

"Conversation with Aziz"

by Michael Finley

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It was a bright afternoon. My son Jon and I were visiting our favorite upgrade shop in Prospect Park, Minneapolis. Jon, 11, likes running computer errands with me. Between us, tech talk passes for bonding behavior.

We get lots of things done for our systems there -- memory, hard drives, motherboards, etc. The place is by guys who speak with Middle Eastern accents, but they are extremely sharp about their business. Accordingly, business is brisk. There are always a half dozen people at the counter lugging PCs to be fixed up.

Our task today was to replace a burned out modem. I tried to attract the attention of the man behind the counter. Finally, a man who was working his way through the throng noticed Jon, lost among all the hardware.

"Hello," he said, "who are you, and how may I help you?"

"Jon Finley," my son muttered.

"I'm sorry, what? How?"

"My name's Jon Finley," he blurted. "We need a new modem. We've got a 33 bps modem but we want to get a 56k."

"I see," said the man, stooping beside Jonathan, so they were on the same level. "Whose computer is it?"

"Mine," said Jon.

"Mine, what?" I asked him.

"Mine, sir," Jon corrected himself.

"What kind is it?" the man asked, unscrewing the case and peering inside.

Jon rattled off the specs in megahertz and megabytes. He characteristically did not make eye contact while he spied off the acronyms.

The man smiled at him. "It's a powerful computer for one so young," said the man. "What do you do with it?"

"Play games, mostly."

"What kind of games?"

Jon looked at me miserably. He knows his mother and I despair of the hours he spends online shooting people. "I'm playing a lot of Rainbow Six these days," he said.

"That's a good game. I like to play that game. Yes, me! You know I have a son about your age. He is 10. He loves games, too."

Jon was a little interested, but did not want to appear to be *too* interested. "What games does he like?"

"He would like to play more shooting games. But I limit him. He is only allowed one hour per day. And only after he finishes his homework."

I was warming to this man. "How does he like being limited? And how do you actually limit him?"

The man looked up at me. "I have explained to Johar that a boy is like glass, innocent and fragile. Throw too much at a boy too soon, he will break. And once he breaks, he can never be put together again. So I am very careful. I have only one son."

I looked at Jon. It was what I had been trying to tell him for the last couple of years -- only the man had said it much better. Jon frowned uncomfortably.

"So how do you limit him?" I asked. "Do you have a timer? Some sort of software controls?"

"No," the man said. "I tell him, from six o'clock until seven. And his homework must be completed first. He would not abuse the rule."

I wanted to ask, Why not? Isn't it a given that whatever restrictions you place on a child, it is their bounden duty to fudge the line? But I got the picture -- Johar didn't mess with his dad's rules.

"Here," he said. "I have replaced the modem, and you can download files at 53k. Have fun -- but be careful," he said, wagging a finger. "Only download good things."

I held out my hand to him. "Thank you, sir," I said. "And may I say I appreciated your insights into raising a son."

"My name is Aziz," he said, taking my hand. "You know, the world is a furious place." He rolled his eyes, taking in the hubbub of the upgrade shop, everyone scrambling for a place at the counter. "But when you have a good son, like Jon, things seem simpler."

And we loaded the PC into the trunk, and drove home. And Jon stared silently out the window, the boulevard trees reflecting against his face. And I reminded myself to spend more time watching him grow.