

## Drop Out, Turn On, Tune In - By Griffin Wicke

"Why is the flyer taking so long?" I asked, realising a moment later that I had said it aloud.

Wednesday was my turn to make supper, and I wanted to get home to get started. I was planning to make curry for our floor, and I'd already picked up the ingredients we couldn't grow ourselves in the rooftop garden. My mind wandered to a school project due the next week. We had to make a presentation on a piece of tech of our choice which old consumerism had made obsolete. I wanted to do something different than what everybody else was doing; they all seemed to be researching "smartphones" or "smartwatches" from the early 2000s. I wanted to go further back than that and find something quirky. Perched on the rail of the flyer platform at Waaban Station, I looked over the nearby forest. This whole area used to be contaminated industrial land, but nature had reclaimed most of it, so the sounds of birds and other wildlife made for a zen spot to wait. I leaned back to glance up at the screen and confirm the lack of obvious delays - why isn't it here yet?! - when a weird jolt shot suddenly, sharply through my shoulder. That was the last thing I remembered before everything went black.

When I came to, sore and confused, I realised that I must have gotten shocked by an exposed cable from the solar passenger shelter and fallen off the platform. I had crashed through the roof of a small building in a little patch of forest between the flyer station and the geothermal plant. I sat up painfully and looked around. It seemed like I was in some sort of shed.

It was full of things - mostly plastic - so they must have been really old. Most of it looked electronic but nothing was familiar. There was a lot of old junk in there. I opened the lid of a shoebox and saw that it was full of those old iPhone communicators from the 2010s. Next to it was a storage bin, again made of deteriorating plastic, full of these weird shiny disks. I picked one up and dusted it off. *Pearl Jam, Ten*. Gran had told me about these plastic plates with music on them. I guess this was some kind of track mix made by someone called Pearl or something. Behind a pile of shoe boxes and storage containers were a stack of old plastic boxes with control panels. One caught my eye. It was originally black, but someone had painted it so it was entirely covered in (faded) colours. The stylised writing on the front said 'Hitachi record and playback portable stereo.' It had a bunch of buttons on it that said 'Play', 'Rewind', and 'Fast-forward'. I fiddled around with it, then put it down and opened a nearby shoebox which was full of little plastic boxes about the size and shape of a playing card. Strange words, phrases and images

covered the paper inside. I'm pretty sure they're an old technology that people would use to listen to music. 'Tapes', I think they were called. Back from before the shiny discs. Cool old tech for my assignment, maybe?

Just about then, I realised that I was really quite cold. I reached for the heater button on my jacket, pressed it, and pressed it again. Nothing. I pressed it again. Still nothing. I realised that the shock that knocked me out had also toasted all my electronics. I had no heater, no geomapping, no payment system, and no way of contacting anyone. In an ironic 2020s throwback, I sure could have used one of those iPhones right now, with all my connections fried. I turned back to my surroundings to see if I could find a blanket or something to help me get warm. There wasn't much except for a huge boxy shape covered in a tarp. Maybe I could wrap myself up in the tarp while I looked for ways out? With all my tech dead, I couldn't take the flyer home, so I'd have to figure out some other way.

I tugged at the tarp fruitlessly for a while before realising that it was attached at the bottom. Bending down to see better, I untied the knots and pulled back the tarp, revealing a big metal box with glass around most of the top part. It was sitting on four, probably petroleum-based, wheels. I looked around and found protruding handles on the side. I pulled on one and the door popped loose. I slid it open and looked inside. I thought it was some kind of tiny apartment at first - and then I saw the turning ring.

Gran had told me about these things. Vehicles that were powered by a liquid called 'gas'. What a confusing concept. Since I was a little kid I had learned that my ancestors had messed up the planet by burning this stuff to power all kinds of things. She had also told me how attached people got to their vehicles, and how her family had had one a lot like the one I was sitting in right now. I'm pretty sure she said that the on switch was right underneath the steering ring thing. I climbed through between the seats to what must be the front. Looking under the ring, I found a little piece of metal sticking in a slot there. I jiggled it experimentally, then twisted it, and suddenly I heard a massive rattly explosion of sound! After the initial shock, I clued in. The sound was the motor, exploding a little bit, over and over. I vaguely recalled learning about this old technology in school. There was initially smoke and a stench coming out of somewhere, but it dissipated a little in a minute.

Poking around, I discovered a slot in the dash that must've fit those weird plastic boxes with strips of music in them. I found a few sitting around, one marked *Nirvana, Nevermind*. I popped it in for a laugh, assuming it would be some chill meditation thing. When the loud guitar chords burst tinnily through the box's speakers, I recoiled - and then listened. I kinda loved it. It sounded nothing like the cyberbeats that I was used to, but it resonated with me.

As I listened, I kept messing around with Hitachi Tape Playback And Recording Portable Stereo. A few batteries in another shoe box, some loose wire; how could I get this thing going? I used a pair of scissors to cut the wire and stripped the end. I tried to attach two more wires which I then attached to the battery. I pushed a tape into the slot and pressed the button marked PLAY. A scratchy voice and some loud guitars came out of the speakers.

A few minutes later, still tinkering with this old tech, I heard a *tap, tap, tap* sound. Assuming it was part of the confusion of music, I ignored it and kept listening. But then a few moments after that, I heard it again, in the middle of a different song, so I went to the door and looked out the peephole. A community patrol officer was standing right outside, knocking at the window! The sudden release of toxic gases when I started the vehicle must have tripped some sensors and sent the officer straight to me. Soot, was I about to catch it. Quickly pressing the stop button, I crammed the Hitachi Tape Playback And Recording Portable Stereo into my backpack, then grabbed what I thought was the handle and tried to open the door. The handle didn't pull towards me as I expected it would, but instead moved down, turning a bit. When it turned, the window moved, so I kept turning it until the window had disappeared fully into the door.

Turns out, the officer was just off duty and walking to the flyer station when they heard the music and came to investigate. After hearing my story about the shock and fall from the platform, they told me I actually was quite lucky a second time - apparently the smoke from the vehicle was dangerous to breathe in for a long while. I could have fallen asleep - and never awakened. It did feel good to be back in the fresh air. They led me back up to the platform, used their chip key to let me onto the approaching flyer. I thanked them several times, and they waved me off as it zipped away.

I was home in time for supper, though not soon enough to make it. Mum was wheeling herself agitatedly up and down the hallway, like she does when she lets worries get the better of her. She

was initially upset with me for not getting in touch, especially when she couldn't geolocate me. But when she heard about my misadventure, all was quickly forgiven.

Then, when I took out the Hitachi Tape Playback And Recording Portable Stereo to triumphantly show Mum, it didn't work! So frustrating after I thought I'd found the perfect subject for my project. I fiddled around with it fruitlessly that night, then after school the next day and the day after that. It was looking grim for my deadline. But fortunately, at the next Saturday tech repair drop in, one of our building's community elders helped me figure out the problem. After we'd replaced a few wires and cleaned out a lot of grime, it worked well and played my favourite non-meditation. Bear has so much knowledge to share - I hope I can be as helpful to the youngers when I get to their age.

And my tech assignment - it turned out great. Full credit.