Storm Clouds
by Ken Trethewey

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Cue: Hardware …

Narrator:

In the beginning, it was mostly about hardware. Everything was once stored on your computer. My first computer arrived at work in the early 1980s. It was a shiny, beautiful IBM XT with a thirteen inch screen. We took it out of the box, plugged it in and after a couple of minutes, the bright orange screen was blank except for:

"<C:>"

I thought:

"OK, What now? … And why C?"

A computer in 1989 might have a huge capacity of 20 megabytes - a hundred and sixty million ones and zeroes - on that curious thing called the 'hard disk.' But the computer was only interested in text and numbers so it was fine. Today, it could hardly store a couple of photos.

But there was also a 'floppy' disk - remember them? The disks really were floppy at first, but then they became stiff and we still called them floppy. (Instead of the Age of Technology we ought to call it the Age of Silly Language!)

At first, things called programs came on floppies, but you could also store stuff; 1.44 megabytes of beautiful data apparently saved for eternity, as long as you didn't put it near a magnet. Even just one of your phone photos today wouldn't fit on it, but they were well used for years.

Then, after a while, the pile of floppy disks started filling boxes and there wasn't enough room on your computer as the stuff we generated (called files) got bigger and more numerous and - curiously - we couldn't bear to delete anything, just in case.

So, if storage became a problem then we got external hard drives - which worked fine; they still do! And as the technology improved these external drives stored more stuff and became cheaper to buy. Wonderful! Why did we change? To make money for some men, perhaps?

The Internet in those days was new and slow, and we used to have special wires to our landlines and use dial-up. We cared deeply about baud rate and if your modem was able to transmit at thirty-two thousand bits per second you were in seventh heaven.

Today, billions of bits per second is not enough to keep the whole family streaming and the smart phone still delivers distorted speech that drops out, crackles and stutters, messes up your conversation with time delays … and so on.

In some areas, even in big cities, the Internet is still painfully slow for some. A businessman I know can barely function in the city because the Internet is too slow to use. Yet the businesses across the street have fast, gigabyte Internet. Despite many complaints to the service provider, he is constantly told this cannot be fixed. But so what? Who cares?

The Internet got fast enough for most people and then They (the companies - but actually just a few American billionaires) realised that, instead of just leaving us to wend our merry way with our files sleeping comfortably at home where we might lose them (!) it was a much better idea for Them to store our stuff on Their computers where they would be 'safe'. And we could even let Them hold all our personal information and bank details where they would be safe from harm …

Ah, the smell of money over the morning coffee next to the swimming pool. Nice!

We had already begun to buy CD writers that could store four billion bytes of data. Endless amounts of music and videos and movies and recorded TV programmes that we never listened to or watched again were safely committed to thousands of tons of indestructible Frisbees that were later - if not deposited in landfill - an excellent hi-tech replacement for scarecrows. And we were generating - across the planet - billions of non-recyclable last-forever plastic discs for all our data storage. But somehow that wasn't enough.

So, as we all upgraded our computers because they couldn't handle the jobs we thought we wanted to do on them, They reduced the size of the storage on our new computers - even though it was cheap as chips - so that our storage filled up quicker and the computers got slower because of it.

They also, amongst many other changes of course and direction:

(1) Gave us fewer and fewer sockets to plug all our devices into;

(2) Kept changing the cables and connectors that we did need - so we would buy more;

(3) Removed all access to floppy discs, CDs and all other useful external devices

And - amazingly - They actually made us glad that we could finally store our stuff with Them - endless amounts of space! HaHa! At a cost that was hidden to most of us.

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Scene 1:

At a Texan spaceport, two men are enjoying a chat between rounds of golf.

Elon Haltwothousand, a tech billionaire who made his fortune with his private spaceship business, is relaxing by his pool with cool towels around his overheating brain. His visitor is Donald Clump, a dodgy businessman out of Florida's Orange County who never pays his bills and uses other peoples' money to invest in the leisure industry.

Elon gets a sudden idea.

"Hey Don, we should try renting our stuff out. Why should they pay us only once for our stuff. They should pay us monthly for EVERYTHING!"

"Elon, I thought of that thirty years ago. I have so many brilliant ideas I can't use them all. I'm a genius you know?"

"Oh really, Don? That's great. Want more coffee?"

"And I have the greatest software businesses in the history of our country ..."

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Cue: Software ...

Narrator:

Once the hardware became so cheap, They were able to upgrade all the software to help us make larger files since storage wasn't an issue any more. Everything could now be sent up and down the wires at the speed of light (if you were lucky enough to have optical fibre, of course) and it didn't matter how big the files were. And instead of us once having to load Microsoft Office using fifty (true!) floppy discs, so we could write letters and check our spending on Excel, and make Powerpoint presentations that were efficient at sending folks to sleep, we could now download it all from Their computers and they could charge us a monthly license rental fee for using it.

And They could at last stop piracy because:
"Home taping is killing music."

And They could control where we put our stuff.

Maybe you didn't realise this: when we use software it comes with settings that tell it where to store the stuff we make. Once upon a time - by default - the storage was on OUR computers. Now, by default, it is on Their computers. (Most of us don't know how to change that.)

So, as you use Windows and Apple and Android and all the others, your stuff is automatically saved on Their storage computers and we pay them for it. (Well, that's not entirely true because there's that thing where they get you hooked with a free offering on start-up, and then later They start to charge you when you're hooked and can't get out without losing all your stuff and there's too much to download on the slow Internet we suffer with out in the boon docks.)

And our files get bigger and bigger because the wonderful new bigger screens show thousands more pixels to make it sharp and colourful and we can see the ant on an elephant's backside. (Do we need that?)

By changing from 32-bit software to 64-bit software (which nobody really noticed as long as we kept upgrading) They could make the colours even more colourful, and we could distinguish the countless shades of mauve on Sabine Hossenfelder's YouTube sweatshirt. Even though the file sizes grew even bigger.

But our computers don't have the storage to hold all these big files. We need Their storage.

And if you are a graphic artist or a musician or a photographer or a film maker, you earn a living by creating original things on your computer. It's stuff that belongs to you. You made it. By law, it's copyrighted - owned by you - not transferable - so it can't be used by anyone else without Them paying you for it. It pays your bills.

Yes, but it's stored on Their computers.

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Scene 2:

Elon lets Don into a special secret.

"Hey Don - I'm going to get some clever lawyers to over-ride all these copyrights and use the stuff made by these stupid creatives to train my AIs. Adobe started doing it and all my competitors

will be doing it soon."

"Great idea, Elon, but I thought of that back in the 90s. It was such a beautiful idea. I was going to take everything anyone has ever stored on my company computers and use it to build better AIs. I'd never have to pay for any their stuff ever again. We wouldn't need people at all. Just AIs that are free for us to make anything we want. Just think of the porn images I could make ..."

"Would you like some caviar Don?

"I've got the greatest data centres in the history of our country. No-one has ever seen data centres as big as mine. We have the best lawyers and ..."

"Ha! Yes, I know. And Bill's lot are going take pictures of peoples' screens every few seconds and store it on Their computers so we don't miss a single thing they do. It will take up plenty of storage space. They'll need even bigger data centres, but that's easy enough. Down here in Texas, even though the outside temperatures are in the 100s, we have enough hydrocarbon fuels to burn until doomsday, creating as much electricity for cooling the cores as we need. The money will still come in from the punters. They need us."

"Elon, I invented electricity. Did you know that?"

Narrator:

The worm has turned. Their storing is killing home musicians - and photographers and film makers and graphic artists and all other creative people.

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Cue: Pictures ...

Narrator:

No-one takes film photos anymore. In fact, everyone takes photos all the time on their phones, a craze curiously started by the Japanese. But phones don't have much storage. OK, we decided let's store our stuff on Their computers where they have unlimited storage.

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Scene 3:

A sudden breeze at the poolside causes Don's orange comb-over to stick up. He urgently calls over his bikini-clad hairdresser to fix it, just in case there's a paparazzi in the bushes.

"Elon - D'ya know we have a big new data store being built in Ireland that will use more power than the Irish people use every day. When I turn it on they'll run out of electricity to heat their ready meals. But that's OK because we'll have the best and biggest capacity anyone's ever seen. And we'll have some really beautiful eastern European women on reception."

Elon is unimpressed.

"My store of Twitter - sorry, X - data is already getting full. We have six million quad cores soaking up data from 2 billion minds every day. It's a historic repository of vital conversations between the world's finest brains. We can't afford to lose that. So we simply grow and charge more rental."

"All my stuff is there Elon. Make sure you don't lose that. Of course, that was until I set up the most truthful social media platform the world has ever seen. Someone has to fight back against all the lies told about me. (You didn't by the way!) My Truthful social has all my deepest thoughts which are crucial to the future of mankind. It's so beautiful. I'm a genius you know?"

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Narrator:

A justification - so Their story goes - is that we can now access our data across multiple devices. What a great idea! That's so fun! Some households might have twenty devices or more. That's no good. If my kids are everywhere on their phones and their tablets and their desktops and their X-boxes , how will I know what they are doing?

Now we can link all our phones and our tablets and our TVs and our computers and our gaming consoles and our Internet-of-Things at home - we can link them ALL to the same storage centre. Then we can see fabulous photos of - like - our dogs and the meals we ate last night and - like - totally EVERYTHING - in hi-definition on our 'smart' TVs that download everything from Their remote computers on our wonderful gigabyte fibre broadband that's quite inexpensive. It's all so cool.

And instead of talking to our kids, we can communicate instantly with all our friends on social media because there's unlimited storage.

Oh, and that doesn't cost us anything (at least, I don't think so). It's the advertisers who pay and

they never increase their charges because of their advertising overheads. So we take thousands more photos than we ever did before. We take photos and videos of EVERYTHING and we don't have to worry because They are storing them all on Their computers.

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Cue: Videos …

SCENE 4:

"Hey Don, videos take up much more room than photos in our storage. I'll soon have everyone shooting video."

"Elon, did you know that I actually invented video? My companies were making porn movies before anyone even thought of it. YouTube is now recording everything that happens in the world in wonderful 5K video. All my best speeches are up there. My videos get the biggest audiences anyone has ever seen in the history of presidential campaigns."

Elon ignores him.

"Video makes me a lot of money. The storage requirements are unimaginable and nothing ever gets deleted. And it's all backed up somewhere else so it doesn't get lost. The rentals I charge for storage of video are amazing."

"Elon, did you know my kids - you know the ones I had with Ivana or Ivanka or whatever her name was - were making videos of themselves - really great videos they were too - back in the 80s. They made films of themselves doing stupid dances? They loved it."

"Don, I'm creating a new thing called TikTokamak for the stupidest videos ever made. They're only short, but the kids don't have the attention span for anything longer. So they'll make more and more videos and I'll have more to store. Oh, and I'll also use my channel MyTube for the same thing and call it 'Shortpants'."

"Elon, you really should watch my videos. They're the greatest vid..."

Ignoring him, Elon gives Don a bill for the coffee and caviar which Don leaves on the ground as he walks off with his bikini-clad hairdresser.

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NARRATOR:

Brilliant! We don't all have to be clever movie-makers. Instead of taking a boring photo that could be just a few thousand bytes if we saved it right, but is actually 2 or 4 million bytes and getting larger with every phone upgrade, we can now make brilliant 30 second videos that are 400 million bytes and store them on all that unlimited space on Their computers because we don't have enough space on our phones.

Of course, we can pay Them for that, but we don't notice the cost. It's all included in our phone bills, and all the other things we pay for - and WILL pay for when the skies fall in from climate change. Yeah, who needs photos when we can shoot video?

But the cameras on our phones are not great and we can now buy these incredible cameras that shoot hi-resolution video of the dog dancing or Parker falling off his skateboard, and we can put them on YouTube or Facebook or Instagram where all our friends can see them. And they are only about 4,000 megabytes each in size. It doesn't matter because they are all saved on Their computers. (They are NEVER lost because they are all duplicated and backed up to a different geographical location just in case …)

And we can film our entire lives inside cars with these 'dashcam' cameras, or we can use them to take endless videos of cats at night as these video surveillance cameras keep watch over our front doors. And I could even mount two - one at the front and one out the back...

WE CAN NOW FILM OUR ENTIRE LIVES!

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SCENE 5:

Stephen Nonothing is a social media influencer making a fortune on TikTokamak because he is admired by millions who love him because he knows nothing but spreads hate and misogyny and has great pecs. He is scrolling through his latest posts with a grovelling admirer, Mary-LeeAnn-Tracey Aphrodisia Spirioglou.

"Hey Stevie - so where does all this stuff on my phone and my computer go? (Just love those tats, by the way!)"

"Well, Mary-Lee - like - whatsyername? It's up there in the clouds somewhere. Isn't it like insane? Who cares - just do it baby."

"OK, I get it now. Are you like coming with me to the Save Planet Earth demo?"

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