

(SARAH BIRD)

Birds Off a Wire

This summer, as an experiment, my family unplugged from the Internet. It was no fun while it lasted.



It didn't start out looking like an alien invasion when I got a computer more than a quarter century ago. Not an early adopter—I'd maxed-out technologically with the four-slice toaster—I had that first one foisted upon me by a cyber-visionary friend. Like the Trojan Horse, it was a "present" that arrived in a wooden case. If the Trojan Horse had used ten-inch floppy discs and a CP/M operating system, the analogy would be perfect, since this insidious intruder annihilated the culture it invaded. ¶ Slogging through our most recent endless Texas summer, I tried to recall the lost predigital world for Teen Boy. I spoke of a time when vacations were so boring that incinerating ants with a magnifying glass and watching reruns of *Our Miss Brooks* were considered entertainment. You might, oh, I don't know, read a book. I offered my theory that, thanks to the computer, and to unending levels and ever-newer releases of *Counter-Strike* and *Pillage & Plunder*, his generation might well be the first never to experience life's greatest motivator: boredom. ¶ "Hey," I concluded with the

ultrapeppy nonchalance that mothers trying to mind-control their offspring imitate so well. "Just for fun, just as an *experiment*, why don't you see how long you can go without a computer?"

Teen Boy fixed me with a dead-level gaze. "I can go a lot longer than you can."

Gulp. My protests might have carried a bit more weight had there not been a family intervention the week before when my online Scrabble disc was wrested from my cold, dead hand. Still, believing I could quit anytime I wanted—it wasn't as if I was tethered to a CrackBerry or anything—I accepted the challenge. Like those shows on PBS on which everyone has to give up zippers and wash their hair with lye and wood ash, we would unplug. Call it Non-Virtual House. I programmed my e-mail server to send out an automated response, telling correspondents that we were offline—"So call, and let's see if we still remember how to talk!"—then switched off my computer. Teen Boy did the same, strafing his last Zero before he shut down *Battlefield: 1942*.

On day one, the phone rang way too early. It was a friend. My heart skipped. Since we always e-mailed, I knew she must have something intense to tell me. I guessed "divorce" before she reminded me about the automated response. So that was the first revelation: E-mail has so much become my default means of communication that phones now mean bad news.

The next call was from Xlibris, a vanity press, saying they'd gotten my e-mail telling them to call, and did I dream of becoming a published author?

Like Orthodox Jews who hire Gentiles to turn appliances on and off for them on the Sabbath, I had to ask my husband to go online and remove my automated re-

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sponse. I hadn't gotten out of bed yet and already I could see how tough life on the unplugged frontier was going to be.

Fortunately, like all the good mothers on those PBS shows, I had laid in supplies for the long winter ahead: books, DVDs, CDs, and videotapes. After mowing the lawn, Teen Boy sorted through the offerings. Diving into the DVDs, he snagged the sixties epic *Battle of Britain*. Though computer wizardry was nonexistent—actual planes exploded into actual flames—the bombing sound effects were exactly the same as in Battlefield:

1942. *Duh-duh-duh-duh-duh! Murrrrrrrrrrr! POOO!* This was probably a comfort to him, like methadone for the recovering addict.

With the cries of brave Brits and doomed Jerries coming from the living room (“Tallyho! Stuka at nine o'clock!” “Ist eine Schpitfire!”), I peered into the abyss. I couldn't work, didn't want to scare anyone with a phone call, couldn't read *The Onion* or watch *Daily Show* clips. My mouse hand itched. Just a few minutes of clicking Scrabble tiles into high-scoring words would have been so soothing. Shocked at how thoroughly digitized my life really was, I surrendered to my Higher Power and backed away from the mouse.

Stuck in the non-virtual world, I noticed the colorful collage of paint chips I had tacked onto various walls months ago. Damn perfection! I grabbed one of the test quarts I'd bought, shoved Teen Boy and his friends out of the way, and was slapping on Tuscan Radiance by the time the next Stuka went down in flames. (Our pioneer foremothers got a lot of butter churned before Bill Gates came along.)

Half a wall later, I was noticing that Tuscan Radiance should have been called Gulag Glow when a familiar voice from the movie interrupted my painter's remorse: “Thanks awfully, old chap.” Who was that actor? He had played the father in *The Sound of Music*. The urge to Google was close to overpowering. Intense irritation drenched me when I couldn't access the auxiliary brain my computer had thoughtfully provided at just the moment when the factory original was wearing out. I couldn't resist. I Googled. Christopher Plummer! Of course! Relief was short-lived and followed by guilt. I had betrayed Non-Virtual House. I was like the cheaters who sneaked eyeliner and PowerBars into the sod-roofed frontier house. I resolved to do better.

By day three, I was painting the guest bathroom Nantucket Nude and daytime television had become the permanent fixture it had been during the summer vacations of my youth. Since we don't have cable, Teen Boy clicked swiftly through all the channels. “Hawkeye! Somebody snuck in our tent and committed a neatness!” Click! “Alexis, getting pregnant with Chad's baby, then putting it up for adoption, then finding out that Chad secretly adopted it has been hard for you.” Click! “Tell her, Billy Ray! If you love her so much, how come you was sleeping with me the night before you married her!” Click! Silence.

“This experiment is stupid,” Teen Boy said.

“You giving up? Did I win? Help me paint.”

We had reached the point that all house experiments do when the fake colonists or Victorians turn dangerously grumpy and sob into their personal video diaries. Or discover that real colonists coped by drinking a gallon of beer a day and go off and ferment something. Or just rip off their bustles and codpieces, pack it in, and head for the nearest McDonald's.

So when I emerged a few hours later from a bathroom that was less Nantucket Nude than South Padre Butt Nekkid, I fully expected Teen Boy to be dive-bombing Zeros, liquidating aliens, or obliterating terrorists. Instead, he was soldering various disemboweled gizmos together. Tiny solar collectors, a container of canned air, duct tape, and twinkle lights were involved. No word yet on what's being created, but I'll let you know if he puts it in a wooden case and says it's a present for me. ♣