“L.O.L.” Adam Gopnik

The story I want to tell you is a simple story about myself and my son Luke. Some of you may have read about him over the years. I write about him often enough. And the truth is we’ve always been pretty good friends. Father and son, of course, but we’ve always shared a lot in common. We lived through Paris together, and we love football. I’ve taught him to love hockey; we even love the same hockey team, the Montreal Canadiens.

But then he turned 12, and in New York City, because everything is a little accelerated, 12 is really 13. And when 13 happens to kids, as you all know, something profound changes. They begin to become adolescents; they approach being teenagers. And the bond, no matter how strong it is, between a father and son, or a mother and son or daughter, begins to change. It begins to alter. And suddenly they become more distant from you.

And it’s like—if I can even use the word in this context—it’s sort of like the mortality of parenting. That is to say, you know it’s going to happen, but you can’t believe it’s going to happen to you. You think, It happens to other people, but it won’t happen to me.

And so Luke started coming home from school at three o’clock. I work at home, and I write. Three-fifteen I would open the door, and I would do the thing that no parent should ever do, but that no parent can resist, even though you hear the chorus of parents past behind you saying, “Don’t do that!” The doorbell rings, and you open it, and there’s your 12-year-old, and you can’t help yourself, you say, “How was your day at school?” And the 12-year-old hunches his shoulders and droops his head and walks into his room without saying a word, and the door shuts.

Now you know what’s going on on the other side of that door; he’s on his computer. You sort of wish you could smell the healthy whiff of marijuana or hear the sounds of adolescent groping because that at least you can connect to from your own adolescence. But there’s not a chance of that. They’re on their computers; they’re instant messaging each other, six or seven at a time, talking about just what big schmucks their parents are. And that’s appropriate.

And you never learn! The doorbell rings the next day at three-fifteen, you open it, and the great chorus of parents past chants, “Do not ask the question!” And like Oedipus you do the thing you’re never supposed to do, you say, “How was your day at school?” And you get a shrug, and he walks into his room and shuts the door. Well, I understood it. And I knew that he was back there in the silence instant messaging his friends, as I say.

Now, instant messaging is something that I could not understand. I couldn’t understand the appeal of it, and I couldn’t understand the prevalence of it. Because the truth is when I was 12 years old, we used the telephone all the time. We had a series of phone conversations with everyone we knew. And it always seemed to me that had the telephone come second and the instant message been the thing that Alexander Graham Bell invented a hundred years ago, there’d be no question that the telephone call would be the huge technological break- through. If Steve Jobs had invented the phone call, it would have been on the front page of the *Times* the next day, and there’d have been giant back-page ads everywhere you looked talking about “Finally, real voices! Real communication!”

“Liberate yourself from the pressure of the keyboard. Hear your sweetheart talk!” It would have been the great breakthrough of the 20th century. But because that was the 19th century, kids only instant message. That’s the only way I can understand it.

Well, Luke is always insisting that I download software—Skype, or Limewire—and he insisted that I download AOL Instant Messenger, and I did. And I had it on my desktop. One day he comes in, I ask the question, he walks into his room, the door shuts, I go back to my little study, and I’m writing, and suddenly I hear a ping on my screen. And I look down, and it’s an instant message from Luke.

“Hey, Dad! Wuz up?”

And I write, “Nothing much. Wuz up with you?” And he says, “Oh, I had a terrible day at school.”

And right away—he’s 15 feet away from me—we have the conversation that he denied me at the door five minutes before. And I realized, of course, what it was really all about. The appeal of instant messaging is that you control—the child controls—the means of communication. You’re not accepting the three-fifteen third degree. You’re claiming the right to control your own conversations.

 And so every day from then on it became a sort of ritual. It was practically Japanese. Doorbell would ring, I would open the door, Luke would come in, we would bow at each other, he would say nothing. He would walk into his room, shut the door, I would go back to my office and shut the door, and about thirty seconds later a ping would go on, and it would be Luke.

“Hey, Dad! Wuz up with you today?”

And we would instant message each other and have a conversation about our days. And sometimes we’d actually be sitting on the same bed watching a hockey game together, instant messaging each other in total silence.

Now I loved instant messaging, once I’d gotten the hang of it. I loved the simplicity of it, I loved the autonomy of it, and I loved the language of abbreviations that instant messaging has. And Luke taught me all of the abbreviations: “brb” means “be right back,” “U2” means “you too,” “g2g” means “got to go.”

And then there was one that he didn’t even have to teach me because it was so self-evident and that was “LOL.” And I knew right away that it meant “lots of love” because he put it at the end of every message that he sent me. And even when I sent him a really sententious message (you know, one of those “Just do the things you’ve got to do, and then you’ll be able to do the things you want to do. I had homework too.”), he would always write back, “OK, Dad. LOL—Luke.” And I was really moved by this because even when I was lecturing him, he was able to absorb it in a mature way and send “lots of love” back to me as he thought about it. And I thought, This is such a beautiful telegraphic abbreviation for the 20th century because it’s like a little arrow of love you can send out to anybody you know.

And for the next six months I was infatuated with instant messaging and its power of emotional transmission, and I sent “LOL” to everybody I knew. My sister was getting divorced out in California, and I wrote to her, “We’re all behind you and beside you, LOL—your brother.” My father got ill, and I sent him “LOL” in Canada. Everybody I knew at work, at home—everyone—I sent them “LOL.” I was an instant messaging demon.

Well, one evening I’m in the lounge at LaGuardia waiting for a plane. I have to travel a lot to speak. And I was IM’ing with Luke, and he and I were discussing this. And I was really full of emotion. I hate traveling, I don’t like being away from the children. And I wrote to him, “Luke, I just want you to understand that every weekend I’m away is a weekend I hate, but I have to do it to live the life we want to live and to make money for us. LOL—your dad.”

And suddenly on my screen, there at midnight in the lounge in LaGuardia, I see coming across my screen giant letters, like an incoming message from NORAD—Bombers are on the way!— and it says, “DAD! WHAT EXACTLY DO YOU THINK ‘LOL’ MEANS?—LUKE”

And I write back, “Lots of love, obviously.”

And he writes back, “No, Dad. It means ‘laughing out loud’!”

“No it doesn’t.” “Yes it does, Dad.”

And, of course, it does. It’s all it means.

Well, I was miserable. Not only had I been totally misunderstanding the degree of ridicule that Luke had been shooting at me for six months, but I was going to have to repeal six months’ worth of “LOL.” I was going to have to go through every single person I’d sent an instant message to and apologize for having made fun of them in the midst of their suffering. And I thought to myself, This is the real nature of every communication between parent and child. We send them lots of love, they laugh out loud at us, and we don’t even know they’re doing it. We stopped instant messaging each other.

And then a couple of months later, Luke and I went off on a trip together. And my computer broke, and I had to send something in to work, so I said to Luke, “Luke, can I use your computer?” And he said OK.

“Well, just give me your password so I can get on.” He said, “Eh! I don’t want to give you my password.” I said, “Luke, why don’t you want to?”

He said, “Well, you give me your password.”

“Well, my password is you—Luke94. Your name and the year you were born.”

He said, “Really?”

I said, “Yeah. So tell me, what’s your password?”

And he said, “It’s, uh, Montreal Puck.” It wasn’t exactly “Dad,” but it was pretty close; it was something that we had shared, and that secretly he had encoded as his way out into the world. It was as though he were packing his suitcase, but he was packing it with something that I had given him.

And from that night on, when we got back to New York, we started IM’ing each other again. And every time we would, we would include it—LOL. Because here’s the thing that I think is true, what I’ve learned, and that is that through all of those months when Luke was laughing out loud at me, and I didn’t even know it, he never thought there was something strange about our miscommunication. He never stopped to think that there was something wrong about the way that I was using LOL. Because, if you think about it, there are very few times in life when saying “I’m laughing out loud in your presence” and saying “I love you a lot” aren’t really close enough to count.

They’re not exactly the same—if they were we would never grieve when someone we loved died. But in most of the exchanges that we have, between ourselves and our children, saying “I’m laughing” and saying “I love you” are a reasonable hit, a near miss, good enough to carry on with.

And so now every night, the last thing we do, me from my bedroom and Luke from his, is to send each other an instant message, and we always end it “LOL.”

“LOL, Dad!”

“LOL, Luke!”

And it doesn’t matter what it means. It means laughter or love, or whatever it might mean at that moment to us.