

Nobody From Nowhere

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I grew up in Dubai, which is a city that has no patience for the idea that things cannot be built quickly. The skyline changes year to year. Glass towers appear where there was sand. There is a particular kind of ambition in that place, visible and unapologetic, the belief that if you work hard enough and want it badly enough, you can manufacture a future out of nothing. I absorbed this the way you absorb the heat there, which is to say without noticing it, until one day you realize it has gotten inside you and you cannot tell anymore where it ends and you begin.

My parents are Indian. They came to the Gulf the way a lot of Indian families did, carrying the particular immigrant calculus that goes: sacrifice now, position the children well, let the children carry the expectation forward. I understood this without it ever being explained to me. The expectation was ambient. It lived in the way my father talked about certain careers, in the schools that were considered worth attending, in the unspoken arithmetic that converted achievement into safety and safety into love. I am not saying this as a complaint. I am saying it because it is true, and because I think it matters for understanding why I became the kind of person who, at nineteen years old, is simultaneously studying mechanical engineering, building AI companies, applying to research fellowships, and genuinely not sure which of those things he is doing for himself.

The question I have been sitting with this semester, the one that started as a seminar topic and became something more personal, is this: what does it mean to expect something from your own life? Not in the motivational poster sense. In the real sense. What are you actually hoping for when you imagine the future? And how much of what you are hoping for is yours, and how much of it was handed to you by a city, a family, a culture, before you were old enough to negotiate?

I built my first real product at sixteen. It was a distraction-tracking wearable, smart glasses that logged when you looked away from your work. I soldered the circuit board myself, wrote the firmware, designed the enclosure. Nobody asked me to do this. I did it because the problem interested me and because I had the kind of teenage energy that, if not directed at something, turns corrosive. But even then, at sixteen, I was already thinking about the story it would make. Already imagining explaining it in an interview someday. The project was real. The problem was real. And yet somewhere inside the doing of it was also a performance, for a future audience I had not yet met.

This past year I built Candid, which is a platform that deploys parallel AI agents against websites to surface the reasons people leave without buying. I built the whole thing; the backend in FastAPI, the browser automation in Playwright, the real-time analysis pipeline. I competed with it solo at HackIllinois, over a thousand participants, and won an honorable mention. Then

two weeks later I won first place at the JHMC Ideathon at Purdue. These are, by any reasonable measure, good outcomes. I was proud. I called my parents.

And then, maybe four hours later, I was already somewhere else. Already thinking about what came next, what this could lead to, how to position it. The win had been metabolized almost before I finished tasting it. And I noticed this happening, the way you notice a habit once it has been pointed out to you, and I thought: this is not healthy, exactly. But I also did not know what the alternative was.

There is a thought experiment that has stayed with me from Plato's Republic, offered by a character who is trying to argue that justice is just a performance we put on for others. The thought experiment is simple: imagine you could become invisible. Imagine no one could ever see what you did or hold you accountable for it. Would you still behave the same way? The argument is that you would not. That the invisible person, freed from the audience, reveals what they actually want, which is comfort and power and safety, not virtue, not justice, not the good. The performance ends when the audience leaves.

I read this and did not think about justice in the abstract. I thought about the hackathon win. I thought about whether I would have built Candid if I had known, with certainty, that no one would ever find out. If there were no competitions to enter, no applications to strengthen, no story to tell. If the product would simply exist, used by people I would never meet, solving a problem no one would ever trace back to me. Would I have still stayed up until 3 a.m. debugging the WebSocket connection? Would I have cared whether the Gemini integration was elegant or just functional?

I want to say yes. I am not sure I can say it honestly.

What I can say is that there is a difference, and I have felt it, between the two kinds of work. There is work I do that is oriented toward an outcome I can name and present and submit. And there is work I do that is oriented toward a problem that will not leave me alone. The first kind is energizing in a specific way; it has the energy of a sprint, of a deadline, of something that can be won. The second kind is quieter and harder to explain and does not end. When I am reading research papers on scientific machine learning at midnight, not because a deadline is coming but because I want to understand how physics-informed neural networks handle turbulence at the boundary layer, that is a different feeling. It does not produce the same high. It produces something more like gravity, a pull that does not care whether anyone is watching.

I think about my father. He is an engineer who became a manager who became someone who no longer does the thing that made him an engineer in the first place. I have watched this happen over the years and I have never asked him whether he misses it, the actual work, the problem-solving, the making of things. I do not know if he does. I do not know if the version of success he was working toward had room for that question. The immigrant calculus does not leave a lot of space for asking whether you enjoy the work. It leaves space for asking whether the work is secure, whether it pays, whether it positions the children well. Enjoyment is a luxury of the already-arrived.

I am not sure I agree with this. I am not sure I have earned the right to disagree with it either.

What I know is that I came to Purdue with a very specific picture of what success looked like, and that picture was made of other people's definitions. Google by junior year. Research publication before graduation. A company with funding before I left. These were not arbitrary goals. They were the goals of someone who had been paying attention to what the world rewards. They were rational. They were also, I started to realize somewhere around the second semester, not quite mine. They were the goals I would have chosen if I were designing a person who would be impressive to the people I wanted to impress. Which is not the same as designing a life.

Plato's argument, the one underneath the thought experiment about invisibility, is that the person who only behaves well because they are watched is not actually a good person. They are a strategic one. And a strategic life, a life organized around what looks good rather than what is good, is not a free life. It is a life of constant performance, which means constant anxiety about the audience, which means you are never quite doing anything for its own sake; you are always doing it for the reaction. The ring does not corrupt you. It just shows you that you were already performing.

I competed solo at HackIllinois because my team fell through the night before. Most people would have gone home. I did not go home. I stayed, built the thing in thirty-six hours, and placed. I have told this story several times since then. It is a good story. It has a clear shape: adversity, persistence, reward. What I have told less often is what the thirty-six hours actually felt like from the inside, which was not triumphant. It was quiet and strange and a little desperate. There were long stretches where I was not thinking about winning. I was thinking about whether the architecture made sense, whether the agent prompts were producing useful output, whether the evaluation framework was actually measuring what I wanted it to measure. The competition faded into the background. The problem came forward. And those were, I think, the best hours of the whole weekend.

I do not think ambition is the enemy of this. I think misdirected ambition is. There is a version of wanting things that is really just wanting to be seen wanting things, and that version is exhausting and self-defeating and structurally incapable of being satisfied. And then there is a version that is genuinely about the thing itself, about understanding something, building something, changing something, and that version can sustain you across the long stretches where no one is watching and nothing is being won.

I am nineteen years old. I do not have this figured out. But I am more honest about the question than I was a year ago, which is maybe what a semester of reading Plato and Dickens and Plutarch is supposed to do to you. Not give you answers but make the questions harder to avoid.

Pip, in *Great Expectations*, spends most of the novel trying to become someone worth looking at. He goes to London, acquires the clothes and the manners and the debts, positions himself near the people he believes mark the center of the world. He gets most of what he

wanted. It does not make him happy. It makes him ashamed of where he came from and confused about where he is going and lonely in a way that nice apartments cannot fix. The expectations were great. The life they produced was small.

I think about this more than I expected to when I started reading it. I think about the version of myself that gets everything on the list: the Google internship, the publication, the funded company, the fellowship. I try to imagine what that person feels like from the inside. And I notice that the image I produce is still performing. Still explaining himself to an audience. Still checking whether the audience is satisfied.

The thing I am working toward, slowly and with a lot of backsliding, is a version of expectation that is not about the audience at all. That is about the work and the problem and the people the work might actually help. I want to build things that are good. Not things that look good on a resume, though I will not pretend that does not matter, it does. But underneath the resume, underneath the story, I want there to be something real. A problem I actually cared about. A solution I was actually proud of. A version of the work that would have been worth doing even if nobody was watching.

That is my great expectation. It is less impressive than the list I came to Purdue with. It is also, I think, the only one I can live inside without losing my mind.

Works Cited

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