

Test Pattern

When our children were quite young, my wife and I bought our first dishwasher and installed it in the kitchen. The kids, probably 3 and 4 at the time, became quite excited over what was to them a momentous paradigm shift in the household routine. That evening we loaded the machine up and pushed the buttons. The kids dragged their little play table chairs up to the washer to sit down and watch it work. There was nothing to see, of course, but that didn't stop them. Helped by the whirring and gurgling noises coming from the washer, their imaginations ran away to a place only the very young can go. After a few minutes, the machine stopped and took a breather before what I guessed would be the next cycle.

"Mom, it's broke," said my daughter.

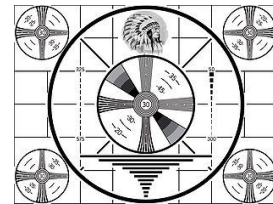
"Be quiet," my son told her, "the next show is gonna start."

I remember the excitement felt by my brothers and me, three little boys, when we settled down in our living room in 1951 to watch our first television program. On the night my father came home after ordering

a TV set from a store in town, he explained that television was like a miniature movie.

The console TV, with doors on the front, arrived in the afternoon a few days later. We boys had all we could do to contain ourselves waiting for Dad to come home from his job as a newspaper pressman. Then we could watch our first TV show. All afternoon my mind served up images from the silver screen. My favorite cowboy stars and maybe Doris Day would hopefully appear in our living room, though somewhat smaller than in the theater. After supper, when we were all assembled quietly on chairs and the floor, and Mom had made sure Grandma had a decent seat close enough to hear, we were ready.

Dad switched on the TV set and we watched the tube light up. Immediately lines began crossing the screen, zigging and zagging and rolling enough to make anyone queasy. Finally, the screen resolved into a picture.



"What's that?" said my older brother.

"It's called a test pattern," said Dad.

"It looks like an antenna," I said. "All those straight lines."

"It's not doing anything," said Grandma.

"Well, it's ..." began my father.

"Where are my cigarettes?" asked Mom, patting up and down her apron, the one with so many pockets she could have rented out a few to the neighbors.

"I've gotta go to the bathroom," said my little brother.

"The test pattern has five lines in each set," I said. "That must be like a code."

"I've never actually seen Jack Benny," said Grandma. "Never went to his movies."

"The program will be on in just a minute," said Dad. "Jack Benny isn't on TV yet."

"Oh," said grandma.

"Look, there are four sets of lines," I said, "Like a compass."

"Your newspaper said Jack Benny was going to be on TV," said Grandma.

"Michael, if you have to go, please go".

said Mom as my little brother squirmed around on the floor.

"It's not my newspaper," said Dad. "I just print it."

"Four sets of five lines equals twenty," I said. "Aunt Sue's street number is sixteen-twenty!"

"Stick with the compass," my older brother said to me. "You're always lost."

"It was just a fart, Mom," said my younger brother.

"Maybe Senator McCarthy can get them to put Jack Benny on soon," said Grandma.

"It could be a message from Mars," I said. "Maybe they're taking over."

"I think ... I'm sure ... I'm pretty sure it was a fart," my little brother said softly to himself.

"You'd help the Martians take over, you turncoat," my older brother said to me. "You even look like a Martian."

"Look, there's four circles. Four times four is ... the rest of her street number!" I shouted. "Dad, they're after Aunt Sue!"

The test pattern suddenly disappeared and a drawing of a man riding a lawn mower appeared on the screen. A collective gasp of appreciation rose up from our little group. Dad had read about TV studio operations in Popular Science magazine and said we were viewing a studio advertising card, a poster sitting on an easel in the studio. A camera was trained on it while an announcer would

read the advertising script, a "voice over." But the announcer had evidently left for supper, because there was no voice. In a few moments, while we sat glued to our seats, the lawnmower ad slid sideways off the easel with a jerking movement and revealed a new poster, this one selling tires.

"Turn the sound up, dear," my mother said to Dad.

"It is up," he said. "See this little button? It says ... oh, it says Contrast." He twisted a different knob.

"... and stay tuned for our network television programming," said the announcer, who didn't know he'd been out to supper.

"Aw-w, we missed it!" said my older brother.

"What did we miss?" said Grandma.

"The invasion," I said. "They came on lawn mowers."

"Uh - oh," said my little brother, and he slid along the floor and out of the room.

"I can see why everyone is so impressed with television," said my grandmother.

"Poor Aunt Sue," I said.

You the picture ... pun intended.

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