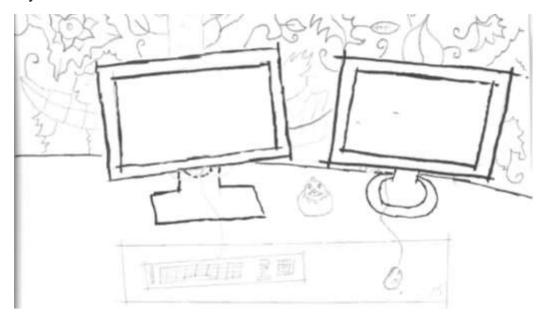**A War of Aliases**

The internet is a wonderful place to go and escape from the physical world. That is something I found out at a young age. The place where I felt the safest and most content was at my desk behind the illuminating screens of my computer monitors. For a portion of my life, between the ages of about twelve to fifteen, I spent more of my free time talking to people online than people in the physical world. I didn't know the names or faces of many of these people, but they became some of the closest friends I had ever had up and helped me grow throughout hard times in my life.

My safe space wasn't anything special to look at. My room was on the second floor of my small townhome in Centennial. The sun found a way to shine all its blazing rays of light directly through my single window, often leaving the air around me stuffy and torrid. My computer was situated under my simple desk, which had two twenty-inch monitors, a keyboard, mouse, and mouse mat situated on top of it. It was decorated by a rubber duck, and a large wall tapestry covered in abstract nature designs. One could see me situated at my chair all day and assume I was alone. A room like that is usually seen by people as just a rest area where an introvert may go to recover his/her social energy. However, even though I was by myself in a simple room, I rarely considered myself to be alone while I was there.

Around the time I turned twelve I started playing a popular game called Minecraft. I gradually started meeting people as I played online and found myself in a virtual 'friend group'.

The catch was, I barely knew any of their real names or faces. We all went by our online aliases, preferring to separate ourselves from our physical lives and create new ones in this online world. As someone who did not particularly enjoy his real life, I found myself enjoying going by an alias and feeling like I had some control in what other's knew about me. I went by the name, 'Boomz', and did not want to tell any of them my real name. Most of them felt the same way, choosing to go by names like Jomacy, Noterdam, Speed Freak, and Staragata. However, there was one outlier, and his name was Atticus.
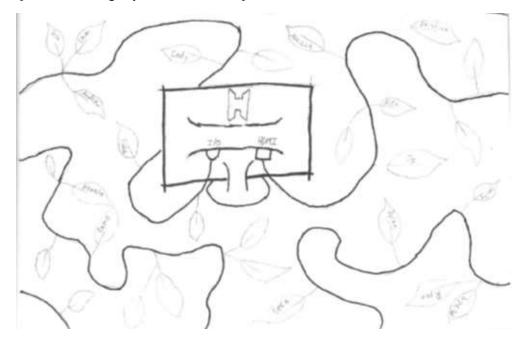
Atticus only had one name, unlike the rest of us. It was the name he went by in both the physical and digital worlds. He was about 10 years older than me and became something of a big brother figure. He was calm, level-headed, mature, had impeccable judgment, logical, and cared deeply about others. I looked up to him and thoroughly enjoyed every minute I spent talking to him. My desk and computer became the place where I'd go to talk to and have fun with my online friends, and where I'd look forward to getting my dose of life wisdom from Atticus.

After about a year of consistently talking to and playing games with Atticus, he finally confronted me about my name. I told him that I wanted to keep my online life separate from what I thought was a rotten real life and that I felt like having a separate name was kind of symbolic of that. I felt like my two lives wouldn't be compatible and would just get in the way of each other. However, Atticus was having none of it and decided to have a lecture and teaching moment.

"Your lives don't have to invade each other. You aren't a battlefield, you're just a person. Don't consider it as two sides of a war, because those two sides are just one. You are you, not just an alias, and once you can accept that fact you'll find yourself feeling a lot more control. Accept yourself, then you can truly carry over the calm you feel here into the real world because this is only a separate life if you treat it like one." These words of his really started me down a path of growth. Everything Atticus said felt very logical and obvious to me, and I just had to accept the words. Soon afterward, I finally told him my name.

To a stranger, my room could be viewed as just a stuffy corner of my house without much visual value. However, it became my portal to other worlds full of unique environments. I could go from stepping on the crunchy, pixelated dirt of Minecraft to exploring the rich colors of the

cosmos in Waframe, to hearing the bellowing roars of demons racing along the red sands of Doom's version of Mars. These are the kinds of experiences I could dive into when sitting at my computer. I knew that so many fun adventures could be found in this reality, and I eventually used that to my advantage when making friends. I decided to allow my computer to be a launch point that would allow me to connect with people in real life. As I started talking to more people at school, I also started inviting them to play various online games with me. My safe space became a hub that connected me with so many people. I used to have two separate vines of life, one that grew connections digitally and one physically. Instead of hiding from the leaves of one, I grew to be okay with allowing them to grow side by side. Their roots always found themselves at my computer, allowing my room to be the place I could feel both safe and social.

While the internet can be great for escaping the world, it can also be ideal for connecting with it. Without meeting people online, I may not have ever become comfortable with myself or people in the real world. Atticus, as well as many others, helped me develop so many parts of my personality and identity. My judgment, logic, empathy, and maturity can all have their roots traced back to those online friends. While I didn't physically move much while in the safe place I called my room, it allowed me to go around to so many different people and allow the vines of our lives to intertwine. I'll never forget the friends and memories my computer allowed me to make and look forward to the many more to come that will continue to help me grow.