

Lost in sun and silence

The golden age of communication.

Vincenzo Palermo

Finally, he was alone.

The Sahara was black, covered by billions of dark solar panels, silently chasing the sun. He had to bribe the Libyan maintenance workers to leave him at the exact centre of African Phoenix, the largest fully robotic solar plant in the world.

Alone.

Well, not exactly.

"I really think this is insane," said Rick's voice into his head.

"Everybody thinks this is insane," commented Mei Li, another voice in his ears, "but you know how Liam jumps into things. Let him stay there for an hour or two, and he will return home crying."

Looking at the display of his phone, Liam saw that most of his friends were online. They were there for him, to see if he really was going to do it. Rick was connected from his office in New York, Mei Li was chatting from home in Hong Kong; then Michael, Alan, Nikolaj... all his chat friends scattered around the world.

"If you want to stay disconnected for some time, you just turn off your computer and phone, you don't go to the middle of nowhere," said Rick.

"How many different windows do you have open on your computer now, Rick?" asked Liam.

"What do you mean?"

"How many other things are you doing while talking with me, my friend?"

"Come on, this is not important."

But that was exactly it. Liam knew he had the attention of all his friends at that moment, but none was giving him a 100% of their time. Liam was hardly in a position to criticize. His house in London was the first to have a TV in the bathroom, to keep tedium at bay, even in those special moments.

"I can't remember myself doing only one thing at a time. Ever," said Liam. "I can't remember working without checking my e-mail, or jogging without listening to music. Come on, Mei, even when we had sex, we had music on and our mobiles ringing!"

Mei Li didn't answer. Maybe she was chatting with somebody else.

That was exactly the reason why Liam, that same morning, took a low-cost flight from London to Timbuktu. The crowd of the city, where half of the solar energy feeding the world was produced, was the last bit of hyper-connection that Liam could stand. Turning off the phone is not enough (he said to everybody); it's like swimming in shallow water, where you can put your feet on the ground whenever you like. He didn't want any emergency escape.

"Well," said Rick, "call me when you are over with this bull..."



He turned off his smartphone, his only remaining connection to the world. Then, he threw the phone into the air as hard as he could. It described a long arc and hit a silicon panel, bounced a couple of times and fell down in the underworld, between the solar cells and the sand.

Then, Liam discovered the Silence.

Nobody around for kilometres; no Internet connection; no way to communicate. He could hear the wind passing through the panels, whistling around the tubes, noises he hadn't noticed before. The huge amount of electricity produced and carried around seemed to induce a low hum in the air, or maybe it was just the noise of the piezoelectric actuators continuously aligning the panels to the sun.

Alone, and in silence — at last.

After some time, Liam got bored. There was nothing to do, just walk around and get sunburn. The desert was fascinating, but only for the first five minutes. Now he had shown he could do it, he could go home, talk about it at parties, and girls would ask: "Really? You stayed

disconnected and alone for a whole day?"

The biggest fear of the twenty-first century was not death, but loneliness.

And low connection speed.

After some more time, he was not just bored, but thirsty and tired. The Libyan workers should come and take him back at 8 p.m., but without his mobile he had no watch, and couldn't tell the time. This drove him crazy. Mei Li was right. He was going to come back home and cry.

After what seemed a huge amount of time, he was in full crisis. What if the work-

ers didn't come and rescue him? The sun was still high, but he was sure that 8 o'clock had come and gone. He could have called for help — before the stupid idea of throwing away the phone.

He ventured beneath the solar panels, away from the main road. The panels were mounted on poles at least two metres high, so he could walk under them in a pleasant shadow. It was easy to find the phone, lying in the soft sand, undamaged by the hard landing.

He had just turned on the phone when they came.

Four young guys, dressed hip-hop style, their clothes

whitened and worn by a long stay in the desert. They all had long metallic tubes, pointed as spears. Very primitive. And scary. A gang of teenage marauders, as there were in every big city, but how the hell could they survive in the desert?

He tried to say: "Hello!"

They got closer. Their noses were deformed by cotton plugs soaked in gasoline, and they had headphones shooting music at maximum volume, keeping them in permanent hallucination. Liam turned back and ran away. He hadn't gone ten metres before the spear hit him. Falling down, he could hear Rick's happy voice, answering his call.

"I had bet ten bucks on you calling back," said Rick. "You could not survive a whole day alone." ■

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