I ARRIVED AT my friend George's new house as the temperature outside had begun to drop. The place was bigger than I had expected. I rang the doorbell, which played a clip of John Lennon singing “Money.”

George opened the door and greeted me. The living room, as usual had one couch, one small table, two chairs, and about a dozen servers. Still, it was impressive.

“How did you score this place?” I asked George. Housing in the Bay Area was hot these days.

“I got lucky,” George said. “The guy who owned it before made his money in Alabama, heard about bitcoins, and came here to cash in.” George grinned. “By selling leather-tooled purses for them. It turns out that just like some people don’t want to buy a house where someone died, around here they don’t buy houses where businesses died. Except this is more serious because money is involved.”

“So what’s your new big idea?” I asked.

“Everyone’s doing Internet-of-Things startups, net-enabling everything from refrigerators to picture frames to thermostats. So I’m doing it too. Just about everything in this house is smart.

“But that’s not enough to differentiate a startup,” George continued. “Then it came to me. If all your appliances talk to one another, it might be a good idea to be able to listen in.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s a bogus idea, even for you,” I told him. “The computer illiterate are sure going to want to look at packet counts.”

“You are correct. My system translates the commands in the context of the house’s environment.” George looked at his smart watch. “You’re just in time to see the heating and cooling system go into action. Follow me.”

We went into a gigantic room. One wall was lined with windows, all closed and curtained to keep out the afternoon heat. George led me to the interior wall, which had speakers, displays, a thermostat, and what turned out to be a thermometer.

“The thermometer displays temperatures from inside as well as from a bunch of temperature sensors outside. That way the house can figure out the exact time to turn off the air conditioning and open the windows.” He pushed a button. “Let’s listen in.”

Thermostat: Temperature outside cool enough. Air conditioner off, curtains up, windows, open.


Windows: Which way is open?

Curtains: If I fold up I get all creased.

Thermostat: Windows, open is up. Air conditioner off.

AC: I’ll compromise. I’ll set myself up five degrees.

Window: Which way is up?

Curtains: You see, no one cares about us. We’re just window dressing.

Thermostat: Air conditioner off already. Curtains, the iron can smooth you out. Window, up is toward the ceiling.

Curtains: Okay. We like Iron. He’s hot. Going up now.

Windows: What’s a ceiling?

Thermostat: *&* ^%$# Just flex.


Thermostat: Air conditioner, set yourself to 99 degrees.
AC: Changing setting.
Thermostat: Transition accomplished.
Heater: Is it time for me to come on?
All the lights in the house flickered and I could hear the sound of servers crashing. I turned to George to see he had his smartphone out.
“Going to reboot from there?” I asked.

“No,” George said with a sigh. “I’m calling my real estate agent. Time to move again.”

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