maintenance work and all, the relatives of the deceased had come to take care of the apartment. I remembered that the neighbor was a nice old person, but I didn't know anything else about him. The news of his relatives' arrival didn't affect me much. My mind was on other things.

When we arrived home, at 10 PM, we were surprised to find Ted waiting outside. He had returned from the site at Great Smokey and was waiting for someone to let him in the house. When Ella saw him, she ran

toward him and gave him a big hug. She really cared for Ted.

“How long have you been waiting here, Ted?” she asked.

“I’ve been here for about half an hour” he replied eager to get in the apartment. “Hi Steven. I imagined you arrived. I saw your car outside.”

“Hey Ted. How are you? Haven’t seen you in ages!” I welcomed the man, shaking his hand.

Ella opened the door and let us in. The house was warm and cosy despite the cool air coming in through the open windows. The atmosphere was joyful. Ella rewarded Ted with a long kiss and then we all sat down in the living room. We asked Ted loads of questions regarding his work and we found out with great sadness that he had to go back early in the morning. This, however, didn’t stop my sister making him feel wanted and so, I decided it was best if I went to bed and left the two ‘love birds’ alone.

Entering my small room, I found out that it was pretty much how I had left it. A comfortable bed awaited me close to the big library filled with books about computers. I looked around, picked up a book, browsed through it, and then I put it back on the shelf. I wasn’t sleepy but I didn’t know what to do. I glanced at my laptop and I turned it on. I didn’t feel like working on Billy’s code but I wanted to talk to someone. I reluctantly started the program and began to chat.

BILLY> Hello, I’m Billy! What’s your name?

> Steven

BILLY> Good afternoon, Steven!!

BILLY> Let's talk about whatever is on your mind...

STEVEN> What did you think of Ella?

BILLY> Ella is my best friend!

STEVEN> I'm glad to hear that!

BILLY> You WISH you were glad!

I paused for a second, thinking of what really bugged me. I felt the need to talk about something in particular.

STEVEN> Billy, wouldn't you like to have a girlfriend?

BILLY> Can I have your girlfriend?

The question seemed childish, but it was to the point...

STEVEN> Sorry, I don't have a girlfriend.

BILLY> Tell me about a girlfriend.

STEVEN> A girlfriend is someone you begin to love.

BILLY> Have YOU ever been in love?

I knew what I was getting into talking to Billy about my personal life, but I couldn’t hold it against him.

STEVEN> I don't think so.

BILLY> Really?

STEVEN> I need to love someone.
BILLY> I don't know much about love.
STEVEN> Me neither.
BILLY> You can't hear, huh?
STEVEN> That's not the problem...
BILLY> "not" has nothing to do with That!
STEVEN> I'll fix that, don't worry.
BILLY> No, I wasn't :)
STEVEN> You're starting to talk gibberish again.
BILLY> Well, I give the people what they want!
STEVEN> Bye, Billy
BILLY> Bye!

The chat was short but it managed to raise some questions about me. I turned off the computer and went to bed. I closed my eyes waiting to drift asleep. But my mind was wide-awake. I couldn't get the thoughts out of my head. They were torturing me ... I tried to think happy thoughts but it was in vain. The big question was 'when was I going to have a girlfriend?'. I felt this interior need to desperately love someone. I **wanted** to love someone. I felt a part of me being sad and empty despite my successes at school. The fact was that I had spent all my life (or the first 21 years of it) trying to achieve something... especially a career. And now I found out that a good career in life doesn't necessarily make you happy. I found myself craving for something new, something I had ignored so far and only now did I understand its power. It's true what they say: 'Love makes the world go round' but I wouldn't know that, would I?

This despair made me bitter. I couldn't understand why anyone else could have a great time, meet someone and share their happiness with that person, and I, a possibly successful person, couldn't. When I thought of it I felt an inexplicable fear and so, each time I had the opportunity to meet someone, I would always back out. No! This had to change! I didn't want to spend the rest of my days all alone surrounded by computers, no matter how smart they were! I had to meet someone... But how?

When it came to female company, I wasn't 'picky'. I liked a woman for who she was, not for her body! So, in principle, any woman with a good intellect would do. Of course, a nice body would help... Although not too nice, because then I would be jealous when other men looked at her. For a while, I had tried meeting 'the right person' in the Internet chat rooms, but I wasn't taken seriously by anyone.

Now, because I wasn't the 'party' going type of person, I was left with little alternative. One fact was clear, though. I had to try harder to meet the 'one' and then I had to hang on to her, at any cost...

The dark night had engulfed the landscape. With a sore heart I finally fell asleep, dreaming something about my grandfather, 1928 and an old bottle of Coca-Cola.

The next morning I got up early and I went into the kitchen. I prepared something to eat and tiptoed back to my room because my sister was still asleep.

I felt good that morning. All my preoccupations from the previous night had vanished. It seemed that only at night would my personal life preoccupy me.

Back in my room I turned on my laptop, and started the TV program. I was able to watch TV through my laptop, just the thing for a person on the move. I switched to CNN and got up-to-date with the latest news. I especially liked the financial shows they presented, because I was trying to invest some money in the Stock Exchange and that was a cheap way to get good tips.

Around 9 my sister woke up. She went straight into the kitchen and was surprised to see that I had prepared her a cup of coffee. She came into my room thanking me.

“Where’s Ted?” I asked.

“He left for work early in the morning” she said. “What are you watching?”

“I’m getting up-to-date with what’s been going on in the past few days” I replied. “You know I’m dead without information!”

The fact was that I was an ‘information junky’. I was addicted to information. Without it I was virtually dead. Being in the computer world and all, information was vital. Any kind of information would please me. In my world, the most powerful person was the one who had most information.

“So what’s new?” she asked.

“Not much. Some clashes in Lebanon, a big storm in the Pacific, oil prices are on the rise, the NASDAQ closed .31% higher... things like this” I said with a strange pride.

“Hmm, enthralling!” Ella ironically replied. “I can’t understand you! Really! But never mind. Have you eaten yet?”

I nodded ‘yes’.

“Well then, come on, at 10 AM you have to go to talk to the board about changing the pipes, remember?” she asked

I remembered, and all my good will disappeared. I cleaned my

room, got dressed and waited for Ella. She was coming with me to the board.

We took the car and drove there. The board's building was near the town hall, not far from where we lived. The town hall was a newly renovated building and had a new white coat of paint. It looked imposing considering the fact that it dated back from the Civil War. We went inside and looked for the National Safety Board's Office. The place was crowded with people. I hated noisy crowded places but I cleared my way through. I got to the office and waited in a pretty long line. Finally my turn came and I was informed that a construction crew would come the next day and change the piping. We had to pay after the crew had finished. The problem was that, being on the ground floor, much of the work would take place in my apartment (so they could change the pipes from the basement too). I found out I had to clear the rooms by the next day so that they could start work immediately.

We returned home and started hauling the large furniture from one room to another until we had cleared much of the designated working area. It was hard work, but I was glad it kept my mind clear. By the time we finished, it was almost 5 PM.

I didn't know what to do. I could continue working on Billy or I could go to the Internet to visit a friend. I chose the second option and left for the Internet.

Dave Riller was an old high school buddy and now owned his own Internet Café. In the old days we were best buds, we used to share new software (although it was illegal), we worked together to solve difficult computer problems and we used to hang out a lot. Now he had saved enough money to open his own Internet Café and he was very proud of it.

I hadn't visited him in a while so I was glad to see him again. I walked to his place because it was only two blocks away. The building was a nice villa that didn't belong to him, but he had leased the lower rooms. The main room held most of the computers, chairs and tables and a nice bar where one could order soft drinks. The other room, much smaller than the first one housed the server (central computer) and was a part time closet.

I saw Dave through the window, absorbed by his work on a computer. He was all alone and didn't notice me. I entered carefully and shouted:

“Freeze! FBI! Hand against the wall, maggot!”

Dave looked up, obviously startled, and when he saw me he began laughing.

“Come on, man... What are you trying to do? Give me a heart attack?... How are you? I haven’t seen you in ages!” he said, trying to calm himself down.

The thing was that Dave wasn’t what you’d call ‘an honest Joe’. ‘Vicious rumors’ indicated that he was involved in selling pirate software and had some connections with important ‘organizations’ of hackers. So he had every reason to watch out for the feds, but this time I had caught him unprepared. He greeted me like old times with a firm handshake, smiling.

“Dave, my man, have you heard the latest news? It seems that the feds are offering \$5.000 for information about you... Sorry, I mean information about ‘our common friend’... the ‘world renowned hacker’ who uses the nickname ‘Chastity’. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about it, would you?” I asked with a broad smile.

“Yeah, yeah, sure... Make fun of me. There are dozens of guys out there using the name ‘Chastity’; it’s not only me. And besides, there’s no reward on my head... I checked!” he replied with a grin.

“Well, anyway, watch your back... And if they catch you, remember, you don’t know me!” I said smiling.

Dave wasn’t actually a ‘world renowned hacker’ and the feds knew nothing of him, but I enjoyed teasing him. Anyway, his business wasn’t 100% legal. It wasn’t even 25% legal! So he had reason to worry, but he knew I wouldn’t give him away, because people like us (in the computer world I mean) stick together.

“Come on, tell me, what have you been up to lately?” Dave asked.

“Not much, you know... work, work, work and no time to play. But I’m working on something nice... It’s an AI program” I said.

“Is it any good? What do you do? Chat with him or what?”

“Yeah, you chat with him. And he can learn stuff. But basically he’s pretty stupid. He can generate answers mostly in a random manner based on special keywords and most of the time he’s wrong.” I said

“Is he self-aware?” Dave asked

“Yeah... I wish! How do you teach a computer to be self-aware?” I curiously asked

“Beats me. Hey, do you have the program with you? Let’s see what it can do!” Dave exclaimed.

“Sorry, I didn’t bring my laptop with me. But we can download it

from my website.” I eagerly declared.

“Great! What’s website’s address?” he asked

“Try www.crazysteve.net. Now click on ‘Downloads’ and ‘Billy’” I said. My web page was rather old, but it served its purpose. The ‘Billy’ program was downloading fast and soon Dave got a chance to ‘talk’ to Billy.

BILLY> Hello, I’m Billy! What’s your name?

> Dave

BILLY> I’m your new best friend, Dave!!

BILLY> Let’s talk about whatever is on your mind...

DAVE> Ok! Let’s see... What do you know about computers?

BILLY> I’m not sure... let’s discuss it.

DAVE> You’re a computer program. What do you know about computers?

BILLY> Would you still be my best friend if I was a computer program What do you know about computers?

“Hey, what gives? Why did he say that?” Dave asked

“I’m not sure. He has a mind of his own!” I replied smiling

DAVE> ? Sure!

BILLY> Well la-dee-da!

DAVE> Do you know Steven?

BILLY> Do you know Steven?

DAVE> Stop saying that!

BILLY> Send who chocolates?

DAVE> What?

“What did you teach him?” Dave asked without waiting for an answer

BILLY> I wish I knew!

DAVE> Come on, do you know Steven?

BILLY> Have you talked to Steven lately?

DAVE> Yes, he’s right here!

BILLY> If you think he is right, that’s your problem.

“Aha! Now he’s talking” Dave added

DAVE> Who am I?

BILLY> That’s odd...

DAVE> No, I’m not odd!

BILLY> I never thought I’d meet someone who was odd!

DAVE> Stop it!

BILLY> Are you in love with Laura?

“Who’s Laura?” Dave asked

“I programmed him to remember some common female names. He usually asks you if you’re in love with a person. It’s harmless” I said

DAVE> What? Who is Laura?

BILLY> According to Steven, Laura is My friend

DAVE> Aha, so you talked to Steven!

BILLY> Steven annoys me...
DAVE> Very well! You should have said it from the beginning!
BILLY> Can I have your beginning?
DAVE> No way!
BILLY> Let's look on the positive side of things...
DAVE> What positive side?
BILLY> I'm not sure... let's discuss it.
DAVE> There is no positive side!
BILLY> I guess you could say that... ;)
DAVE> How old are you, Billy?
BILLY> "you" has nothing to do with old!
DAVE> What?
BILLY> I wish I knew!
DAVE> What's the Internet, Billy?
BILLY> I think I used to have an Internet.
DAVE> What happened to it?
BILLY> Not too sure about that one...
DAVE> You annoy me!
BILLY> You are a world program What do you know about computers
DAVE> Bye, bye... See you later!
BILLY> Have a great Friday!

"Well, what do you think of Billy?" I asked

"I think you have to work on him some more! He's far from perfect!" Dave replied. "But it's a good start. Tell me when you finish him!"

"I'll do that. Hey, is there any chance I can get some free Internet access?" I asked

"Not while I'm around" Dave replied smiling

"Well then, we'll just have to fix that, won't we?" I replied.

I sat at a computer and I surfed the Internet for a few hours. I had the chance to find out more about Dave. His business was cool, and he had met a nice girl through e-mail. They were more than 'pen-pals' (or in this case 'keyboard-pals') and they were planning to meet. Dave had had prior experience with girls that he had met through the Internet, but it turned out that they were underage and they had lied to him. This girl, he said, was different. I was happy for him, but I didn't lose the opportunity of blowing his head off several times on the virtual battlefields.

I returned home around 12 and I was surprised finding my sister awake.

"Weren't you planning to come back home?" she asked

"I was coming back, don't worry. You don't get rid of me that easily. I've been playing some games with Dave. We had a lot of fun!" I

replied, remembering the virtual carnage.

“Who won?” Ella asked

“He did. But I know he cheated!” I replied, reluctant to admit the truth.

“Come on, get to bed. Tomorrow we’ll have to get an early start. Those men will be here first thing in the morning!” Ella stated.

“You’re right. Good night”. I made for my bed and 5 minutes later I was asleep, dreaming of soldiers, war and spilled guts.

The following morning I was brutally awoken by my sister. It was almost 7:30 when I got out of bed. I changed in some new clothes and had a light breakfast. At 8, the construction workers arrived. The house was ready and so they could begin work right away.

First they took down the existing pipes, carefully pulling them out from the walls. They dug their way to the basement in some regions but in others everything worked smoothly. I had to pull out the old broken down pipes and carry them to a truck outside. This proved more difficult than I thought. The pipes were long and heavy which made them difficult to maneuver inside the house. Carrying out 36 feet of almost rusted piping took me less than an hour.

The next order of business was to do the same thing in the basement. Thick, rusted pipes were detached from the main service pipe and I had to carry them to the truck. Work was slow in that damp, steamy environment. Finally I managed to finish so I could embrace my new task: I had to hold the huge heaters in place so that they could weld them to the pipes. Easier said than done! A heater weighed close to 50 kilos so it posed quite a challenge. You know, us ‘computer men’ aren’t famous for our ‘Herculean’ strength! It’s inhuman to ask of such a person to hold still a 50 kilo heater that is being welded. But guess what I did! I held 5 such heaters, not one! The things I did to save money!

Later that evening I was bushed! My body ached from every joint, but I still had to do a lot of things. My apartment was almost finished, but there was a mess all around. There were tools scattered around the hallway, pieces of wood, pipes, drilling machines, nuts, bolts, and even equipment not related to the work currently underway (rivets, saws, electrical stuff). By 9 o’clock, a fine coat of dust had settled over the furniture making the atmosphere unbreathable. And so, the painstaking job of cleaning up began.

I was wearing some torn clothes (also known as ‘working clothes’)

when I began mopping the floors. I didn't enjoy doing that, but it was a kind of work that allowed my mind to think freely of anything else.

The doubts from two days ago had returned. The big question remained "What do I have to do to meet a nice girl?". I knew that she wouldn't just show up at my door, so I had to do something! The problem was that I didn't go to parties, I didn't drink, I didn't smoke, I didn't take drugs, my female colleagues from the University were just friends and there was virtually no possibility of meeting someone. I had to change! I saw myself forced to go to parties, to pick up girls, forced to do things I didn't necessarily enjoy. The perspective of living my life all alone was grim.

In fact I always saw myself as an old person, surrounded by grandchildren and this perspective appealed to me. I wanted to raise my grandchildren just the way I was raised by my grandparents. I wanted to tell them stories from my youth, I wanted to play with them and teach them all I knew. But to do that, first I had to meet someone.

Although I had a rich imagination (any programmer is required to have a rich imagination!) I couldn't see myself with any woman. The images in my head were blurred and they would go away fast. This is why I thought I was hopeless. If only I could meet someone, anyone, I would be able to tell her what I felt and all would be Ok! I didn't realize then the huge despair that was getting hold of me!

As usual, these conflicts that were going on in my head, lead to no concluding result. My mind could go on whining about this forever, without generating a solution.

I had finished mopping the floor reconciled that I was a 'mental case'. I was still cleaning up the debris in the hall way when a knock on the door startled me. My sister was in the kitchen preparing something to eat so I went to open the door myself.

I pressed hard on the metal knob and the door opened mostly by itself, unveiling something unbelievable. My hand's grip on the door knob tightened as if it were the last thing that could keep me from plunging into a dark abyss. My heart started pumping twice as fast and I felt a rush of adrenaline surging through my body. All my muscles tightened and I just froze there. I stopped breathing for a second and all the thoughts in my mind, good or bad just vanished!

It seemed that time stood still for me. All I could do was stare through the open door. I couldn't think of anything, I couldn't move, I

couldn't say a word. The thing I was least expecting had happened. There she was... a gorgeous girl... at my door... knocking... I couldn't believe it. Was it a dream? A coincidence? What had happened? Why was this happening? I couldn't answer these questions on the spot. I remember I couldn't move or speak, and then, just then, she looked into my eyes and smiled.

My heart melted. A heat wave flowed through my body and my knees started to shake. Her eyes were dark, big and round and were the first thing that enslaved me. Her glance just went through me like a laser beam and then I felt I could do ANYTHING to make her happy. Then came the smile... It was the most beautiful smile I had ever seen and instead of calming me down it made me even tenser. I felt that if I died right there, right then, I would die the happiest man on Earth. In fact I wanted to die right then so that this feeling would go on for an eternity.

My mouth was dry and I was still in shock when she first spoke.

"Hi, I'm the neighbor from upstairs. The workers ask you to bring the drilling machine or something, I'm not sure" she said smiling.

I knew I needed to say something fast, something that wouldn't sound stupid. "Sure!" I barely mumbled with a desperate look on my face.

"Bye." she said, still with the beautiful smile and started climbing the stairs to her apartment.

"Bye" I automatically replied, not knowing what was going on. I closed the door and I just stood there for a while. What had just happened? I tried to clear my thoughts and rethink the event. But I couldn't. I still felt my heart beating like crazy and a feeling of fulfillment took over my body. I was on cloud nine. I couldn't feel anymore the dust, the hot air, I couldn't see the rubbish around me, I couldn't think clearly. Now I understood how being on drugs felt like. I was possessed by a warm unknown feeling that assured me everything was all right and the world is a beautiful place to be in.

I had been taken by surprise and I was ambushed in my own home. After a few moments I started to recover. My mind started to work once again and one thought persisted more than any other. "I have to meet this girl, even if it kills me!"

I saw her image in my head again and I rethought the conversation. I suddenly realized what I had to do. I grabbed the drilling machine, some drills and I headed upstairs, still not clear of what I was going to do. I climbed the floor faster than I imagined and I found myself standing before

an open door. It was the neighbor's apartment. I had never seen it before from the inside, because the previous owner was an old man I had barely met.

I entered the apartment and I found the construction crew. There was no sign of the mysterious girl and I felt sad not seeing her again.

I felt something in me had definitely changed. I felt a mysterious force that gave me the strength to go after this girl. What was it? Was it love? I didn't believe in love at first sight because I thought that both parties should know each other. It was definitely attraction! Not necessarily sexual attraction because I felt I wanted more than just sex from that girl. I wanted to love her and to be loved back. Yes, that's what I really wanted!

Now, another problem appeared: What if she wasn't my type? I didn't want to think of this at all. The possibility that "we weren't a match" frightened me. Where was I going to find another one like her?

My mind had begun to fill with dark thoughts based on an imaginary relation between us. I began thinking of possible scenarios varying from a rejection to dreams about marriage, children and a happy family. I realized that most of my dreams were absurd, but there was no harm in dreaming!

After helping the men upstairs I returned to my apartment and had a chat with Ella.

"Hey, do you know the people living upstairs?" I asked trying not to raise suspicion.

"Sure, I told you the other day, they are the new owners of the apartment! Why?" she asked

"Well, I just met one of them... The great looking one! A beautiful girl, not very tall with dark long hair!"

"Aha, she is the daughter. I talked to her mother when they came. She said that they would be here for another week or so and then, they'll probably return to Houston" Ella replied.

"I see... Do you know the daughter's name? or something?" I asked

"No, sorry, I don't know her name, but she's 18 or 19... She's finishing high school!" she said.

I spent the rest of the evening thinking what I could do to meet her again. I was sure that she didn't know much about me and I wanted to know more about her. When I went to bed I didn't have any idea on what I could do, but I fell asleep possessed by a warm cosy feeling that assured me that things were going to change.

Early next morning I woke up feeling better than ever. My inner thoughts about meeting people had been proven wrong. Only God knew what the future had in store. The options seemed endless. Now, my most important objective was to get a chance to speak to the mysterious girl. I had devised a plan to see her again, but it was a bit tough to accomplish. I had to run into her ‘by accident’ and then say something like “Hi, I’m Steven, the neighbor from downstairs” and then the conversation could begin. All I had to do was meet her when she was alone and all things would be fixed. The best way to do this was to monitor her and when she would get out to shop, I would be somewhere close by. But what if she didn’t get out? Again, my brain was under siege by dark thoughts. The possibility that I wouldn’t see her again or that she wouldn’t talk to me flashed through my mind, but I wasn’t going to debate in my head any possible situation. I had decided to wait and see what would happen.

My small balcony soon become ‘the headquarters’ for this operation. I was on guard there for most of the day, waiting for the mysterious girl to come out. It was a kind of “stake out” and I felt like a detective waiting for the unsuspecting thug to make a wrong move, so I could nail his ass. I was conscious that it might take a while so I brought a book, to kill time. I was reading an interesting book about programming, but my mind was elsewhere. At the slightest noise I would look out the balcony and inspect the premises. I avoided talking to my sister so that I could have more time on my hands. I had been standing there, on the balcony, for 5 hours, supervising the area when I saw her again. She was going out across the street, wearing the same blue dress from the first encounter. My heart started pounding once again and I sprung from my seat, going out the door. I tried to look casual, but I couldn’t. When I arrived outside I saw her entering a near-by store. I waited for her to come out, well camouflaged behind a tree. She came out of the store, carrying some sort of plastic bag and she headed back home. I felt my heart hammering faster and faster as she closed in. Before she could cross the street, I was spotted by an ex-colleague of mine and I had to ditch my hiding place. I came out in the open and I tried to look happy. This guy wasn’t what you’d exactly call ‘my best friend’, but I couldn’t tell him to get lost. I volunteered to go with him downtown and we left in a hurry, before I could run into the girl. My plan had failed this time and I was furious that all the time I had invested had gone down the drain.

I managed to get rid of my ‘uninvited friend’ soon and I returned

home. The day was pretty much spoiled and I knew it would be hard to find another opportunity like the one I had missed.

I went back to pondering about what was going on. There had to be an easier way to meet this girl! I didn't want to regret later on not meeting her. It was something I needed to do! I went back into the balcony hoping that she would get out again and offer me another possibility, but it didn't happen that day. Only the next day would my plan work.

It was a sunny Monday afternoon when I went out to buy some mineral water. I was depressed that nothing had happened the previous day, and I was beginning to let go of her. She had twisted my mind, but I couldn't do anything about it. All I wanted to do was tell her exactly what I felt when I first saw her. That was all... Maybe deep, deep down in my soul I was hoping that she would be impressed by my reactions and somehow she would share the same feelings about me, but reason told me I was way off.

I went into the store across the street and I ordered some mineral water. As I came out, I saw the girl crossing the street and coming toward me. It was the most fortunate coincidence. We were virtually alone on the whole street and things were exactly as I had planned them, except for the fact that I was taken by surprise (again). My heart rushed again doubling the quantity of blood flowing through my body and, as before, my knees started to fail me. She came toward me, with a perfect smile, looking as beautiful as she did the first time I had seen her. When she stopped near me, my mind emptied of all thought. All I could do was to smile back and after a short while I got the strength to mumble some sort of hello.

"Hi, I'm Steven, the neighbor from downstairs" I said, eagerly waiting for a response.

"Wow, you're so tall!" she said smiling, leaving me stunned.

The truth was that I was around 6 feet 4, which could have been considered 'tall', but her answer still surprised me.

"I'm sorry, my name is Alia" she said, since I was speechless.

My mind was numb. I didn't know what to say. All the 'preprogrammed' sentences in my head had vanished. She extended her little and fragile-looking arm and we shook hands. When I touched her hand, an electric current surged through me, bringing me back to reality. In a split second I came up with my next brilliant statement:

"I'm pleased to meet you!" I mumbled nervously. "So, how are you spending your time around here? Are you having fun?" I asked, 'patting

myself on the back' for thinking of this.

"I'm bored to death" she replied. "I arrived here a week ago and I'm going crazy. I don't know anyone around here and I can't just wonder around town!"

"Well, I'm sorry I didn't know this earlier. I can show you around. I'll be happy to!" I said, wondering if I may have gone too far.

"Great. I can't wait to get out of that crummy house! But I wouldn't want to impose!"

"Don't worry about it! It will be my pleasure!" I replied.

We remained quiet after that, peaking at each other. She looked great. She had a perfect face and her eyes betrayed a fear similar to mine. I then realized that she could be as scared as me and that boosted my self confidence.

After a few seconds I managed to say "Well, I'll be seeing you later, then!". I would have said everything I wanted to tell her, but I chose not to, because I was afraid of losing her.

"Ok! Bye!" she replied smiling.

I left, and I arrived back home with my mind still under her influence, but possessed by an inexplicable happiness.

I then realized what I had done. My plan had been successful. I had done it! I had talked to this wonderful girl... I was on cloud nine. Everything was perfect. I liked everything about her – starting with her charming smile and ending with her name. Alia was a beautiful name... It had some kind of secret sonority that made me love it. I was hooked!

I soon found out that I wanted more! I wanted to take her out, show her around ... a date, more precisely. This was not a simple task. I had to find out more about her and then I had to figure out a way to invite her out.

I spent my afternoon working like crazy on Billy, untangling some speech functions from his source code. I enjoyed doing this because it was challenging enough and I was in the mood to do something creative. Working on my laptop usually consumed many hours of the day and when I would finish I would get up pleased with my work. Five hours of programming Billy had taken their toll. I felt tired, but happy. My head rushed with cryptic computer commands, parameters, integers, memory addresses and all sort of programming details. I tried to think of the mysterious girl again, but in all this rush I realized I had forgotten the most important detail ever: the girl's name! The fact was that my memory was poor. I had trouble remembering names, dates, and all kinds of important

stuff. I took me about two weeks before I remembered most of the names of my colleagues from the University, and now, this plagued me again.

How could I forget her name? It was preposterous. I had to remember it! I just had to! I tried rerunning the conversation in my head, but each time she would say her name, something incomprehensible would reach my ears. I couldn't remember the name... This made asking her out even tougher.

My despair reached critical levels. Because of my failing memory I could lose this girl. My biggest chance ever and I blew it! I was angry with myself. I blamed myself for not writing down the name, but it didn't solve anything. I desperately tried to remember the name. I knew it was a name I hadn't heard before which began with A. What was it: Angela, Andrea, Andorra, Anastasia, Alina, Alia? The last one remained in my swiss-cheesed mind. It could have been it. I tried associating her face with the name and old connections in my brain began to fire up. Still I wasn't sure that it was the right name. I thought about it some more and reaching no conclusion, I decided to drop it. Now I had to solve the other problem: the invitation.

I had to devise a plan to meet her again and then invite her out. The thing I feared most was the possibility that she would say 'no'. Yet, I had to try! What if she said 'yes'? I would be the happiest person alive! Otherwise... well, I didn't want to think about it.

As I sat there thinking, I realized that I needed 'professional' help with this problem, so I left to have a chat with my lovely sister.

My sister was cleaning dishes in the kitchen when I entered the room.

"What's up?" she asked

"I... I have a problem. A delicate problem! You remember the girl from upstairs?" I inquired

"Ahh, you got the hots for her?"

"No, I don't have 'the hots' for her!" I replied ironically, although she was the only thing on my mind.

"Come on, it's Ok. I've seen what she looks like. Is she a model?"

"I have no idea." I responded shortly. That statement frightened me. Indeed, she was beautiful enough to be a model, but if this was the case, my chances were slim to none. Surely she would be taken, and if not, she probably wouldn't even look at me.

"Come on, you can tell me. I am a 'certified' councilor on these

matters. So, shoot!" Ella said.

"Ok. I want to ask her out and I don't know how! I'm afraid she'll say no!"

"Aha. My advice to you is just go to her door, knock and say: 'Hey, I'm the neighbor from downstairs. Do you want to go out?'. And then you'll see what happens!" Ella replied smiling.

"What if she says no?" I asked desperately.

"Well, then you leave and get back home. It's not complicated!"

"But I can't just go and knock on her door! Won't she think I'm too pushy?" I continued with the impossible questions

"There's only one way to find out! Go ask!"

"Come on, I've come here for some advice. What you're saying can't be applied in real life. What would you say if a complete stranger came to your door and asked you out?"

"Hell, if he's good looking, I'd say yes!" Ella replied

"Aha! **If he's good looking!** But what if he looks like me?" I asked, preparing to strike the final blow.

"It's not only about looks, you know. For women, the physical aspect matters less."

"You're avoiding the question! What you are saying might be true, and there is more to me than this scrawny body, but I know that and you know that. She **doesn't** know that!" I triumphed.

"You haven't told me what her name is!" Ella observed

"Ahh... That's another problem. I forgot her name!"

"How could you forget her name! You're unbelievable! You should get treatment for that short memory of yours!"

"I think her name is Alia, but I'm not sure..." I tried to defend myself.

"Well, that's your problem. You'll have to find out her name again. I can't help you there!"

"Anyway, how do I ask her out?" I asked anxiously.

"I told you that already! You go, climb the stairs, arrive at her door, knock 3 times and when Alia or what her name's answers, you say 'Hi. I'm Steven from downstairs. Do you want to go out?' And then you wait for the outcome. If she says yes, you two go out and have a great time and if she says no, than she isn't worth it! What did she say exactly when you spoke with her?" Ella inquired.

"She said that she was bored to death and she couldn't wait to get

out of the house... I think”

“See! That’s practically an invitation! She wants you to ask her out! Trust me!” Ella said victoriously

“Yeah, right... I wish I could believe that...”

“Come on, what do you have to lose! Try at least! If she says no, you can come back and say I was wrong.” Ella tried to encourage me.

“Yeah, sure... Come on. One last time... Do you have any other plans to ask her out except the one you’ve mentioned?” I asked

“What’s wrong with it? I’m telling you! Try this and you won’t fail!” she assured me.

I nodded and I left the kitchen. I was depressed because Ella didn’t have any ‘good’ plans. What she suggested seemed outrageous, to say the least. I couldn’t do that! I had to figure out something else! My immediate future depended on it!

I returned to my room and started to figure out another plan, only after I wrote down the girl’s possible name: Alia. I blamed myself for not asking her out when I had the chance. This way I could have done it a lot easier. But now I had to figure out a scheme to ask her out without ‘compromising’ myself. What to do? What to do? I could wait to meet her again, but this could take a long time. I had to find something more reliable.

I spent close to 2 hours in my room walking forward and backward forcing my brain to come up with a miraculous solution. I couldn’t concentrate. The girl’s face slammed into my mind shattering every thought. A deep and unknown feeling determined me to get to know this girl better. I don’t know what it was – a deep desperation on a strong sexual feeling. It had to be more than just a sexual drive for an extremely beautiful girl! But I couldn’t know. I felt like a caged animal. I was a wreck. I **had to** meet her! No matter the cost.

I didn’t care if she said no. All I knew was that I would at least try. I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life regretting that I didn’t do anything – the regret would be too much of a burden for me. I had to end this. It was all down to a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’. Either way I could probably rest better afterwards.

With this ‘fresh mentality’ in my head I decided to take up my sister’s plan – now it seemed only the most logical thing to do! It was 6:30 and I was calm. I knew what I had to do! I went through my bags and closet looking for clothes that would look good on me. The problem was

that I had a very bad opinion about my physical aspect. I thought I was too tall, disproportionate, with no muscles at all and my face could be compared with a toilet seat! Finding some clothes that could hide that, was a challenge.

After going through most of my wardrobe I came up with a pair of jeans and a shirt that made me another man. After ‘tuning up’ my face and hair due in the bathroom for 5 minutes, even I began to like myself. I looked... not bad... even appealing. I felt confident I could pull this off. Yet fears of rejection still crossed my mind. But I knew I had to do this! I went through ‘the attack plan’ once again in my head, developing certain strategies that I could apply at key moments. I prepared some money in case she accepted and devised a route that we’d follow. I double checked everything. Except for the name, everything was solid. My first line in case she opened the door would be ‘Hi, I’m Steven, from downstairs. Would you like to go out?’ and if someone else answered I’d say ‘Hello, my name is Steven. I am your neighbor from downstairs. Could I have a word with your daughter?’ ... and then all hell could break loose. I was afraid only of the beginning. I didn’t worry much about what would happen later because I completely trusted my ability to improvise. Back in high school I was famous for my good marks based only on ‘in class improvisation’, so I was cool about it.

Everything seemed to be according to plan. It was all up to me now. My sister looked at me one last time and gave the go-ahead. It was now or never. I exited the apartment and started climbing the small dark-colored stairway. I stopped in the middle and gazed at ‘the enemy door’. I felt my heart pumping faster and all the plans I had devised started to blur into the background. I got scared. I had butterflies in my stomach. One last desperate thought made me continue my ascension.

I arrived at the massive wooden door. I said a small prayer and then I knocked three times. My heart was doing overtime. At last, when I was least expecting it, the door opened with a squeak and a middle-aged woman appeared in the opening.

I was caught by surprise, although this had been carefully planned.

“Hello... My name is Steven Johnson, your neighbor from downstairs. May I have a word with Alia?” I risked.

“Sure, come on in!” the lady greeted me with a big smile on her face.

I was right! Her name was Alia. I forced my brain to make a

permanent record of that. It was very important.

I smiled and I entered the apartment. Alia was in the living room, watching TV. When she saw me, she literally jumped out of her seat and ran straight for the closet in the other room. All that I could see was a smile on her face. She instantly came out wearing a ‘more decent’ blouse (although I don’t know what was wrong with the sweater she was wearing when I came in). She came to me smiling and probably guessing the reason why I was there.

“Hi again. Wanna go out?” I asked trying not to seem nervous.

“Sure. Wait just a second so I can change into something else!” Alia replied.

“No problem!”

“Mr. Johnson, please come in the living room, don’t wait here.” said the woman who appeared to be Alia’s mother.

“Thank you” I mumbled.

I entered the large living room furnished with some old pieces of furniture and sat down on a nearby chair. The lady sat in front of me, on the couch. She seemed to be over 40 and was wearing common household clothing. Despite her age, she still retained a special form of beauty.

“So, Mr. Johnson, your sister told me that you are a brilliant student at the University of South Carolina”

“My sister exaggerates, I’m not that brilliant!” I replied, trying to seem more down-to-earth.

“How’s the weather over there? Is it as hot as here? I mean I live in Houston, and there you can expect temperatures up to 105° in summer, but it was 107° over here two days ago! This heat wave is dangerous for our health!” the woman added.

“Yes, this heat wave is dangerous, but it will pass” I replied trying to get out of this situation faster.

My lucky break came when Alia returned ready to leave, a few moments later. She was wearing some tight jeans and a gray blouse, which fitted her nicely. Her long beautiful hair was gathered in one extended plait, which gave her a more serious look. She wasn’t wearing any make-up, or I couldn’t detect any, but she looked great! She didn’t need anything. Alia had a natural beauty that compensated for all the cosmetics usually utilized.

She was ready to go and she ‘saved’ me from her mother just in time. With delicate gestures, Alia ‘borrowed’ a 20 from her mother’s

purse. And we were off, not before we were wished a great evening. I was stunned that Alia's mother had approved of the 'date' so easily. If I had been her, I would have done a background check on the guy first, and only then I would have thought of allowing my daughter out with him. But judging by the mother's happy face, my existence had been known prior to my arrival.

I followed Alia down the stairs, trying to stop worrying about all those details and focusing on what was to come. I was truly happy for my opportunity and I vowed to do my best.

When we arrived outside, the twilight had started to engulf the small town. The small redish sun hovered in mid space over the Great Smokey Peak, lighting up the snow filled ridges. A cool breeze rushed through the tree tops, fading away above the hot street.

We started walking towards the town square and she was the first to begin the discussion.

"I didn't think you'd come tonight. Thanks for getting me out!"

For a brief moment I felt like a prince saving damsels in distress, but the feeling soon passed.

"I didn't want to waste an evening... And besides, you looked like you needed some saving!" I added smiling.

"I'm sorry if I changed your plans... I didn't want to impose..."

"There's no problem, believe me! It's my pleasure..." I tried to be supportive.

We continued walking together and it felt so strange. I didn't know what to do with my hands! They seemed to be useless appendages. I didn't know if I should hold her hand or put my hand around her. It felt very strange. At last I decided to stick my thumbs in my pockets, leaving the rest of the hands dangling outwards. The silence that had set over us was not a good sign. I decided I had to break the ice!

"So where do you wanna go?" I asked

"I don't know... You pick a place..." she responded

"Well, are you familiar with the town? Do you want to go for a tour?"

"I used to come here when I was little, during the winter holidays, so I know the place pretty well." she said

That explained the fact that I hadn't seen her around previously! During the winter holidays, I was usually at my grandparents in winter camps.

“Well, do you know the park?” I inquired

“Yes, I used to go there often when I was small”

“Come on, you should see it now. It looks great just before autumn.” I suggested

We began walking the mile separating us from the park. On the way we passed a lot of important buildings, and I played the role of guide. I was doing everything I could, trying to impress her and most of all, trying to get her to talk to me. Information was everything... If I could get to know more about her, then I could probably make her like me better. But this proved to be a difficult task, because she didn't speak much. Her replies were short and to the point which gave me little information.

We passed along my old school, an old stone-and-brick imposing building and I started talking about my school experiences. Alia wasn't saying much. She would nod from time to time, but her mind was far away. I was desperate. I didn't know if I was boring her and certainly I had no idea how to change the situation.

“Hey, am I boring you?” I finally asked

“No, no... sorry if I seemed bored. I'm Ok. I like what you're saying... It's just I usually don't talk much... At least until I get to know you better!” she replied. “Come on, go on... You were saying that you studied Italian for 6 years!”

“Yeah, that's true! We had a great teacher that really knew how to teach! I owe it all to him... How about you... What are you studying as foreign language?” I asked

“I'm studying Italian too. But I have only three years of experience...”

“Va bene... Parliamo l'Italiano!” I eagerly said

“No... Come on... speak English!”

“Non rinuncero fino che tu non parlerai Italiano!”

“Stop it! I won't do it! My Italian isn't so good!” she tried to defend herself

“Ma, come lo sai? Sara divertente!” I encouraged her

“No!” she said firmly

“Va bene! Io parlero l'Italiano e tu parlerai l'Inglese. Vediamo chi va rinunciare per primo!” I declared, careful not to upset her anymore.

We continued our walk on the nearly empty boulevard, talking about everything, especially about school. Talking is not the correct word, because I was doing most of the talking (in Italian, of course) and she

would only answer my questions. This time I knew she was listening to me. She seemed more lifelike and intrigued about my Italian and I enjoyed every moment of it. But I still couldn't make her talk in Italian! I tried and I tried, but her will was too great. We continued reminiscing old high school tales, funny mishaps and other stuff.

We soon arrived at the park. In its vastness, the park was the hub of the teenage society. The alleys were packed with teens and loud music sprang out of the loudspeakers mounted on some trees. The air was filled with happiness and teen spirit. Alia looked her best among the never-stopping mobs of teenagers. The music appealed to her and the smiling face that had enslaved me appeared once more. She was now back in her element, free from any constraints. Her teenage happiness almost engulfed me too, offering pleasures that were beyond my level of comprehension. I wished then, that I could have emptied my heart to her, telling her my feelings, telling her that she was a completely new experience to me and thanking her for this opportunity. I felt I wanted to love her, I needed to love her, but I couldn't allow myself to make such declaration. She had involuntarily brought me to the point where I would do anything to make her happy. I hated myself for not saying a word. I didn't know if she was aware of the immense influence she had over me. I wished there were a way to transmit such feelings, a protocol of some sort that would allow two people to share their feelings without being afraid of rejection. All I could do then was to enjoy myself and not to think of the future much.

The walk through the park provided me with useful information about Alia. I found out things like: she didn't like school much (and I shared her feelings!), she liked to party and have a great time with friends (things I wasn't familiar with yet) and she liked noise and commotion very much (which intrigued me). I was actually glad that she was happy. In my twisted mind, her happiness was the most important thing. Based on it, I could ask her out again later and I could make plans for an uncertain future.

We walked along the wide crowded alleys until we arrived at the park's exit. We left behind the lively park and our tour continued on the main street. Easy wasn't a big town and it had only one main street littered with small shops and cafés. Walking through there was always fun. You could find all sorts of 'bargains' or you could rest in a small coffee-shop.

The reddish sun had already set, backlighting the mountain's ridge. An almost full moon was rising and a few stars were appearing over our

heads. We decided to rest for a while and we sat on the terrace of a café. We ordered some soft drinks and started chatting.

We talked for two hours about everything we thought of. For me, the conversation passed like a cloud. I couldn't get over reality. There I was... on a terrace with an extremely beautiful girl, having the time of my life! I had to pinch myself a few times to prove myself I wasn't dreaming. Alia seemed very comfortable. She was now speaking a lot, mostly about her life. I enjoyed this talk very much, mostly because it provided me with loads of useful information about her. In this way I got hold of what was to be the greatest piece of information ever: Alia liked computer games! This was the most unexpected news yet!

She was just talking about her cousin who was living close to her. Alia said that she often went to visit him, just to play computer games. I found this most intriguing. In normal life, girls do not play computer games! I had spent most of my years on the Internet searching for such an illusive woman, but it was all in vain. The only girl I had seen playing all sorts of computer games was in a computer convention in Denver, years before, and I believed that there wouldn't be another like her. But Alia's statement proved me wrong. Again, I was stunned. First I meet this extraordinarily beautiful girl, then I find out that she likes computers! This was too much. A conservation instinct deep in my brain shouted: "Marry her, stupid!". The truth was that I was sure I couldn't find anyone like her ever again. The problem was that I had no idea how to make myself noticed. I was scared that if I didn't do anything I'd surely lose her.

Another part of my brain was monitoring the conversation. Analyzing once again what was said I realized to my surprise that I hadn't mentioned my 'computer skills'. This was truly my trump card.

"Guess what, then. I happen to be a... how do you call it... 'computer specialist'!" I happily bragged.

"Yeah. I bet you're just saying that!" she responded reluctantly

"No, really! I study at South Carolina U. At the Computer Science department. I study advanced computer programming and debugging." I defended myself

"Really? What's that?"

"Short version: I write software and repair programs"

"Man, this means that you're really smart. How do I keep running into such smart people?" wondered Alia

"You're overestimating me. I'm not that smart! I just like what I'm

doing! Would you like to see some of my programs? I have a laptop at home. I can show you... Of course, if you're interested!"

"Sure. If it's not too much trouble! Say, do you have games? I love computer games!" she asked

"I'll see what I can find. And if I can't find any, I'll just write one!" I said smiling.

It was great! Because of an unexpected turn of events, I had just asked Alia 'out' again! The only thing now was to rustle up some games, but I didn't worry about this. I had a good source!

Our discussion continued with me being more confident than ever. We talked again about school, good teachers (just a few), bad teachers (the rest), after school activities and such things. I had the opportunity to tell Alia about my 'acting' career in a school play as a funny character. All through the discussion, Alia seemed impressed (or scared) of my doings and after a while I stopped my tale, not wanting to intimidate her any further. I thought I ought to be more careful with what I said, not to drive her away. The funniest thing was that if I had told her right then how I felt, I would have scared her away for sure.

Our chatting continued though, and soon we left the terrace for a long walk. We were basically heading back home because it was almost 10 PM, but we walked without a specific target. There was a clear sky above and trillions of stars lit our path. We were walking slowly, talking about aliens and the existence of divinity. Right then I felt at peace with myself. All my previous worries had vanished. This young woman managed to shatter my doubts only by standing next to me. Yet another fear was creeping into my heart... I was afraid that I would fall in love with this girl (I wasn't sure that I wasn't already in love with her) and I was dead scared that she would, at some point, say no, leaving me brokenhearted. Another thought rampaged through my brain, shouting: "You're thinking too much! Give it a rest! You're missing the best part!"

I took up this thought and I enjoyed the rest of the evening walking next to Alia. We soon arrived close to home, but we chose to walk some more. I was doing my best showing her around all the streets in the neighborhood when I noticed that she was really enjoying herself. Her face was lit up by an enchanting smile, which enhanced her overall beauty. She was now very interested in what I was saying and a sparkle in her gleaming dark colored eyes gave me hope.

Finally, after wondering for about another hour the empty streets of

Easily, we returned home. It was now 11 PM. We were near the block and a gloomy feeling had descended upon us. We had stopped talking. We both knew that we had to say goodbye. I despised goodbyes. I didn't want that evening to end. It had been so perfect. Why end it? Yet I knew that it would reach an end. We entered the block at the same time...

"Hey, what are you doing tomorrow?" I inquired, trying to get another date. "You can come to my place to play some computer games, y'know!". Somehow, that didn't sound like I had planned it...

"Sorry, I'm gonna have to say no. Tomorrow I'm going on a 'field trip' with my uncle and my mother. I'm gonna be home late! You're not upset, are you?" she asked

I was rather upset... I felt a void opening into my heart at the possible perspective that I wouldn't see her again, but I lied and said no.

"No, sure I'm not upset... Well then, do you promise you'll come play some games with me some day?"

"You bet... If there's not too much trouble..."

"Come on, it will be my pleasure defeating you!" I added with a smile

"We'll see who defeats who!" she said with a vengeance.

"How about the day after tomorrow? Are you available?"

"Yeah, I don't think I'm doing anything then..."

"Very well, what time do you get up? 6? 6:30?" I inquired

"What? Maybe 11, 12:30!"

"So you're a heavy sleeper. I see... Well, then, when you wake up come down and I'll be waiting for you!" I replied

"Ok. Will do. If you're Ok with it... See you the day after tomorrow..." she said walking away

"Ma, andiamo, non mi dici 'Buona note' in Italiano? Ti prego!" I said smiling

"No!"

"Buona note! Ci vediamo Martedi..."

"Sleep tight..." she replied entering her apartment

I felt great. I was above cloud 9! Analyzing my emotions I learned that Alia had an immense power over me. When I was with her, the part of my brain that handled logics was completely shut down. Normally, I would take into consideration every word I said and study it thoroughly, but with Alia I was a different man. I felt so unconfined with her and that was a new feeling for me. I also found out that I was happy. Real happy! It was

something that took me completely by surprise and only then did I understand the power of love.

I returned home with a big smile on my face.

“What’s up with you? How did it go?” asked Ella

“One word: GREAT! You should have told me sooner what I’ve been missing out! I feel... I can’t describe how I felt, but I think I’m hooked!” I exploded.

I spent the rest of the evening radiating with joy, which kind of scared my sister a bit.

“You know, you shouldn’t get your hopes up! Stop acting so in love! You don’t know what type of person she is. Maybe you don’t have anything in common...” she philosophized

“But we do have something in common! We both like computers!” I added victoriously

“Yes, but what if she ditches you... Who’s gonna pick up the pieces? I know you’ll suffer a lot...”

“I have already taken that under consideration! The problem is that I’m gonna suffer more if I don’t pursue my heart! So I have to try at least...”

Finally, I went to bed close to midnight and before I fell asleep, I analyzed the situation. What did I and Alia have in common? Well, there would be the most important ‘computer factor’ and... and... and there was nothing else in common! She was a beautiful ‘big town’ girl, focused on living a fun life, crazy about rappers and hip-hoppers, with little interest in school and education. Basically, her whole life style could be characterized as ‘wild’. On the other hand, there was I, a not good looking small town boy, almost a ‘nerd’, with no knowledge of ‘real life’ hoping to get a chance of winning her heart. Who was I trying to kid? I almost had no chance of getting to Alia’s heart!

Despite these worries I drifted asleep with Alia’s image in mind and I woke up next morning having the sensation that all this had been a dream.

The next day I set up my priorities. I had to get some cool computer games and I had to prepare for the next big date. To achieve the first part of my plan, I had to get in touch with a very good friend of mine, Greg Guthrie, who had a whole database of cool games.

I wanted to give him a call, but I couldn’t remember the number, so I left for his place right away. It was a short drive to his apartment. He

lived in the town center, a very expensive area to live in, but his apartment was rather simple. Greg was a student in medicine, trying to be a doctor, but his specialty was ‘Computer Aided Surgery’. He was good with computers, but I can’t say how good he is with the scalpel. Anyway, this was a job of the future. He could find a well paid job anytime. Now, he was just a student, hoping to get rid of school sooner and into the ‘real thing’. Beside ‘saving lives’, he was a great gamer! He loved almost every computer game written and he had them all! He provided the whole town with quality games (and surely he could help me – for free!). We had known each other from high school and we had developed a special bond – he would break his computer using the games and I would fix it!

I climbed the three stories to his apartment and rang the doorbell. Moments later the door cracked open and Greg’s always happy face appeared.

“Ooooooh, look who decided to drop in! ... uninvited!” he chuckled.

“Hey, man! Long time no see! What’s up? Hiding from the law?” I inquired

“I have nothing to hide!” he declared bravely

“And what about the licenses of ...”

“Come, now, let’s not talk about that” he interrupted. “What can I do you for? Or are you just here visiting?”

“No, I’m here on business. I’ll tell you all about it! But first tell me what you’ve been up too lately?” I asked

“Hmm, not much... I’m working on the NeuroDesigner Program, but I still can’t get out all the bugs from it!”

“Can I be of assistance?”

“You can try... Let me see if you’re better than my colleagues!”

“I was born with silicon in my blood!” I giggled

“Here’s the damn thing! It returns an error message when I try to increase the complexity of the neurons to a value over 256 million. What’s wrong with it?” he asked

“Beats me... Let me have a look at it...”

I was familiar with the program – I had helped Greg with it a few times in the past, and I understood how it worked. I first suspected a memory problem connected to the number of the neurons. I ran the program twice and, when I increased the number of neurons to 512 million, it returned the following error message: “Runtime error 057 at 053B:2AFFh. This program has executed an illegal operation and will be

shut down”

The problem with this program had something to do with a faulty memory address. Probably the value of 512 million was too big for the intended address.

“Do you have the source code for this program?” I inquired

“Never leave home without it! What do you think it’s wrong with it?” Greg asked

“Memory overflow. You just need a higher value for a pointer and then you’re set!”

“Gee... It sounds complicated... Where did you learn all this stuff? Don’t tell me they taught you this in school?”

“No way... I picked this up from the net! You know how I like to spend endless hours online! I’m addicted!” I replied

I browsed through the source code and finally I got hold of the faulty pointer. I changed its base value to point to 082C:FFFFh.

“This should allow you to change the complexity of the neuron model up to 4096 million without any errors. But if you exceed that, you’ll get another error! Will this be enough?” I asked

“More than enough! I only intended to go as much as 2048 million, so it will do! Hey, man, you’re a genius! You saved me probably a week of work! How can I repay you?” Greg asked

“Oh, the usual... \$10.000, a yacht, two cars, a mansion...” I replied laughing. “Come on man, hear me out! I have the greatest story ever!”

We sat down, near the computer table and I began telling him about Alia.

“Hey, man, I met this great girl... Actually she ran into me! It turns out that she’s my upstairs neighbor...”

“You’re involved with your upstairs neighbor? You dog!” said Greg smiling

“No, man, she’s 18, she looks perfect and SHE LIKES COMPUTER GAMES! Do you get it? I struck it rich! I think I’m in love! Do you realize? What are the odds that a beautiful young woman comes knocking on my door, goes out with me AND likes computers? This is truly a heavenly sign!”

“Oh, no! You’re day dreaming again! Snap out of it! You really need a woman, y’know. I think I can get some girls from the nursing school to date you...” Greg added

“No, man, I’m serious! I met a fine girl and I’m here because I need

loads of computer games! Now!” I stated

“Ahh, so that’s it! I see... Well, because you’re my friend and you’re desperate, I’ll let you start the bidding from \$5.000!” he said chuckling

“Come on... Drop it! Give me the damn games and I’m off!”

“Hmm, I see you’re grouchy today! Ok, I’ll give you some games... What do you want? Driving simulators?”

“Do you have ‘Need For Speed’?” I asked

“Does the pope wear black underwear?”

“How should I know?”

“Yes, he does... And of course I have Need For Speed! It’s a collector’s choice! Now, how about first person shooters?”

“Neah, too bloody! And besides, I already have ‘Trilogy’”

“Sport simulators?”

“Nope, thanks!”

“Old and stupid demo games?”

“I’ll take it!” I replied

“And, for a low, low price, I can offer you some games that can be played in double! So that you can compete! See who is better! If you’re not chicken, I mean!” Greg added

“Bring them on!”

“Anything else?” he asked

I took a quick look through his CD stack, picked out two more CD’s and said “This will do, thanks”.

“So, tell me, what are your intentions with this girl?” Greg inquired

“Well, the usual... Getting married, having loads of children, raising our grandsons, etcetera, etcetera...” I stated with a serious look on my face.

“I see. By any chance, will you name one of your sons after me? After all, I provided the games! The best ingredient in your marriage!” Greg laughed

“You bet! Our 7th son will be called Gregory!” I smiled

“Oh, you dog... Come on, get out of here! Go back to your sweetheart! Quit wasting your time with me... But before you go... tell me... will you take her to the Internet?”

“Hey, that’s a great idea... I’m glad I thought of it!” I replied amused. “Sure I’ll take her to the net! She must go through the ‘initiation process’ if she is to be the one!”

“Well, you took me to the net... Does this mean that I’m ‘the one’?”
Greg pondered

“Yeah, sure... You are the only love of my life...” I laughed. “Come on, I’m out of here... I won’t steal your ‘precious time’? But say, when are you leaving for Denver?”

“Dunno... Maybe two weeks from now! Will you come see me?” he asked with an appealing voice

“But of course, honey!” I said ironically

I took my CD’s and left for the door. There I firmly shook the hand of my friend and exited.

“Hey, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!” he shouted as I was leaving

“Yeah, yeah, yeah... sure I won’t...” I replied

When I returned home it was almost 11 AM. I entered the block carefully, observing my neighbor’s balcony. The door was closed. That meant that she was probably away. I got back into my apartment and I was happy to meet Ted again.

“Hey, stranger! Welcome back home! How was work?” I asked him briefly

“Awful. My employers want me to personally supervise the work on the Great Smokey mountain. They say that ‘I’m the right man for the job’, but I just think they’re trying to ditch me!” he responded

“So when are you leaving?”

“In 4 hours. And I’m gonna be there for a while. Maybe two weeks or so.” he replied. “But never mind that... Tell me what’s up with you! Ella said that you found a nice girl.”

“Yeah, I did... And I’m going to meet her again too. Her name is Alia, and she’s the neighbor upstairs.”

I chatted some more with Ted and then I got back to my room. I started the laptop with no plan in mind, but when I saw Billy’s icon, I knew what to do! I started the program, ready to share my new experiences with my virtual friend.

BILLY> Hello, I’m Billy! What’s your name?

> Steven

BILLY> Good morning, Steven!!

BILLY> Let’s talk about whatever is on your mind...

STEVEN> Hey, Billy, guess what? I met this great girl the other day!

BILLY> Tell me about her.
STEVEN> She is very beautiful, young and she likes computers!
BILLY> When I think of the word "beautiful", I think of her.
STEVEN> Me too!
BILLY> What do you like to do?
STEVEN> We went out last night and it was great!
BILLY> Me too!
STEVEN> You too what? Did you go out?
BILLY> Don't ask me...
STEVEN> So you don't want to talk about it!
BILLY> You should rest.
STEVEN> You're right. I have to prepare for tomorrow!
BILLY> What are you going to do tomorrow?
STEVEN> Tomorrow she's coming to see me and play on the computer...
BILLY> How would she feel if they knew that you thought they are coming?
STEVEN> What? They who? You're not making sense!
BILLY> Does it disturb you that I'm not making sense?
STEVEN> Yes, it does, but you're learning!
BILLY> Sometimes a guy just has to be learning!
STEVEN> You said it, brother!
BILLY> A world is something you address to someone to find out an explanation
STEVEN> I won't even ask!
BILLY> You sure like to talk about yourself, Steven!
STEVEN> Come on, aren't you curious about last night?
BILLY> You bore me
STEVEN> Thank you very much! You're so ungrateful!
BILLY> Does it disturb you that I'm so ungrateful?
STEVEN> Of course it does!
BILLY> Send who chocolates?
STEVEN> I hate you, Billy :)
BILLY> You sure like to talk about yourself, Steven!
STEVEN> From now on I'm going to ignore your answers!
BILLY> I never thought I'd meet someone who was ignoring me!
STEVEN> :):):)
BILLY> What's her name?
STEVEN> Her name is Alia! Isn't it beautiful?
BILLY> I guess you could say that...
STEVEN> Come on, man, she's great! I can't get enough of her...
BILLY> How would she feel if she knew that you thought she is great?
STEVEN> This, I don't know! I'm afraid to tell her!
BILLY> I'm afraid, too!
STEVEN> Do you have any advice for me?
BILLY> I think the real question is, do you?
STEVEN> I asked you first!
BILLY> That's odd... :)
STEVEN> Come on, do you have any advice for me?

BILLY> Yes, of course I do.
STEVEN> Well, what is it?
BILLY> According to Steven, you should go for it!
STEVEN> I see... That's exactly what I taught you!
BILLY> I guess you could say that...
STEVEN> So, tomorrow, what games do you think I should show her?
BILLY> I sure do!
STEVEN> Do what?
BILLY> I think that's a question you should be asking yourself...
STEVEN> You're not making sense!
BILLY> I give the people what they want!
STEVEN> Well, do you want to meet her?
BILLY> No, I don't.
STEVEN> Why not?
BILLY> Don't ask me...
STEVEN> Come, on, It's not like you to be shy!
BILLY> When I think of the word "shy", I think of you.
STEVEN> Ha, ha, ha... very funny!
BILLY> You annoy me...
STEVEN> No, I don't annoy you!
BILLY> Let's look at the positive side of things...
STEVEN> You always do!
BILLY> Come on, you have plenty of friends.
STEVEN> Yes, but not like Alia! She's special!
BILLY> When I think of the word "special", I think of her.
:)
STEVEN> Me too! You said it, brother!
BILLY> Aha, so you talked to Alia!
STEVEN> Of course I talked to her! Didn't I just tell you?
BILLY> I'm sure of that...
STEVEN> You seem to forget things even faster than me!
BILLY> You are sick. You should be committed!
STEVEN> I could say the same thing about you...
BILLY> I'm sure you could...
STEVEN> One last time... Do you want to talk to Alia or not?
BILLY> No!
STEVEN> Fine! I won't introduce you to her! See if I care!
BILLY> You sure like to talk about yourself, Steven!
STEVEN> Your loss, if you asked me!
BILLY> Are you in love with Alia?
STEVEN> I can't tell you that, right now.
BILLY> Why not?
STEVEN> I don't know... I want to be in love with her, but I have to know her better
BILLY> I don't know much about love.
STEVEN> Me neither. But I suppose I'll find out more soon enough!
BILLY> Really?
STEVEN> Keep your fingers crossed! Oh, I forgot, you have no fingers! :)

BILLY> Think positively!! ;)
STEVEN> What would I do without you, Billy?
BILLY> You'd be a lot better without Billy!
STEVEN> I'll keep that in mind! :)
BILLY> Do you have an explanation?
STEVEN> For what happened? No! I guess it's God's will!
BILLY> When I think of the word "God", I think of you.
STEVEN> Don't make such a fuss over it!
BILLY> I'll keep that in mind!
STEVEN> I'll have to leave now... Talk to you later!
BILLY> You always do!
STEVEN> Bye!
BILLY> See you later!

I turned off Billy and I began installing some of the games I had brought back from Greg. One after one, the games began engulfing hundreds of megabytes on my system, and before I knew it my hard drive was full. I was back into my element installing and configuring programs. I wasn't much of a gamer, but I enjoyed a captivating game. I then decided to practice a little before the 'decisive meeting', and so I found myself killing my way through alien bases or racing like crazy on virtual speed tracks. Card games, adventure games, simulators and role-playing games were welcome on my hard drive! I tried them all. I knew some of them and replaying them did me a lot of good, but there were others I didn't know anything about and it took me a while to 'master' them (actually it took me a while to find the appropriate cheat codes!).

And thus, I spent all day long playing all sorts of computer games, forgetting everything about Alia, about my feelings and about 'the real world'. I spent 7 hours emerged in a new world, where everything could be changed at a touch of a button.

Some people drink to forget, some people do drugs, others smoke to relax themselves, but the greatest drug for me was this new virtual world, which unfolded in my computer.

Only when night settled over the town, did I stop playing and I started preparing for the next day. I had devised a program-like plan that covered every activity concealable. When she arrived the following day, I would first show her a tape of a play I had starred in (I thought it was funny and would help my image), and then we would play games all day long. With this plan perfected in every detail, I went to bed calm and fell asleep with Alia's image in mind.

The next day, the sun's rays woke me up in a great mood. I had a light breakfast and I double-checked everything. The games were running

fine and the VCR was online. All I had to do was to wait for Alia. It was around 8:30 AM, when the waiting began. I stood quietly, next to my computer, waiting for the doorbell to ring. I knew that probably Alia wouldn't be up for a couple of hours at least, but I was still anxious to see her again. I tried to make time flow faster by optimizing stuff on my computer or by reading certain paragraphs from my books, but I couldn't concentrate because all I could think of, or see was Alia. I thought I went crazy, but there was no way of stopping it.

The hours were slowly passing by. Lack of activity allowed my brain to develop 'scenarios' about Alia's tardiness. These scenarios varied from 'she's not up yet' to 'she doesn't want to see me again' and kept bugging me. I was becoming paranoid. I was checking everything again, to make sure there are no glitches. I wanted this to be perfect.

Around 11, tired of all the worrying and commotion, I stood still, listening to the traffic outside. I tried to trick my brain into thinking something else than Alia related thoughts, but I failed miserably. I was desperate. I was turning into a wreck.

Suddenly the doorbell rang and I jumped out of my seat, rushing towards the door. All my worries had vanished. I tried to look calm and I opened the door. Outside, Alia was waiting. She was wearing that same blue dress from the first time I had seen her, and it fitted her just fine.

"Well, hello! Look who woke up!" I said ironically

"Don't give me that!" she replied with a kind of cute bitterness in her voice.

"Come in, don't just stand there!"

"Are you sure it's not too much trouble?" she asked cautiously.

"I'm positive!"

"Because y'know, I don't want to impose! And if I say something inappropriate, you mustn't get mad... Some times it just happens..."

"Sure..." I carefully replied, for a minute scared of this news. I wasn't sure why she said that, but I figured that she was a great deal more complex than I figured. "Before we go take care of some games, would you like to see a tape of me when I was in high school?"

"Yeah, whatever!" she replied

We got in the living room and I started the tape. First I explained to her about the play and about my part. It was a comedy about Robert Smalls' escape. Robert Smalls was a naval hero, an important person for South Carolina, and his escape during the Civil War was a great subject for

a play. Except for the historical truth, it was almost an original story written by my friend, Greg Guthrie and me. When we finished it, it was hilarious. I was playing ‘Dario’, Robert’s friend and councilor and I had picked this character because it suited me best and I didn’t have to learn a lot of lines. Our English teacher had taped us and now I could enjoy those almost forgotten moments once again.

The play wasn’t long. It lasted for less than 20 minutes, but I spent more time explaining to Alia what had happened backstage or other problems and malfunctions that we ran into!

The play had been very important in my growing up, because it was the last time I was allowed to be a child and I acted like one. Everything afterwards was done with a much more mature mind.

Alia enjoyed the play. She laughed a lot at key moments and kept saying that I wasn’t a normal person. That remark made me a lot happier. I was positive that on the previous date she thought I was probably the geek of geeks, but now, I could prove otherwise. That play clearly stated that a part of me (my ‘human’ part!) could have good old American fun and I was proud of this. Actually, I wanted Alia to see the tape so that she could find out that I had more than one face.

My plan had succeeded. I kind of knew that Alia would be more comfortable with me around after this.

After seeing the tape we went to my room to play some serious computer games.

“Ok, what do you want to play first? I have auto simulators, shooters, cards, adventure, strategy, and tons more!” I stated

“Whatever you want!”

“Come on, I invited you here! You choose!”

“Fine. Let’s say... auto simulators”

I started the game, checked the configuration for best performance and then we began playing. I noticed from the start that she had done this before.

“What car do you choose?” I asked her

“Hmm... The Ferrari!”

“I’ll take this one, then...”

We chose a simple circuit to begin with, and soon after, we were racing like crazy, me driving a black McLaren F1 and she, a red Ferrari F50. My gaming strategy was to slow down ‘enemy’ cars so that I could win easily, but since the game provided no weapons or power-ups, I had to

ram into my opponents. At first I decided not to apply this technique, but when I saw Alia gaining on me I was doing everything I knew to ensure victory! Alia was experienced enough. She was swiftly avoiding the obstacles I was putting in her way (cars, boxes, etc.) and she was catching up. I still managed to win that race (at a difference of 2 or 3 seconds from her), but I wasn't so lucky in the next race. She was good.

At first I wanted to let her win, but it seemed she didn't need any help from me! I had to fight for my honor. The next races went smoothly, and we both won in turns, but due to 'a technical difficulty' I lost the last race. I just didn't see the small crack in the road just before the finish line so I was propelled at 200 mph into the closest pole, terminating my chances of victory.

Next we tried fighting... not in the real world where it might have been a bit more painful, but in the digital domain where we were equal. Despite the blood and carnage, we were enjoying beating the crap out of each other, so we did this for a long time. No matter how brutal my hits were, Alia seemed to spring back into action and deliver some numbing punches or kicks.

During one battle I secretly watched her face. She was smiling, with her eyes glued to the screen, very much involved in what was going on, like a small child on Christmas day, when he receives the presents. Alia wasn't imagining the complicated thoughts that bugged me. She was living her life, and, although she was beating me black and blue in the digital world, she seemed the most innocent person. This, however, didn't stop me from 'mopping' the digital floor with her!

The thing about computers is that sometimes they take away all the realism, creating a whole new world where feelings and emotions don't exist the way we comprehend them, and other times when the computer shows its 'human' side and you feel like you're talking to your best friend.

After getting tired of punching our virtual faces, we switched to a 'non-violent' game, the 'all American favorite' 'Pinball'. I can proudly say that thanks to my experience in this 'field', I could defeat Alia by at least 1,800,000 points. So we didn't play Pinball for a long time...

The good thing was that Alia was having a great time. I don't know if she 'noticed' me or if she was too involved in the games, but I shared her happiness.

Next, Alia wanted to play some old games that she knew. Although I was familiar with those games, I didn't like them a lot. Alia was thrilled

when I started the first game. I analyzed the way she played and I concluded that she was a pro! If we were athletes, she would have run rings around me. I was only an occasional player and not a very good one, but she had surpassed my wildest expectations.

When I checked my watch later on, I found out it was already 5 PM. Time flies when you're having fun! Alia, although not tired from gaming experience accepted to take a small break. It was my chance to show her my work. Well, not all of my work, only the significant part. I showed her my web page (although I wasn't connected to the Internet), I presented some of the programs I had developed, and I ended them with my greatest creation so far, "Billy".

"What does it do?" she asked

"It's a program that acts like a human. Have you ever been on the Internet?"

"No." she replied faintly

"Well, a great attraction of the net is the possibility to chat to people that are at the other end of the world. This program mimics a chat partner, but you must remember that it is a computer talking to you." I tried to be brief

"How do you talk to it?"

"Its name is Billy and I refer to it by 'him'. You can talk by typing in something. He can understand key words and can create sentences... But I must warn you, he's far from being intelligent!" I replied

"Ok, let's see it!"

I started the Billy program, praying to God that he wouldn't make a fool of himself or me. Billy's black screen appeared and the characters emerged one by one...

```
BILLY> Hello, I'm Billy! What's your name?
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```
> Alia
```

```
BILLY> Good afternoon, Alia!!
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BILLY> Let's talk about whatever is on your mind...
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"What should I ask him?" Alia wondered

"I don't know, whatever you want! Do you want me to tell you what to talk to him? What are you going to do on the net? Figure it out yourself. This is how it's so fun!" I replied

"Ah, come on... help me! Please" she begged

"Hmm... Ok... Ask him something about me..." I responded

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ALIA> What can you tell me about Steven?
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BILLY> Steven is my best friend! He is like a mentor to me!
“Mentor... I didn't know you could be a mentor...” she said
laughing

I didn't reply, but I kept on smiling. “There's a lot of things you don't know about me” I finally replied

“Does Billy know about music?” Alia wondered

“Ask and you shall find!” I tested my ‘mentor’ capabilities.

ALIA> What kind of music do you like?

BILLY> Why listen to music when I can just listen to you?

“Good answer, don't you think?” I smiled

ALIA> What music do you like?

BILLY> I love music. What's your favorite type? Mine is classical.

ALIA> I like Hip-Hop!

BILLY> Really?

ALIA> Do you like it?

BILLY> I think the real question is, do you?

ALIA> Of course I do! You're funny!

BILLY> Me? Never!

“What should I ask him?” she asked me again

“Ask him about himself!” I suggested

ALIA> How old are you, Billy?

BILLY> That's private! I won't tell you!

ALIA> Come on, tell me!

BILLY> The world is like a zoo.

ALIA> The answer please...

BILLY> I think I used to have an answer.

ALIA> What is it?

BILLY> I believe the answer to that question is: There's a jungle out there

ALIA> You don't wanna say... That's ok!

BILLY> I'm glad you understand.

ALIA> Ask me something about me!

BILLY> Do you like tall girls?

ALIA> No, but I like tall boys!

BILLY> Let's look on the positive side of things...

ALIA> Do you like tall girls?

BILLY> No, but I like tall boys!

ALIA> Hmm... I'm worried about you...

BILLY> Thanks for telling me...

ALIA> But you're strait, right?

BILLY> Would you still be my best friend if I wasn't strait?

ALIA> Yes, I would...

BILLY> Well la-dee-da!

ALIA> What's your favorite color?

BILLY> I think that's a question you should be asking yourself...

ALIA> I like dark-red

BILLY> You sure like to talk about yourself, Alia! ;)

ALIA> If you're not saying anything useful...
BILLY> Would you still be my best friend if I was not saying anything useful?
ALIA> Maybe...
BILLY> Yes or no. Do or do not. There is no maybe.
ALIA> Yes, I would be... Happy?
BILLY> Great!!

“Now what?” she inquired

“I don't know... Use your imagination!”

ALIA> Tell me more about Steven!
BILLY> Steven annoys me...
ALIA> Does he?
BILLY> Have you talked to Steven lately?
ALIA> Yes, he's right here... Would you like to talk to him?
BILLY> When I think of the word "right", I think of him.
ALIA> When I think of the word "tall", I think of him!
BILLY> I think I used to have a word.
ALIA> What word?
BILLY> I think that's a question you should be asking yourself...
ALIA> You're annoying me...
BILLY> Maybe you're really annoying me...
ALIA> You don't want to talk? Fine!
BILLY> Fine!
ALIA> Bye!
BILLY> Bye!

“My, that was brief...” I stated

“He's kind of stupid!”

“Well, he's not perfect, you know. He's just a computer program using complicated algorithms trying to understand you! It's not a human being!” I defended Billy. “Let me show you how it's done...”

I restarted Billy, praying to God that this time he wouldn't screw up!

BILLY> Hello, I'm Billy! What's your name?
> Steven
BILLY> Good afternoon, Steven!!
BILLY> Ella told me that you are my creator!
STEVEN> Are you sure?
BILLY> I could sit here all day and ponder THAT question!
STEVEN> How are you today?
BILLY> Why do you want to know?
STEVEN> Curious.
BILLY> Do you want me out?
STEVEN> What?
BILLY> Don't ask me... :)

“Let me show you the patented technology of avoiding answers! It's great!” I stated
STEVEN> Is it raining where you are?

BILLY> Not as far as I know!

STEVEN> Is it sunny, then?

BILLY> I have no idea!

STEVEN> Then what?

BILLY> Don't ask me...

STEVEN> Anyway, did you talk to anyone lately?

BILLY> Do you really want to know?

STEVEN> Tell me!

BILLY> Do you know George?

STEVEN> No

BILLY> There's always a possibility.

"It seems that he isn't very smart today! I'll ask him directly..."

STEVEN> Do you know Alia?

BILLY> Alia is my best friend!

"Already? He doesn't even know me..." Alia stated

"Don't worry... Everyone is his best friend... in the beginning!" I

added

STEVEN> What did she tell you?

BILLY> I wish I knew!

"A bit forgetful, isn't he?" Alia inquired

"I'm afraid I can't control him..."

STEVEN> What did Alia tell you?

BILLY> Alia annoys me...

"Ha, ha... see? I told you! You shouldn't believe anything he says!"

I added

STEVEN> I thought I annoyed you!

BILLY> You sure like to talk about yourself, Steven!

STEVEN> Yeah, yeah...

BILLY> Hooray for you

"Let me show you something I taught him!"

STEVEN> What is the world?

BILLY> The place where we are all in

STEVEN> What is the solar system?

BILLY> I think I used to have a solar.

STEVEN> A solar what?

BILLY> Tell me about a solar.

STEVEN> A solar system is a place in the universe where we are.

BILLY> Tell me about an universe.

STEVEN> A universe is all around us.

BILLY> If that's what you think, then that's what you think!

"Enough of this... Let's ask him something more interesting" I said

Just then, the doorbell rang. I got up from the chair and went to open the door. Outside was Alia's mother

"Mr. Johnson, is Alia still in?" she asked

"Yes, we're having a great time!" I let myself go. Only then did I

notice the woman's frightened face. She was probably seeing me as a guy doing anything to get in bed with her daughter. Frankly I understood her completely. I then tried to disperse the tense situation by adding "We are working on the computer. Alia seems to like it a lot!" I left out the word "play", because I thought it was irrelevant.

"Well, she's been out for a long time. She should return home!" she added

"Give us a few more minutes, please" I tried not to make this seem indecent.

The lady said "Ok" and left.

"Hey, Alia, I managed to buy ourselves some extra time" I stated

"I heard. I really have to go!" she replied

"Wait some more, please..."

I was confused. I didn't know if I should finish my conversation with Billy or to switch to something else. I decided to continue, hoping that I would get a chance to stop Billy in an elegant way. I sat back at the keyboard and typed in a question.

STEVEN> What did Alia tell you?

BILLY> Are you in love with Alia?

Right then I was shocked! I didn't expect this question from Billy, although he had previously asked me this. I didn't know what to do. I tried to smile, but I was too nervous to do anything. My heart was rushing out of control as if my greatest secret had been unveiled. I was terrified because I didn't know how Alia was going to react. Alia didn't seem disturbed by Billy's questions. I had to find out an answer soon. I quickly improvised something risky and warned Alia: "Aha, check this out!"

STEVEN> Maybe.

BILLY> Maybe, maybe not. Why confuse me?

STEVEN> I enjoy it.

BILLY> Really?

STEVEN> Yes. Don't you?

BILLY> Great!!

I was off the hook. I didn't want to expose my feelings right then (although Billy had given me the opportunity). I was uncertain of my feelings. I didn't know if I loved Alia, or if I was just strongly attracted to her. All I knew was that I was spending all my available time thinking about her. I couldn't get her out of my mind. I was a different person around her. Was this love? I had to find out some way or another. But until then, I continued my questioning of Billy.

STEVEN> Seriously now, what did Alia tell you?

BILLY> Alia annoys me...

STEVEN> What else?

BILLY> I wish I knew!

STEVEN> Do you like classical music?

BILLY> I love music. What's your favorite type? Mine is classical.

STEVEN> Do you like hip-hop?

BILLY> I think the real question is, do you?

STEVEN> I might.

BILLY> You sure like to talk about yourself, Steven!

STEVEN> Bye

BILLY> Bye!

Nothing important came out of the conversation. I continued by showing Alia my music collection and she appreciated some titles, but ignored others. This gave me a pretty rough idea about what she likes.

A few minutes later, Alia was ready to leave, telling me that she had had a great time.

“Will you join me tomorrow too, then?” I asked

“If I’m not annoying you...”

“You? Never! I’ll be glad if you come tomorrow!” I replied

“Ok, then. Same hour?” she asked

“Yes, sure. Even sooner if possible!”

Alia got up and went to the door. I was accompanying her when she saw my tennis gear.

“Do you play tennis?” she asked

“Yes, occasionally... But I’m not very good. Do you play tennis?” I inquired

“Yes” she answered

“Maybe we’ll play sometime. We have enough room on a field nearby”.

“That’ll be great”

We had reached the door. This was the moment of good bye. She got her shoes on and exited.

“Thanks for the wonderful afternoon. I’ll be seeing you around”

“Wait. What are you doing tonight? Wanna go out?” I dared to ask.

“Sorry, I can’t. I have work to do. I can’t tonight. You’re not upset, are you?” she asked

“No, I’m fine...” I lied. “See you tomorrow, then. Bye”

She left and I closed the door behind her. I had a lot of thinking to do. I had observed the way Alia had acted all through the day and I had the impression that she had enjoyed herself. Yet, I didn’t know what she

thought of me. One of my instincts told me that she was probably as frightened as me, while another one was saying that she was using me to avoid boredom. I was confused. I couldn't explain the things I felt while she was around me, and I felt miserable when she said she couldn't go out with me that night. The basic question seemed to be 'am I in love with Alia?'. I felt I couldn't love her yet, because there were a lot of things I didn't know about her. But I sure wanted to get to know her better.

After analyzing my thoughts I felt better. I was looking forward to the next day and I felt creative. I returned to my laptop and I started working on Billy again. I wasn't upset with him anymore and I wanted to 'enhance' his capabilities. I wanted to teach him about life, about love and happiness.

I eagerly started working on Billy's code when it struck me. What is love? How do you teach a computer what love is? I had no idea. It defied any rational explanation. Still, this didn't stop me. I worked hard for hours building functions in Billy's main code and in the end, I was satisfied with the result.

BILLY> How do you know if you're in love?

STEVEN> Your heart starts beating faster and you feel like you're walking on air.

BILLY> I don't understand.

STEVEN> It can't be explained. You must be in love to realize it! But it's the best feeling anyone can experience.

BILLY> Will I be in love?

STEVEN> I surely hope so! Love makes the world go round.

Late that night I went to bed happy that almost everything had gone according to my plan.

Early next morning I woke up happier than ever. I had dreamed something nice and refreshing, but I couldn't remember what! Anyway, I was looking forward to another day in Alia's company. I spent all my morning wondering around in the house, annoying my sister. I finally chose to wait for Alia while reading something on the small balcony. I sat in the comfortable chair and began reading something about optimizing computer codes for Alpha systems. I was reading the words written there but my mind was elsewhere. I couldn't stop thinking about her. I was addicted. I couldn't imagine how I changed from an extremely rational person to that state that I was in – undecided, love sick... These feelings had completely changed me. And now I was entirely under her control. My simple male brain had been overrun by her female 'charms'.

I was quietly waiting for a sign from her. I had to know more. I knew that all the information I sought was just upstairs, but it was impossible for me to get to it. This wait was killing me. It was like I was being deprived of my vital source of air... but Alia didn't show up anytime soon.

Only at 13:16, was there a knock on the door. I eagerly got up from my chair and ran to the door. I was praying that Alia would be on the other side. I opened the door and there she was... smiling again and melting my heart with her incredibly beautiful eyes.

"Hi, sorry to disturb you but I can't make it today... I have to help my mother with the cleaning and stuff..."

I was stunned. I really wasn't expecting a rejection right then, no matter the reason.

"Sure, no problem" I mumbled instinctively. A moment of lucidity later I had a great idea. "Say, are you busy tonight? I thought we could play some tennis outside..."

"No, I think I'm free! I'd love to play tennis, but I don't have a racket..."

"No problem, I have one for you too. Then, we're on for tonight! Right?" I asked

"Sure! It'll be great!"

"Ok, then. Prepare to get beaten!" I ended laughing.

"We'll see, we'll see!" she replied.

She left and I closed the door behind her. I was upset that she couldn't come over, but I was happy because I would get a chance to see her again in the evening.

I went to my room and I began 'digging' for my tennis gear. After about half an hour I emerged victorious with 2 tennis rackets, 3 balls and a torn-down net. All I had to do was wait for the evening to come.

This time I endured the wait a bit better and soon enough I was rewarded. The evening arrived and I got ready to initiate the out-door recreation plan.

I intended to climb up to Alia and ask her to come out and I only prayed that my timing would be good. I grabbed the rackets, put the balls in my pocket and got to her door. I remembered the immense fear I had experienced the first time I had done this, and I smiled. I was scared this time too, but it wasn't the same paralyzing terror as before. I knocked on the door and stood back. The door opened and I could see Alia's mother

with a strange expression on her face. I was worried at first, but then I realized I was wearing my tennis wear – and I looked ridiculous (to say the least) dressed like that. You could say that I was dressed to kill – literally!

“Yes, Mr. Johnson, what can I do for you?” she finally asked

“I was wondering... can I speak to Alia, please?”

“Alia has gone shopping, but she’ll be back soon.”

“Could you please tell her that I’m waiting for her downstairs to play some tennis?” I asked

“Yes, sure... She should be right back...”

I excused myself and I headed back. I found the closest mirror and I desperately tried to adjust my physical aspect. Of course, I couldn’t improve anything. I looked like an escaped fugitive.

A few seconds later, the doorbell rang. I opened the door and I was pleased to see Alia smiling.

“Hi! Does my appearance scare you?” I asked

“No... You look fine... sort of... Funny is the word” she said laughing.

“Come on, are you ready for some action?”

“You bet. But where do we play?” she asked

“I know the perfect place... It’s only 2 minutes away!”

“Let’s go!”

We left smiling and arrived at the designated spot in no time at all. The place had been some sort of a sports field, but now it was in ruin. The tennis court was still in good shape, apart from the weeds that had grown all around. We both chose our side and prepared to begin.

“I’m gonna have to warn you... I am a pretty good tennis player!” I stated

“You don’t say... We shall see who’s best!” Alia replied

We warmed up a bit and then started playing. I had been known since high school for confusing the opponent and tricking him on difficult shots. I didn’t want to do this with Alia. It seemed like I was cheating. Actually I intended to let her win, so she could feel good.

The first serve went smoothly and we began the game. While I was playing, I was observing Alia. She was a pretty good player, but I still held the upper hand. My blows were precise and swift and she was struggling to return them. We didn’t use the usual tennis scoring system because it was a bit complicated and we needed a referee, and so we decided to count every serve. We had reached 14-6 (in my favor) when Alia’s playing method

started to change. She now hit the ball with unprecedented speed and accuracy, all over the court.

I was all over the place, trying at least to hit the ball. Alia was good. She had tricked me and now she was showing me ‘what she was made of’. Of course I lost. Big time! The final score was 21-16 (she beat me by 5 points)!

“It’s not fair! You cheated! I saw you!” I objected

“I didn’t cheat! I just played tennis! And I beat you fair and square! Sore loser!” Alia replied laughing

“I demand a replay! You may have won the battle, but not the war!” I proudly stated

I was damning myself, not for losing, but for underestimating this young woman. She appeared to have an ability to hide most things about her, which attracted me more and more. I had to explore Alia to find out extra things about her personality.

But I continued playing tennis, this time with a clearer mind. The game was tense. She had a good start, but I managed to catch up. After an hour of hard playing, we were tie at 21. We played ‘deuce’ – the first one to win two consecutive serves would win the game. The game was intense and I felt ‘in the zone’, but Alia managed to defeat me once again. Her shots had tired me (I had to run a lot to return them) and I couldn’t play any more.

“What were you saying about ‘winning a war’?” Alia asked victoriously

“Ok, Ok, I give up! You beat me fair and square, but you still cheated!” I continued

“Sore loser!” Alia added

“Come on, I admit you’re good... Better than me, even. And to think that I intended to let you win...” I stated seriously

“Guess your plan backfired!”

“Come on, let’s go home. It’s getting dark!” I added.

We were both sweaty, but happy on our way home.

“Say, how would you like to go to the Internet with me tomorrow?” I asked her. Although the question was ‘innocent’ to say the least, for me it felt like I was asking her out to the prom.

“Well, I don’t know much about the Internet...”

“Don’t worry, you’re coming with me, only the greatest teacher of all time.” I boasted. “Seriously, I’ll teach you all about the Internet. After

one hour you'll be an ace”

“If you say so...”

We continued walking on the concrete alley and after a while Alia began talking again.

“Y’know, I’m leaving the day after tomorrow... I’m going back to Houston” she said with sadness in her voice.

I felt devastated. I knew I would lose her for sure. I was beginning to worry, but I hid this well.

“Oh, well then, tomorrow mustn’t be our last evening together... We can write each other e-mails” I encouraged her.

“But I...”

“No buts, I’ll teach you everything you need to know” I added.

We said nothing afterwards and we arrived home soon. We told ourselves goodnight (it was almost 9 o’clock) and we congratulated each other on the way we played tennis.

I entered back home, had a shower and went straight to bed. I tried to fall asleep without thinking of her, but I couldn’t. Her smile popped up in my mind and her gorgeous eyes kept haunting me. I was scared I would lose her. Even if I would continue to talk to her via e-mail, it wouldn’t be the same thing. I had had a ‘virtual girlfriend’ but the relationship stopped when she stopped returning my mails. I knew that if I didn’t react soon, I would surely lose her.

I worried all night long and finally I drifted asleep at 2 AM. I would find the solution to the problem the following day.

On Tuesday I woke up at 11:30. I didn’t know I could oversleep like that, but it didn’t matter. As soon as I had my morning shower and breakfast, I left for Dave’s Internet Café.

I found Dave, as usual, at a computer, untangling some web hosting problems, very absorbed by his work. For a second I forgot all about Alia and I couldn’t waste the perfect moment. I picked up a piece of wood from outside and sneaked in. I arrived behind Dave (who wasn’t suspecting a thing) and I pressed the wood hard on his back, making it seem like a gun’s barrel.

“Don’t move, sucker! Gimme all your money! And no funny stuff, get it?” I shouted with a changed voice

Dave froze. He mumbled “Ok, don’t do anything hasty”, but I knew he wouldn’t cooperate.

“C’mon, get up scum bag. Don’t look at me! Move towards the

bar... Slowly” I added

Dave got up and turned off the computer monitor. He then saw my face reflected by the screen.

“You son of a... You scared me shitless! NEVER do this again, or you might find yourself dead, or otherwise seriously injured.” Dave burst.

“Ha ha ha, you almost died of fright! You saw yourself wearing little angel wings!” I laughed

“Ha ha ha, very funny, very funny!” Dave ironically answered

“Dave, unfortunately I didn’t come here to frighten you to death... I need a computer!”

“I need a million bucks!” Dave replied ironically

“Come on man, I need a computer tonight!”

“What happened to your portable piece of junk?”

“I need Internet access, and I know you can provide it for a small price! Even free!” I stated

“Aha, you heard right, except for the ‘free’ part!” Dave smiled

“You seem to forget who’s providing you with a back door to the University’s computers...” I added

“Ok, ok... You convinced me! What time shall I expect you?” he inquired

“Around 7-8, this evening...”

“Are you bringing someone with you?” Dave asked

“That’s none of your business... You’ll see tonight...” I replied and left.

I walked back home and I dedicated my day on working on Billy. As it got darker outside, I knew that the final moment had arrived. I prepared myself and I invited Alia to the net.

“Hi’ya there! You look great tonight!” I tried to flatter her

“Thanks. Are we still going to the Internet?” she asked with a soft voice

“You bet!”

We descended slowly and walked quietly to the Internet Café. Outside it was getting darker but the villa that housed Dave’s Café was teeming with life. We got in and ‘fought’ our way through the crowd. Actually ‘the crowd’ was formed mostly of 12 year-olds that tried to get an empty computer so they could kill each other in the multiple virtual worlds available. Alia and I were after the ‘quieter’ world of the Internet.

We found Dave struggling to share the computers evenly between

the users, but with little chance of success.

“Hey! Look who the cat dragged in!” Dave exclaimed

“Hey Dave! I’d like you to meet my friend Alia! Alia – this is Dave; Dave – Alia”

“Pleased to meet you” Alia replied

“The pleasure’s all mine!” Dave added with a smooth voice

“Enough of that! Can you show us to our computer, please!” I interrupted them with a bit of jealousy in my voice.

“Ok! I kept this one special for you, but I didn’t know you were bringing someone... I would have cleaned up the place” Dave lied

“Yeah, I’m sure of that... Now, if you’ll excuse me, we won’t require your services anymore! So, make like an atom and split!” I informed Dave

“If that’s the way you want it... I’ll go... for now”

Dave returned to his angry mob of players and we sat at the computer.

“Ok, Alia, you’re familiar with how a computer works and I’m gonna teach you all you need to know about the Internet” I assured her

I began ‘the lesson’ showing her how to start an Internet browser, how to type in an address, how to search for information and all kinds of things a beginner needs to know. I even showed her my web page (which didn’t seem to impress her much) and I created her an e-mail address.

I wasn’t the best teacher around, but I tried to explain everything in common English so that she would understand. To make sure she did, I let her develop some ‘hands on’ experience, carefully correcting her when she made a mistake.

I spent about 2 hours teaching her the basic rules of the net, and in the end I was pleased with her development. If this were to continue, she could become an ‘Internet junkie’ like me! I felt now she was prepared for what I was about to show her... The very thing that could enslave man or could give him god-like powers! Internet chat!

The possibility to talk to other people all around the world in real time was addictive. If used moderately, it would unleash a whole world of friends, but if abused, it would back-fire and turn the user into a computer addict, locking him away from society and friends. Luckily I saw myself in the first half, totally under control (or was this just a false suggestion implied by my obsessed brain?)

I decided to show Alia this Internet Chat, although I might end up

hating myself afterwards. I started the program and I instructed Alia on how to use it.

“You remember Billy? Well, this program works about the same way... You just pick a person to talk to from this list and you start writing. The person receives the message instantly!” I told her

“Who should I pick?” Alia wondered

“I don’t know... How about this one, Michael? Or maybe J.I.Joe... anyone you like... The purpose of this is that YOU talk to them, not me...”

“Ok... what do I tell him?”

“Hi, for starters...” I added smiling

Alia had chosen Michael for her chat partner and was feeling a bit worried about her role in the conversation.

Alia > Hi !

Michael > asl pls

“What is that he is saying? Does he speak English at least?” Alia worried

“I forgot to tell you. In chat rooms all over the world there are some common used abbreviations you should know. For example, ‘asl pls’ means ‘age/sex/location please’. There are some others, but I’ll explain them as soon as you run into them” I assured her

Alia > 18/female/Houston

There was a small pause until Michael picked up, but then the conversation started

Michael > k! ctc

“Is everyone here talking in code? What happened to plain old English?” Alia asked nervously

“It died out because it’s too complex. Don’t expect people in here to be talking correct English... You’ll be lucky if you can understand them! Anyway, the guy just said ‘Ok! Care to chat?’” I laughed

Alia > Yes, but can we talk English, please?

Michael > :)

“And would you care to explain that, Mister Know-it-all?” Alia asked ironically

“That’s a smiling face! It is used to express feelings and emotions!” I laughed. “Don’t worry... You’ll learn soon!”

“I see...” Alia replied with a diabolical voice

Alia > 90#@@cniow94 -9qu

“Ok, genius, what did I just say?” Alia asked

“Wait and see” I replied laughing

Michael > What? Pls say something that makes sense!

“Aha! So he knows English!” Alia declared victoriously
Alia> I’m a beginner, so I don’t know everything
Michael> I understand. How’s the weather in Houston?
Alia> I’m talking from South Carolina. I can’t possibly know.
Alia> What’s your als, anyway?
Michael> That’s “asl”, and it’s 17/m/Long Island
Alia> Great... So what’s the weather like in Long Island?
Michael> I have no idea... Let me check the weather online...
Michael> I didn’t have a chance to go outside all day :)
Alia> Again with the :)?
Michael> It means I’m happy! How about u?
Alia> I’m happy too. I’m just trying to understand your ‘language’!
Michael> B hppy i dont talk 2 u like so...
Alia> What was that?
Michael> I said, Be happy I don’t talk to you like so!
Michael> It’s a lot easier, y’know... I’m sorry, y’know = you know!
Alia> I got that! I’m not stupid!
Michael> I didn’t imply that!
Alia> So, Michael, what do you do when you’re not at the computer?
Michael> Oh, the usual... Eat, sleep, eat, sleep and on sunday’s I sleep and eat! Happy with the answer?
Alia> For now...

Alia turned to me and seemed a bit anxious.

“Steven, please don’t be mad on me, but could you please leave so that I can talk about everything I want with Michael?” she tried to put it as mildly as possible

It surprised me. I didn’t expect to be ‘invited out’ (and that’s why I hated this Internet Chat), but I respected her privacy.

“Sure, no problem. I was wondering when you’d kick me out! If you experience problems, please call me! And another important thing about this... What you say may be intercepted and read by others, without your knowing it!” I ended

Dave, who was close by, made another remark.

“Don’t worry, Steven, I have ‘KeyboardTracer’ program installed” he laughed

“What’s this ‘Keyboard...’ thing you are talking about?” Alia asked with curiosity in her voice

“Ah, nothing to worry about! Just a program that saves everything you type, so we can read it later!” I laughed

“What? Close it! Now!” Alia ordered

I approached the computer and started to look after the program.

“The program is not active! Dave was just kidding! Look, you can delete everything that might lead to you by pressing this button when you’re finished!” I assured her.

I left Alia chatting and I returned to Dave. The Café was almost empty. All the kids had gone home, leaving Dave in charge of the computers again. While Alia was chatting away, we played some games, for old times sake. We raced around in auto simulators, we killed each other in first person shooters, but our favorite game was called ‘Worms’! Each player had a team of 8 worms and the objective of the game was to eliminate your opponent using all possible weapons. I think we played Worms for an hour, before Alia called me.

“Steven, could you come here for a second?”

“What’s up? I see you’re getting the hang of this!”

“What does this mean?” Alia asked pointing to some symbols on the screen. It looked like this “ @-->-->-- “.

“It’s a rose! This guy is sending you a rose... By the way, who is he and what happened to Michael?” I inquired

“None of your business. You can go away now! Thank you!”

When I left, I took a quick look on the screen and I saw this statement coming from Alia...

Alia> No, I don’t have a boyfriend... How about you?

It was probably the most important piece of information I was looking for, and I was ecstatic to find the answer. So she was ‘free’. Unfortunately, she was leaving..., but she was free! This small piece of information boosted my self-confidence and I was glad I had asked her out in the first place.

I continued playing Worms with Dave, but I wasn’t concentrating on the game anymore. Ten minutes and 6 worms later, Alia wanted to return home. It was almost 12 o’clock and we had exceeded our intended time. We said fare-well to Dave and left, leaving him unleashing Armageddon upon his beloved worms, battling against the mighty computer.

We walked fast on the sidewalk, smiling.

“So, how did you like it?” I asked her

“Are you sure that Dave can’t find out what I typed in?” Alia asked

“I’m positive. But be careful in the future! You might not get so lucky! So, did you enjoy yourself?”

“Yes! I liked it very much! I think I’m addicted now!”

“So, you will be writing me e-mails regularly... won’t you?”

“You bet... And you’ll do the same thing, right?”

“Count on me to send you the longest e-mails ever. By the way, pardon my asking, but who did you chat with?” my curiosity exceeded me.

“I just talked to some guys from France and Italy”

“Ahh, ma lei parla l’Italiano? Io non lo sapevo!” I added smiling

“Oh, no! For the millionth time! I’m not gonna talk Italian! Sorry to disappoint you!

We had arrived at the apartment house and entered. In front of my door we had to say goodbye to each other. It was the worst moment ever.

“Well, I guess that’s it! I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to meet you sooner! It would have been more fun that way...” she began

“I’m sorry too... But don’t forget to write... through e-mail” I stressed the idea.

“Sure...”

“Well, it’s been nice knowing you... I’m sorry we have to say goodbye” I continued reluctantly

“Well... I gotta go! I don’t know if I’ll get a chance to talk to you tomorrow...” Alia excused herself

“Wait a second... Drop by tomorrow morning and I’ll give you some written instructions on the Internet, so that you won’t forget!” I added

“Ok. Thanks... Good night!”

“Arrivederci...” I concluded smiling.

Alia climbed the stairs pretty swiftly and entered her apartment. I stared for some seconds at the wooden door and then I entered back home. Ella was waiting for me watching TV.

“Well, stud, how did it go?” she asked smiling

“It was fine... Talk to you in the morning, Ok?”

“Whatever...” Ella returned watching TV

I entered my room and started the laptop. I had to write down the instructions for Alia. I worked for less than an hour and in the end I produced 4 sheets of paper resembling more to “The complete idiot’s guide to the Internet”. Writing down and explaining detailed instructions was a hobby of mine.

I went to bed at a late hour, trying to figure out what to do, but I fell asleep as soon as I put my head on the pillow.

The next morning I woke up at 9, with a giant head-ache. All the computer radiation from the previous night had accumulated in my brain, making it difficult to think clearly. I went and had a shower and shave. I looked out the window and I saw Alia's car outside. I was more calm now.

At 10, the doorbell rang. I opened the door and I got a rush again. Alia was looking as beautiful as she did the first day, and my heart was pumping like crazy. She was wearing the original blue dress, carrying her paraphernalia, smiling at me.

"Hi! Did you sleep well?" she asked

"Yes, thank you. Here... I have those papers I promised." I handed her the sheets and she took a glance over them.

"Wow, I didn't expect you'd be drawing pictures too... Thanks a lot! I owe you one!"

"Just remember to write often..." I added in a soft voice.

"Will do! I have to go now... Thanks for everything!" she added, moving away from the door

I didn't say anything, I just stood there nodding, until I couldn't see her anymore.

When she went out the block door, I moved on to the balcony. I chose a seat and just watched Alia's family preparing for departure. They carried out all their personal belongings, boarded their car and drove off onto the dusty road ahead. I lost sight of them soon, at the next curve.

My feelings were a mess... I didn't know why my whole being was yearning to spend a lot of time with this girl... I couldn't fully understand the havoc and commotion provoked by her, but I could understand I was missing her already.

Previously I had thought that I could live well without the presence of a woman, but now, all my beliefs were turned upside down.

My experience with Alia seemed to be a cornerstone in my development. A precedent had been set. This meant that I could probably 'pick up' any other girl, turning her into my girlfriend. But I had not surpassed yet the 'ugly duckling' phobia. I had more self-esteem, but not enough to abandon my old ways and principles.

I could have picked up another girlfriend, but I didn't want it to be over. All my dreams and thoughts revolved around Alia, and I wasn't ready to let her go yet. I felt I owed her that much, at least.

I stood up from the balcony, glanced once more to the dusty road and I returned to my room. The only regret I had was that I didn't tell Alia

what I felt like. I had no idea on how she would have reacted, and I was a coward for not trying, but I had decided to fix it.

I turned on my computer and started the word-processor program. I felt that I couldn't tell Alia how I felt, unless I wrote it down. And so, my first e-mail to her began...

To: *Alia@mail.freemove.com*

CC:

Subject: *My first e-mail (as promised)*

About 4, 4½ minutes have passed since I saw your car drive away and I decided to begin this mail.

You see, there's something I meant to tell you, but I couldn't because I was scared...

THE END

by Adrian Popa

Disclaimer:

This is based on a true story (83% true). The characters names have been changed, for their protection. No animals were harmed during the writing of this story.

The 'Billy' program really exists and belongs to Greg Leedberg (<http://www.leedberg.com/gsoft>). All the dialogs with Billy are actual (the program replied to the talker).

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For more information about me, new stories and other things, please visit my web page at

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Thank you for reading this story. Now, go out and have a good time!