

*In Sickness* | January 4, 2019

## *BATTERY LIFE*

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I have an iPod – fourth generation – with which I share a deep, personal connection.

I don't own a phone.

That's not quite true. I own several phones, but they're what pop culturists call "burners." They cost \$12 and don't come with an "account"; you purchase "minutes" anonymously, consume those anonymous minutes, throw away the phone, and then purchase more of everything.

People who know me employ the cliché "off the grid", but strangers who see me using one of these phones might assume I'm an aspiring drug lord. The kind of aspirant who is unlikely to actualize his goals.

The reality is: I don't talk on phones much. One conversation a month would be an overestimation.

"Courtney, you don't understand, it's *so* much more than a phone. There's texting, aps, maps..."

Yeah, I understand that. But I have a GPS that I use whenever I have to make a new and tricky commute. This happens about every other year. And all of the other permissions of a phone can be accomplished on an iPod. In this case, a fourth-generation model... which means I bought it when 2010 was in its holiday season.

In those days, after charging it overnight, I could use it for 90 uninterrupted hours.

Today, I plug that same iPod in overnight, and by the next morning, I can use it for 90 uninterrupted *minutes*. But after the first five, a low battery warning appears on the screen. So I open the settings, dim it to the minimum visible brightness, and stretch the last few percent into 85 more minutes, mimicking the time course of a typical NBA game.

Today, that's how I, too, engage the world. Once upon a time, when my organs and soul hadn't been molded to near-death, I could plug myself into bed at night, and wake up the next morning recharged. So charged that I could conduct myself at full brightness for... maybe not 90 hours, but I could maintain function for 19 before my mind shut itself off. And peak performance – the keenest of attention – might last 14 hours before my internal battery warning insisted that I dim my conduct a bit.

That's what frustrates me the most about illness: the necessity of frequent recharges, or, to coin an abbreviation: the R<sup>3</sup> (routine recharge requirement).

When I was 30, and my iPod was in its infancy, we both had extraordinary battery lives. On several occasions, we charged up Thursday night, drove to the airport on Friday, got on a plane, endured the most hectic trip imaginable, and didn't recharge until we returned home on Monday. And we were both fine.

Today, we conduct ourselves dimly, bound to an encumbering R<sup>3</sup>. But brightness and duration aside, we can still perform the same functions we ever could.

Most people have no idea what this sort of deficit feels like. So they go on extending invitations to three-hour events. Meetings, barbecues, whatever. And when I decline those invitations, they're insulted. As though I'm putting comfort ahead of friendship. But that's not how this works. If the event lasts longer than my battery life, it's not something I can attend. Even with a medicinally refurbished battery, I would prefer to avoid most of these outings, but in my present condition, it's not a matter of preference; it's a matter of possibility. I *can't* attend.

It's like asking Great Granny Beansmith to keep up with her grandkids all afternoon. Biology has its limits. You can't just *decide* to have a 20-year-old's constitution and behave accordingly. Similarly, people suffering from irritable bowels and overactive bladders can't self-medicate with zen before going on a six-hour toiletless escapade. It just takes a tiny bit of compassion to understand this, and yet, in my experience, understanding remains remarkably scarce.

I know there are millions of other people beset with the incurable consequences of protracted illness. And at least thousands of them are coping with an R<sup>3</sup> as severe as mine. Unfortunately, I don't know any of those people. Not one. In my life, the only other entity that seems to "get me" is my iPod, as it is bound to the same limitations. Our batteries deplete in tandem. And we would never ask the other to give more than is possible. That's what compassion means. And that's the reason we share such a deep, personal connection, my iPod and me.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Courtney". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'C'.