

My First Computer

The year was 1982. I had done a most unusual and extravagant thing. I bought an IBM personal computer. I had struggled through the many boxes, assembled the heavy equipment, connected the monstrous printer, and learned DOS. I was becoming proficient at using it for word processing. What a thrill. I could write something, edit it without whiteout or tearing paper with erasers, and print it; print as many copies as a wanted. WOW!

Fortunately I do not recall how many thousands of dollars it cost me, but it was a big deal; the monthly payments were just a little less than my mortgage payment. But I was certainly the first person on my block to have my own computer.

I dreamed of the many wonderful things it was going to enable me to do with all that word processing capability. (Now remember things like the Internet, sound, digital imaging, and all the fun software we have available today were not even imaginable in 1982.) But I knew I could write, easily correct, and make copies. I could use it to distribute memos at work; I could write and revise unit protocols; it might be just the thing I needed to get my own business started.

The slight inconveniences that were part and parcel with it were easy to ignore. It took up half a good size room. I had to have a special sturdy table constructed to support it. Each component was enormous. It took weeks to set it up and go step by step through the three volume instruction manual before I ever discovered my first real “c” prompt. Learning DOS was long and tedious, but it was worth it. It more than taxed the electrical power coming into my house. No one could cook, or do laundry, or watch TV when I was using the computer, but those seemed small prices to pay for this leap forward into the world of the future.

My children looked at it in awe from a distance; they were not allowed within touching range. They even brought friends in to see it. Everyone was impressed.

Words are insufficient to describe the feelings I had sitting in front of its gray screen, watching the green cursor move about. Color was far from an option at that time. I had its special table built in front of some windows so I could look out at the activity on the street as I worked, and more importantly, so passer bys could look in and see what I had. Theft was not a problem to consider because it was not something that could be readily moved. Each day my proficiency increased. I couldn't wait to get home from work and try a new project on my computer, or struggle through a previous set of instructions not yet comprehended. Quickly I was gaining the reputation of being “a nerd.”

My seventy-two year old mother came for a visit. I showed the computer to her and told her all about it. She was not impressed. She thought I should be saving money or at least spending it more wisely. How old fashioned her thinking could be. She even harbored some suspicions that these computer things were the work of the devil.

She maintained a safe distance away from it and enjoyed spending the majority of her visiting time doing things with the grandchildren. When they were in school she set about helping me with housekeeping tasks that had been, completely and conveniently, ignored ever since I got my computer. She was determined to bring me back into the world of “real women’s work.”

She got all the laundry caught up, even ironed clothes. I never had the heart to tell her that the laundry had piled up so long the kids had outgrown most of the clothes. She dusted, vacuumed, and dutifully brought to my attention how many vacuum cleaner bags and garbage bags she had filled each day. None of these guilt tricks worked. I just wanted to come home from work and use my computer, and that’s what I did.

The day before she left she let me know that, even at seventy-two, she could still wash windows. She commented on how dirty the windows in my house were and how she could not even see the mailman coming. I promised her I would get to them soon and assured her she did not have to do the windows as I left for work. I knew she would do them anyway, and really was grateful for all her had work.

When I arrived home she walked me through each room of the house to admire the view out the clean windows. It was staggeringly bright again. Then she insisted I walk around the house with her as she explained how she borrowed the neighbor’s ladder and used the hose to pressure wash all the windows from the outside. She had done an impressive job. I oohed and aahed and thanked her profusely, and even agreed to take everybody out to dinner as it would be her last night here for a while. Then I went in and sat in my chair, ready for at least a little computer time.

When I sat a geyser of water swished up over me from the chair cushion. I was stunned and couldn’t imagine why this had happened. My hands reached for the computer table to steady myself and were immediately soaked in a puddle of water. Somehow my eyes next settled on the printer. Water was overflowing from the top of it. Then I saw the windows, the clean windows, the jalousie windows, the slightly open jalousie windows. In horror my mind replayed words like “hose,” “pressure wash,” “all the windows.” I numbly reached for my stack of 5 1/2” floppy discs. They were soaked. They were gooey. Everything in the room was soaked. My computer would not even try to come on. It was dead.

My mother will never know how fortunate it was for her that she had provided me with sixteen years of Catholic school education. The words of those Commandments “Thou shalt not kill” and “Honor thy father and mother” were unquietable in my mind.

I squished back down in my chair as my tears added to the soaked surroundings. After my mother finally realized what had happened she reminded me that I did have insurance that would probably cover the financial loss. She also reminded me that God’s way of purging the world of its evils in the past had been a flood. I bit my tongue so as not to

remind her that it wasn't up to her to play God, as I realized what an accidental tragedy had resulted from her purely good intentions.

My insurance agent readily responded to my call, probably mostly out of curiosity. He waded into my office, looked at my rusting warping heap of computer (which he did not even have in his office), and informed me that my policy did not cover this type of loss.

Thankfully, I don't give up easily. After the clean up, and working plenty of extra night shifts as a nurse, I once again bought another computer. This one was placed far away from windows and any imaginable hazards. That was my second computer, not quite as big and bulky as the first, but almost; incredibly slow by today's standards; but with a few less glitches and bugs.

I look at my room now and in half that original space, and at far less the original cost, I have a desk top, a lap top, two printers, digital camera, scanners, speakers and numerous other pieces of equipment and oh what they can do. Best of all, they are all dry. I think of my mother, now in heaven, and wonder if God has her doing a little data entry, or if she was right and this thing is really is the work of the devil.