

Sprouting links

By Wadih El Haddad

My father's Toshiba laptop was one of the last items of his that I opened in the two years since his passing. It had been password protected, and no one had any idea what the password was. We could take a few guesses based off of the way he coded other passwords but sometimes it was absurdly unrelated. However, just yesterday, my mother found a note in one of his jacket pockets; it was his backup password list. On his desktop were very few work files, a bookmarks folder, and a file titled "Pictures worth keeping". It was a folder with some-thirty scanned images of family members whose names I could not recall and an excel sheet titled "Diagram."

There wasn't much space on the Toshiba, and neither me nor my mom had much need for it. It was a little clunky from overuse but it otherwise worked fine. I decided I'd look up ways to increase its performance speed or make better use of it when I came upon a list of suggestions in a tech article. Most things, such as formatting or partitioning the disk or transforming it into a virus zoo were either too boring or not how I would have wanted to treat my dad's laptop. I eventually came to the more experimental suggestions. That's when I found the Seeding project.

They had a site for Seeding where digital gardeners and green thumbs had gathered to plant a program that grows on your computer. It seemed very practical, did not require too much to install, and the project was open source, which means if ever there was something devious about it, someone involved would note that just by peering into the code. It was perfect for our situation since the Sun wasn't reaching us like it used to, it probably wasn't reaching some of the Seedling users either.

I planted the Seedling in my dad's computer. I tucked its file in a folder named Dirt. I made sure to drop a jpeg of a heart in there too, so that it wouldn't be afraid to sprout. I did not know what to expect, as not many had mentioned what would happen exactly. I was only told that it was safe to do so, so long as I stayed alert, bold, and trusted the process.

Every morning before midday, when the Sun normally would have peaked, I'd be sure to have right-clicked and watered it. Every week and a half or so I'd scramble the file name to toss the Dirt around. I wondered more about what others had grown and how they did it so I went to the forums to know. Seeders had posted about their long-lasting botanicals nurturing a passion for the things that they do. There were plants for gamers that learned how to play games with their seedlings, for lovers that passed compliments and gifts through their vines, for traders that would discuss crop yields and prices based on the "internal market," for cooks that had spice mixes recommended to them on mint and bay leaves, and for bookworms that had dialogue trees and branching narratives. Code lists and ripened filetype fruits were on display by some of the most eccentric Seeders. The recommended ways to encourage your Seedling's growth were varied and adaptable. Some people kept music playing on their computer, while others were feeding discs into their CD drives when they could. It was a homegrown experiment worth observing and nurturing.

I was hyped. This had to be something worth the time I was giving it, not having to think about how hard life had gotten since the United States took its final gamble on keeping its voracious appetite satisfied by blocking out sunlight from one third of the world. They're probably going to have to think of a better name than "The Dark Ages" this time around. Besides, this wasn't the first time they'd thrown a nuclear warhead in a supposed desert to kick up a global dust storm to prove they'll do anything to keep business as usual. Local agriculture production suffered greatly and despite all the urban gardens and greenhouse projects, UV lighting prices soared and God knows what rural farmers are dealing with.

Unlike most things in life lately, I was willing to allow my faith to play with this personal pet project without worry for the consequences and an excitement to see it through. It even gave my mom something to smile about to see me so dedicated to something again.

Some weeks passed and it did not grow as much as my excitement had first led on. I began to water it inconsistently. I stopped tossing dirt around for a good while and a few burnt cigarette icons showed up adjacent to the file. Winter came and I decided I should at least move it into a subfolder to protect it from the cold. I was losing hope and my expectations were beginning to fade.

Mid-January pulled the supposed sun back into its throne. I decided to clean up the cigarette butts and brought the seedling back out of the shade. I was surprised to find a subfolder had been budding in the Dirt file and it was highlighted with a pretty shade of blue. I was so curious and excited. I was witnessing my Seedling grow in a way I could actually reference. The folder was named Branch_7.

I wasn't sure why there was a "7" appended and I checked for any hidden folders. Inside Branch_7 was a .txt file named "Salamat". Was my plant talking to me? In Arabic? I was so unsure and I was ready to look up linguistic preferences on the forum but my curiosity got ahead of me and, the next thing I knew, I was staring at what appeared to be a letter. It read:

Habibi Nour,

We're so glad to hear from you! We haven't seen you since you were just 3 years old. It's been so different living here in Canada that we've almost forgotten what Beirut was like. We still have pictures from our last visit that we go over from time to time and reminisce on all the pranks your father and I used to pull on our boys. Your auntie Stella sends all her love, and I don't know if you've been keeping up with the boys on their socials but I guess you're all into the same things at this point.

Tell us how have you and your mother been? And Ghina? Are there any signs of the dust settling down soon? We were all so uncertain of the future when it happened, we didn't know how long it would last. And yet here we all are.

It's so sweet of you to reach out to us with this application (Seedling) of yours, it was very heartwarming and made our day. It asked if we wanted a Cutting before we typed out this message and I'll be teaching the boys how to water it so I won't have to do all the work. I think your Aunt Huda and Uncles Bassem and Bassel would benefit from this greatly too.

Let us know if you need anything, alright?

All the best,
Randa, Hani, and the boys

I showed mom the message and she smiled to see such kind greetings from family we hadn't spoken to in a while. She asked if I remembered them to which I responded with a scratch of my head, a squint, and a shrug. She went into her room and returned with a box of panoramic photos she had taken when I was younger. I saw Hani and Randa and Mom and Dad standing in a field. I was cradled in Hani's arms, with Randa to his left and mom to his right. "You're the reason they decided to start a family, you know. They were overjoyed and bewildered with how tender and small you were, brimming with life." She mentioned. I couldn't wrap my head around how I could have caused so much joy by just existing.

I asked about Bassem, Bassel, and Huda, and she produced two photos where the family was gathered with more members than I could recognize. The names of everyone present was written on the back.

I scanned both of the images and typed out a response of thanks and love. I told them how happy their message had made us and how we were doing well and have been managing with Lebanon's ongoings amidst this long eclipse. I asked about the difference between here and there, about whether their sons were playing anything in particular lately and how they had gotten into their favorite sports. I also asked if either of them did art or writing of any kind and asked them to share. I pasted the scanned image into the Branch_07 folder and hoped for the best.

I typed out my reply so quickly I was sure I'd found something so precious in the heart of this tree. I barely noticed the little wire bumping up from under the Numpad board. I did not expect this seedling to contact my relatives, nor did I understand why, but I'm glad that it did. Seeing the smile on my mother's face was already rewarding enough. I thought if I included some more of mom's photographs and dad's numbers from his old family phone book I'd probably find some more growth soon.

During the two weeks since the appearance of Branch_07, three other branches had appeared. In Branch_06 was a letter from Huda. She sent me pictures of her adorable cat Dino. She was happy to hear I was reaching out to others as well and she voiced her support more than once. In Branch_03, Bassem's humour and good wishes populated the messages he sent along with links to online jokes from the 2010s. He introduced me to his wife Andrea and their son Roy. And in Branch_05, Bassel who had married Shafi'aa - one of my mom's older sisters - after my parents got engaged, was eager to share very important world news with me that he insisted could help us figure out how to prepare for the next humanitarian catastrophe headed our way. I wasn't sure how serious he was because I certainly couldn't be this oblivious to the treachery of the world. Could I? Some more wires were beginning to loop in and out of the ports on the sides. I pushed them back in and assumed it was just how it always was. The family interactions were all so sweet, but some part of me began to ask questions. Questions I wasn't too fond of.

One evening, over late-night labneh and zaytoun with mom, I asked “How often did you hear from family before I got the seedling? And how come it was so hard for everyone to reach out until now?”

It took her a moment to respond. She ate her bite and spoke, “I’m sure things were difficult enough for them, having to figure out how to set up life anew in another country is never easy. All the daily concerns shift according to what’s physically around you, and those that are farther off feel almost ethereal when you have no control over them.”

“But Mom, they left so long ago, it’s been more than 10 years. Did something happen?” The power cut. The light of the billboard facing our balcony was now the only source shining some light through as it switched from one outdated ad to the next. The silence felt heavier, but we didn’t stop eating. “Don’t bother with old family drama. No one needs their wounds opened up again at this age. Besides, nothing that happened was your fault and they all seem to be very happy with you, maybe things can be different.”

It took a while to sleep that night. How genuine was everyone being with me? Does it matter? The neutral white light offered me no distraction nor room for reflection. Just a white wall in my face. I wish I could just replace it with something a little more pleasing.

I decided to ask Huda about Dad and what he was like. She seemed the most transparent about things. According to her, everyone was closer when they were younger, having had to visit one another often while their parents were busy at work. Things changed with adulthood because of the reality of how difficult living here had become. Sure, everyone wanted to leave, but not everyone could. Those that stayed definitely took on different responsibilities than those that left. This included taking care of the elders, even during the events of the last two decades.

When I asked her about any siblings who passed away before my father, she mentioned Nadia, and how her death really affected him at the time. Being the eldest two, they were really close as siblings and they had the biggest faith in the perseverance of family over everything this life could throw at them. Unfortunately, some problems were too hard for Nadia to overcome.

“Cancer.” Mom answered, shaking her head while looking into the plate. “By the time the doctors located it, it was already metastasized and hard to defeat. She also refused treatment despite your dad’s best efforts to convince her. We had to watch her suffer and stayed as positive as our spirits would allow us in her company. Only God knows how your father felt. I’m sure he felt some guilt for not being able to save her, and he definitely wasn’t happy with the lack of communication or support from outside.”

That must have been awful. I had never met Nadia. Come to think of it, I’d only ever known that she passed away before I was born. Not why, nor how, nor how she related to us.

I tried to relay the rest of what Huda told me: “She also spoke of family trips to Syria and how already, before them, other family had immigrated and spread out across the Earth for other reasons.” The scariest thing I think about is all the damage me and Ghina would have lived

through if we had been born earlier. The effects of this past still echoed in the walls and floors of every house built old and new in our countries. Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Armenia, Iraq, Jordan, Egypt, Tunis, Yemen. I felt the pressure of all the layers of grief.

Mom later got out a box of pictures titled "Nadia, with Love". The box was full of photographs of Nadia and Dad at parties and family gatherings, as well as candid photography of day-to-day life. I scanned them the next day and added a new folder called Branch_01 and inside a file with a similar name as the box "Nadia and Dad, with Love". Whenever one of the relatives stumbled upon it, they'd send letters of admiration and fond recollections of memories. I could understand why he was mad with them.

As the months passed and I kept finding more things to ask about, I couldn't help but feel like I wasn't getting anywhere with the rest of the family members. Popping out of the sides, dead pixels appeared and the metal casing was beginning to brown, things were looking pretty bad. By August I was really beginning to worry, no one on the Seedling forums had ever documented the detriment of a laptop as a result of the project. My post was dumbfounding the developers and regular users. If they had no clue what to do, what could I possibly offer to save it from terminating itself? They were all very astonished by the nature of the result as it wasn't often that people get trees. Of the users that had some experience with saplings at least, they mentioned that sometimes the hardware isn't able to keep up with the growth of the seedling which then gives out before much can be done to secure a better environment for it. There haven't been any documented instances of the seedling overwhelming the hardware. They asked me if I had an abandoned car park nearby or some old cinema theater with really big screens that could serve as a bigger "mechanical" pot, in case I wanted to take a chance at letting this seedling grow bigger.

Another day had passed, the night was denoted by the regional electric switch-off that leaves nothing but the flicker of the corporate ad-space beaming in through my balcony. I stared at the white light and got lost in it for a bit. It stung my eyes. I felt the tears form while I related the stinging sensation to the dead-ended disappointments in digging into family secrecy.

I thought of the seedling again. If only there was some way to pull it out of the computer like through a 3D printer. Why not just install it on the biggest thing I can find? The contrasting light hummed while I was searching in thought. It has to be nearby and easy to access. I should be able to leave the program to grow all it wants. My focus stuck on a growing vine at the bottom of the billboard screen. It was definitely longer than it was yesterday. It's almost like it's feeding off the light from the billbo- That's it!

The terminal for the billboard was not hard to find, the casing was broken and small plants were growing in the dirt that resided in the terminal compartment. I held my breath for a moment before jacking the USB chord, the other end of which was still plugged into my seedling's Lenovo, into the terminal, hoping I could pair the two devices. All kinds of worries began to arise. Even if this did work and the Seedling was able to successfully take over the billboard's programming, how was I going to cover the costs of the electricity bill this thing was going to

consume? Would the municipality or the owners come after me or it? Is there a chance the ads might ruin the tree's produce? Is it safe to leave the contents out here in the open? I just couldn't wait on these thoughts. I needed this thing to live.

All dark. The billboard shut off. Now what? Do I just go to bed and hope? Do I have any hope left? I went back to my room. I packed the laptop, went back up to my house, and slipped under the covers. I missed the white light shining in. The silhouettes of the junk in my room were beginning to come to life the longer I stared at them. Not being able to sleep is one thing, but with the added torment of hyper-awareness, I expected no mercy.

The sudden return of white light blinded me as I was just beginning to accept how unhappy I was feeling; the billboard had turned on again. I cursed at its creators before realizing this was a promising sign of perseverance. I scanned the screen with my watering eyes, I found nothing, just the faint shadow of the vine at the bottom edge of the screen. Only now does it seem like the only remaining truth. It must have taken years for it to reach this height. Finally, I slept.

I woke up to the smell of onions and mushrooms sizzling in a pan begging for the introduction of eggs into the mix. Mom was making a feel-good breakfast. Did she know I wasn't feeling so well just by the way I looked in my sleep?

She opened with a "Good morning! Got enough rest?"

I groggily nodded, still confused about how she had known. I cut straight to the point. "How'd you know I wasn't feeling so good?" She stopped and a smile worked its way through, "Why, your tree of course!" I was caught off guard, but then she pointed out the window. I saw the billboard was displaying a text message: "Mom, I'd love it if I could just wake up to a little boost for the soul!"

I couldn't believe it.

The transfer worked! The billboard was displaying my private sentiments publicly for the whole neighborhood to see. Oh dear. I hope it remains vague. Wouldn't want anyone knowing it was my doing. I took pictures and reported it on the forum. The billboard accepted the Seedling's graft. It was confirmed even further when later in the week, it displayed its own self-inserted advertisements, displaying the message: "In my Family Tree are many branches. I open up to that tree so that I may see all my loved ones soon. Download your very own Seedling today, sprout some links, and gain a little growth!"

It's not unusual behaviour for a billboard honestly, so I'm not complaining.

Years later I had notes from at least 30 different countries on where everyone had been and how they had been doing, on what they remembered and how they planned on spending their summers and winters. Branches were not only categorized by numbers but were also assigned letters for generational levels. While I tried to climb up the tree to find ancestry, the next

generation of kids was beginning to mature and bring with them their own stories and lives. I had sprouted a love that was looking to belong and now the bark was thick and brown, laid across a billboard screen in front of my balcony as I scrolled up and down its HD brambles and branches to find the next loving message for my family.