

It was raining. Actually, it was more like pouring; raining would be an understatement. There wasn't a lot of us who decided to play the match then, especially considering the team we were up against. They were in the 8th grade but quite a few of them liked 8th grade so much that they stuck to repeat it for two, maybe three years in a row. This was a common joke amongst ourselves: it meant that these guys never managed to pass the tests and advance to high school. And a few of them were actually really talented at soccer; too bad they missed the opportunity of an actual football scout who could have provided them with an actual career.

We were in the 5th grade and a lot of us were so skinny, that we would have flown far away like Dorothy if the wind decided to be furious that day. But I thought that we had to be there. All the great players in the history of football would show up no matter what. It could snow, it could rain, a volcano could erupt at any moment somewhere in the world, but we just had to be there and play the match and not disappoint the fans. And it was a championship, after all, we just had to be there to play.

But there were no fans. And the pitch was muddy. And it was a leaning field and it had some rocks. And it was raining hard. Did I mention that? And we played. Just a game that lasted for half of an hour, 5th graders versus 8th graders. The result? 8-0. For the other team, obviously. I remember very clearly that back then I was trying really hard to explore anything I knew about football and wonder if I ever heard about a soccer game, in any division, that finished 8-0. I couldn't bring up anything but I still wouldn't let go. These other guys were so huge and bulky and they had so many talented players and we managed to limit the score at only 8 goals! What an achievement! Maybe some of us could really have a career in soccer.

Then I went to the French class. I was quite good at French. Especially at grammar. It just made sense. Maybe because my native language, Romanian, had French influences. And I was quite good at writing and reading, but to this day I cannot have a conversation in French. Nonetheless, we Romanians have a saying: If you can speak enough of a language not to starve to death in that country, you are good enough. And good enough I was.

I was quite fond of the French teacher also. She was a short woman with short hair with a gentle personality and a lot of charisma. Back then, I had no clue what charisma was, but as you can see, I've learned a lot of new words in the meantime.

When the French teacher entered the classroom, she shouted my name and called me out to the front.

- Ryan, You have to go to the principal's office right now!

- B... But why? I was scared because I was never causing any trouble and I hardly knew who the principal was. I knew that he had a goatee that he was very fond of, everybody referred to him as "Mr. Goatee" and he was always sporting a formal suit. But that was pretty much it.

- You just have to go! Now! I don't know what it is about.

I was wearing sportswear, and my trousers were ridiculously large. And I wore the same thing almost every day to school because my family was struggling hard to make ends meet. But on this particular occasion, my pants were more than baggy and hilarious. They were also terribly muddy. I was also wearing an old and worn-out T-shirt with a fading print. I felt deeply embarrassed to visit the principal's office dressed that way. So I put on my brown - also muddy - sweater. Dirty as it was, it just felt like a better choice at that moment.

I was keeping my head down in shame. I was walking really slow, while the rain was smashing hard the old windows of the school. I do recall that there weren't any thunders and flashes of lightning that day, it was just pouring, but calmly. Yet, at the same time, I could swear, if someone asked me to, that I heard thunders struck and saw lightning bolt or perhaps the other way around, as I was heading to the principal's office. My classroom was on the second floor of the school, which was also the highest level of the building, - not to mention that my school was the tallest building in my village. The principal's office was on the ground floor, in the opposite direction of where I was. The walk could hardly have required more than 40 seconds, in a regular situation. Yet it took me hours. I do believe that I got my first gray hair on that day.

I was restless and young and had no such experience before. I kept wondering what I did wrong. Maybe it was that one time when accidentally I scratched the wall on the hall. Perhaps it was. Somebody must have witnessed it and reported me. They are going to give me a warning. Or maybe they will rate my behavior poorly. Romanian school rated your behavior and you could even be forced to attend the same grade again if your mark was low. Oh, my GOD! I would carry a stigma until I finished school. Or would I even be able to finish school? And what was I going to tell my mother? I was screwed for life right there. By the time I've got to the principal's office I was soaking wet; not because of the rain, but because of the pouring sweat. I sweat so much when I'm nervous. I just learned that about myself right then and there.

I've knocked on the door. Pause. I skipped a few heartbeats, when, suddenly, a kind voice told me to come in.

- Ryan, do you know why I've called you here?

I could hardly speak at this point, so I moved my head left and right to signal a no.

- There is a program sponsored by the government which grants one kid per school, based on their school results, a 200-euro voucher destined for the purchase of a new computer. And you have outstanding results so far. Thus, we decided to give that voucher to you. Certainly, we cannot hand out the voucher to you, you will have to tell your mother to come tomorrow at school to collect it. Congratulations!

He tried to shake my hand, but I was trembling profusely and couldn't find the inner power to answer. He understood and smiled.

- That would be all. You can go back to your French class.

And off I went. It must have taken me half of a second to leave the office. I wasn't able to realize what those words meant right then. While on my way to the class, I was trying to put them together and gather their actual meaning.

The government, 200 euros, computer, me. Wait...That can't be right. Me? Computer, me. Me, computer, 200 euros. And I have to tell my mother to come to school to collect it. The computer or the money? But he said voucher. What on earth is a voucher? And will I have a computer? Me? My own computer? That can't be happening. Before that, I only saw a computer in the home of a rich neighbor. That kid was younger than me, yet he had so much more money, and it always stroke me as unfair back then. He had a lot of toys and I hated playing with toys because I was only dreaming about playing Fifa 2000 and Need For Speed II. Those were the days... But now I could play anything at any time if I really, truly, genuinely was going to have my own computer.

My mother did come the next day and she did collect the voucher and she was so proud and happy. She kissed me and said I was worth her hard life as a single mother dumped by a dad who never paid child support, as she was too proud to sue him.

Then, the saga started. A computer, back then, was worth around 500 euros and my mother had a salary of 100 euros per month, give or take. In order to pay the difference of 300 euros, she had to apply for a loan which took weeks to get an approval and after that, we needed to go in city to actually purchase the computer. Ploiesti was the biggest city nearby and was roughly 30 kilometers away from my village. And in order to bring the computer home, we needed to borrow someone's car, because we didn't own one, and the computer was so big and heavy.

So we had to ask a car owner to join us on this journey. This guy expected to be paid by computer owners like ourselves. So we borrowed some more money to pay him, too, and, after all that time and hustle, my new, long-awaited first computer was in my room.

Instead of a happy end, it was the beginning of another struggle.

How does one connect all that stuff and all those wires? And after we found somebody else who managed to ensemble it all together, how does one start it?

We searched for the power button for half of an hour. Then we noticed some chrome ornaments on the front of the unit. It took us a while to realize that some of these worked as buttons, too.

And one of them turned the magic on.

When it actually showed "Loading Windows" it was the happiest day in my life so far. Also, it was something else. The first time when I got something that I didn't really work for.