

MUSING

So old-fashioned!

I couldn't reach the pedals. The first time steering the wheel around bends only to recover on a straight as I sat on the driver's lap was so much fun that I instantly decided to displace the driver one day. Then, the first day behind the steering wheel — all by myself — was a blast, because another operation thrilled me even more. It was the manual shifting of gears with quick release of the clutch. Control was with me, not with the car.

The noise of every shifted gear was awesome. On a zigzagging upslope, playing catch-up to keep the car from rolling back with the perfect mix of clutch and accelerator wasn't easy. Hey, I could do things my way! Fast forward: the smooth ride in my new car has so much computing power behind it. The engine, way more powerful, just zips ahead at the slightest caress of the accelerator, but I can barely hear the roar of the engine. The power it packs now allows me to sit back, relax, and think of something else, cushioned by thick windows and efficient computers. Sure, it is comfortable, but my thrill has diminished.

You are perhaps scrawled on the bed as you read this, texting in between to some of your buddies, or a loved one. But have you really spoken to anyone today? These days, you laugh out loud without being heard, grieve over a friend's tribulations with a teary icon without even shedding a real tear drop, and express love with a red rose without having to hold a real one. If only you could add the smell of a real rose on the screen! Wouldn't that be wonderful?

At a party, I caught a glimpse of an army of middle-schoolers happily clicking away to buddies outside while being blithely oblivious to the very person sitting next to them, engaging only in occasional chats. Most of them knew one another. But one girl seemed an outlier, slouching, when a careful second look revealed that she did not have a device. Bummer! How could she have forgotten a basic necessity? Her entire party was ruined. And that bespectacled

sleek-looking boy who could pass for a debate prodigy? He seemed to be on a killing spree on his mini game console. Many popular games now teach the art of killing.

Smartphones are such beautiful toys that we absolutely adore them. Even when I don't have anyone to talk to, I never get bored. Back when you would go to a place where you didn't know anyone, you'd feel so awkward that you'd stare at the floor or survey the ceiling, eager to flee. Not anymore! Nowadays, you are empowered. It's often super easy to pretend to be busy when you are not supposed to hear something, and be able to quickly debunk a friend's theory in just a few clicks. You may be sometimes unwanted by some people, but never by your device. This is mind blowing.

The party host didn't quite know how many guests were invited for dinner at his house, and seemed to be getting surprised at the door upon seeing some, he thought, were not on their guest list. What a pleasant surprise!

He managed to smile at everyone, as if he was expecting all of them. His ability to cope with the unknown was a testament to his immense social skills. He would always pick up the phone and invite someone after a small talk. Such an old-fashioned person, I thought to myself. He didn't realise that his wife had invited everyone through Facebook in minutes. Yes, you heard me

and bustle. The tactile memories of my first book and first pair of shoes would lure me to buy more. I'd smell the new books, turn the shoes upside down and try them on.

I still pop into Barnes and Noble for the smell of the books. These days, visuals are so strong and intense that you don't need to perceive most things by touch and smell. Once you step into a virtual world, you can swim among the dolphins, or scale a mountain. Books, devoid of any smell, appear on online devices by the hundreds. Missing a salient feature of a product is impossible with loads of reviews and pictures from different angles. Comparisons are so thorough that you often go crazy. Your simple deduction from your own inspection is now lost to a slew of other people's reviews. It's amazing to be able to get to know and order something with a few clicks. Doing things in your pyjamas has never been better.

Your smartphone apps for relaxation ask you to imagine doing nothing, not even stepping out to the chirping of the birds. Would you not rather relax under a tree canopy, being drummed on by incessant rain than in an app?

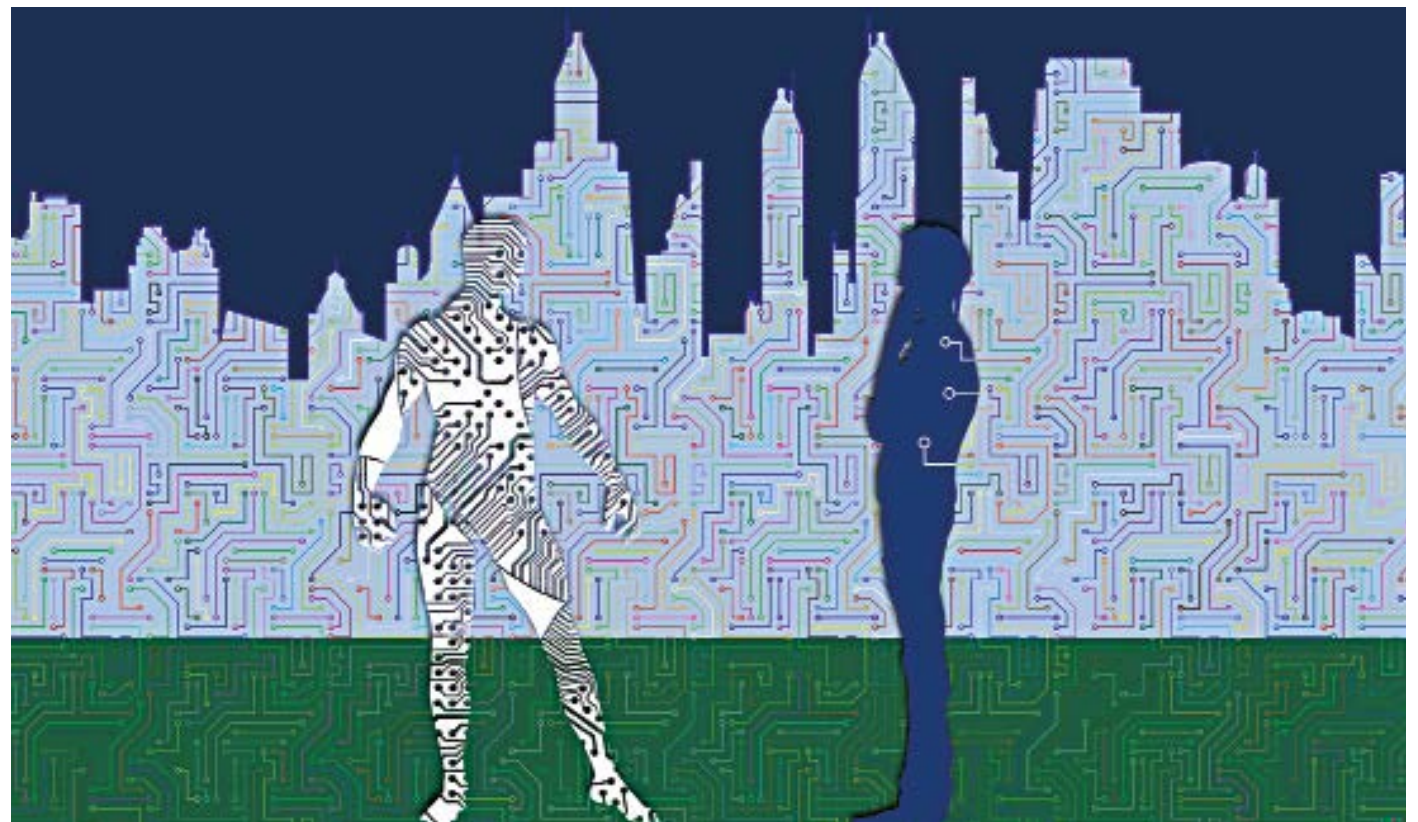
Before you ask me to move over, get this: I love magic. I had a hard time ending a virtual session that took me hang-gliding over the dazzling lights of Manhattan. What a feeling! Could I ever have mustered enough courage to jump from a skyscraper? I can't tell you how I got saved

once there, I admired your selfless fundraising for the distressed. You like almost every aspect of your friend's life, even if the post is as mundane as combing hair. I get it. But I neither figured out why you liked your Facebook friend's loss, nor your insistence that we debate on Facebook rather than face-to-face, even though we see each other often.

The thrill of shifting gears is long gone. As you anxiously await the advent of the driverless car, I cringe. Yes, that first love has stayed on with me. Steering around a bend, while pushing the pedal to the metal, and shifting gears is the reason I hop in the car. While I always ask my car or Alexa, I enjoy talking to you a lot more because it is not I who asks all the questions. Your open-ended questions extract more from me, and I love it. Texts? You often text, wishing to say no more than you write, and your rich collection of emojis get you by comfortably.

I am as hooked on technology as you are, but my new-found magic may have quashed something precious. A robot waiter immaculately serves me, but draws a blank when I ask why I made his day. He looks the same every day.

I am slowly giving away more of my natural self to someone who's stripping out my inconsequential emotions, keeping only my valued intelligence to make decisions for me. Airplanes override lowly pilots at times. It is artificial, but way more powerful.



right. All the friends roaming on Facebook could be found at one place, and the RSVPs were prompt. Not that he was technically-challenged. What I love about technology is that no one can stake an absolute claim to omniscience.

Strolling inside a mall, I relish the hustle

by my smartphone where I couldn't have imagined any other option during my travel. Oh, that icon? I have laughed out loud many a time without distracting a book-reading you.

I wonder if I had really known what you stood for until your Facebook post, but

Could this intelligence one day render me worthless?

Oops! my watch is asking me to breathe again. Sorry, I must go now.

By Arif Shahjahan
Photo: Arif Shahjahan