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Differents: Essays About a Human (and Humans)

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Differents: Essays About a Human (and Humans)

A thesis presented to
The Graduate Faculty of
The College of Arts and Sciences
Department of English
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In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

will gerdes-mcClain
April 2021

Differents: Differents: Essays About a Human (and Also Humans)

by

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Mans in the Mirror

Among my many regrets in life, a recent one that stands out is a tweet that I didn't like. I mean, I liked it, in my mind, but I didn't hit the little heart button with my stubby little finger, thereby marking it and making it easy to return to. For whatever reason, I'm always focused on retaining precise wording and being able to attribute ideas correctly to their source, so it bothers me that I failed to archive this one properly. Nevertheless, the tweet's content stays with me (however memory has garbled it): *I'm so over white people who are perpetually stuck on recognizing their own privilege, as if that in itself is a form of antiracism.*

I just keep thinking about it.

...

...

...

I honestly feel so attacked right now.

~~~

*When I'm Fucked Up, That's the Real Me*

I'm drunk.

I mean, I'm at the 2017 College Composition and Communication Conference (4C's, colloquially) in Portland, OR.

No; I mean, I'm drunk.

I'm not, like, knee-walking, falling down drunk, but more than drunk enough. Before coming to this restaurant, Ana and I went to a reception held by Bedford St. Martin, or some other publisher, and there was free wine. There was also food, but that didn't seem as important. We got lost on the way there, but made it just in time to have plenty of wine. We're walking everywhere, so there's no urgent need to be mindful of my intake, which is nice, because the stress of being at a huge conference and being a capable version of myself is taking a toll. Once we got to this restaurant, I saw that, in addition to my partner and one other person who I know, there's like seven or eight strangers, so I needed to order a Bloody Mary. I've had a couple, at this point, so I'm drunk. And I am doing a *lot* of talking. Indeed, I'm rolling.

Who can say how, but the topic has turned to race and/or gender, which I always have plenty to say about, though I'm also usually much, much more reserved, even around people who I know, let alone around strangers. However, in this city, in this restaurant, with these people, in this moment, due to the stress of the past couple days and the fact that I am decidedly drunk, I am *on one*. I'm saying the stuff that I usually only say to my partner, the stuff that I am aware of myself enough not to put out there with people who I know don't know me and love me unconditionally. My friend, Ana, who is Latina, is

sitting beside me, and three women, two of whom I've never met before, all graduate students from the University of Maryland, are sitting across from me, as I talk some serious shit, holding forth with my sophisticated, nuanced views on these complex topics. My deluxe vegetarian nachos are getting cold on the table in front of me.

“I don't know if you all know it, but there's a Run the Jewels song called 'Close Your Eyes (and Count to Fuck)'—it's an amazing song, by the way, if you haven't heard it, just so fucking good—it's during Killer Mike's verse. He's describing a prison riot—actually, he's exhorting prisoners to riot—and he's talking about killing the guards and the warden, and he says 'Even if some good ones die, fuck it; the Lord'll sort 'em.' I love this line, because it's the *truth*. I don't think I'm one of the good ones—I hope I'm not one of the worst ones, but I also know I'm not a 'good one'—but even if I was, I know that when the revolution comes, I'm gonna be at the end of a noose, swinging from a lamp post. And that feels right, to me. I haven't done anything, I don't do anything that excuses my culpability in the system.”

In my memory, everyone is just letting me talk. They're all surely used to White Dudes Who Have Shit to Say, and they've probably had plenty of practice listening politely, waiting for us to tire ourselves out. My mind is racing even more than usual, rapidly running through all the calculus, trying to keep myself from saying anything too stupid. I can't stop my mouth from running, but I also know that I need to do my best to be thoughtful, keep from upsetting anyone or making myself look *too bad*. I'm doing a better job than usual of looking the people across from me in the eye, especially considering the fact that two of them are strangers. I'm not looking at Ana, partly because she's sitting next to me, making it awkward, and partly because she's the one I'm most afraid of upsetting, the one whose

opinion is genuinely important to me. The waiter asks if anyone would like another drink, and of course I would. Now I've moved on to talking about how the only thing I can think of that makes sense, for a white person, is to just be John Brown. My partner sits on my other side, engrossed in a separate conversation. She's heard this shit before.

“When I really think about it, that's the only way I can think of to even come close to stopping being part of the problem. Just spaz out and attack the system, go for its throat in a way that there's no coming back from. Short of that, you've always got your privilege, you're not really committed, because you are still complicit, because you're still benefitting. Honestly, I'm not even totally sure that that's enough, but it's the most that I can imagine that an individual can do. I'm too much of a coward to ever do what I should do—I'm too scared to even *talk to strangers* if I wasn't drunk right now—and I should to be held to account when it goes down. I'm not John Brown.”

I think I feel like this is a mic drop statement, but I don't really know. I mean, I built up to it, and it feels meaningful that I've indicted myself, held myself accountable, but it's very, very possible that I just sound silly. In the end, regardless of how forceful I am, I'm just talking, putting on a show; not doing anything. Maybe all I've accomplished is identifying myself as the worst, most infuriating white person there is: the one who needs you to know how truly, madly, deeply woke they are. Ugh. The three women sitting across from me probably nod, thoughtfully. I don't look at Ana's reaction. Someone probably has a response, but I don't remember it. I've disappeared back up my own asshole, wishing I had kept my mouth shut.



Actually, maybe I'm wishing I hadn't shared this story. Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut right now.

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By the Time I Get to Oklahoma, Pt. 1

Do you remember the SAE Fraternity Incident at the University of Oklahoma in the spring of 2015? You probably heard about it. A video recording of a bunch of white frat guys on a bus, singing a song about how 'there will never be a n****r in SAE,' and how 'you can hang them from a tree, but they'll never sign with me' was posted online and quickly went viral. There was a *Daily Show* segment about it. The university responded swiftly, shutting the chapter shut down. Two students who, according to the university 'played a leadership role' in the chant (which seemed to mean that they were the only ones who could be positively identified from the blurry cell phone footage), were expelled.

The week all the shit hit the fan, a student in one of my composition classes asked me to speak to him in the hall right as class began. He was visibly nervous, a stark difference from his typical, nearly hostile indifference. He explained that he was a member of SAE, and that he and his parents were concerned for his safety on campus with everything that was going on. This seemed an overreaction to me, as I couldn't imagine anything drastic happening—at least, not to a white kid—on the campus of the University of Oklahoma, but I also believed that he was sincerely scared. He asked me if it was okay for him to leave class, so that he could return to his room and get his stuff together, and I asked him to stay for the first few minutes of class, so that he could hear some particularly important instructions, and he agreed and thanked me. I began to turn to go back into the classroom, when he stopped me, saying "I

just want you to know, I wasn't on that bus. I swear, I wasn't there. I'm not like that." I wasn't sure how to respond to this. I can't know for sure what his motivation was in telling me this, but it felt like a plea, like he needed me to believe that he wasn't like that. I just said 'Okay,' and walked back into the classroom.

Later, talking with other adjuncts and graduate students, we dissected the administration's response to the incident, which included creating a couple new positions to encourage diversity and dialogue on campus, in addition to shuttering the fraternity and kicking out the two students who could be identified. My argument was that, while I absolutely understand why the two students had to be expelled (their continued presence would, essentially, send a message to every African-American student that their education and safety is not important), it was depressing to me that it had to be handled that way. It's a school, right? Aren't we supposed to *teach* people, rather than kick them out when they fuck up?

I imagined both of those guys that got kicked out, and every one of those guys on that were on that bus, in fact, making a plea similar to the one my student had made to me, to someone, saying "I'm not like that," and actually believing it, having a truly difficult time understanding what was going on, because they didn't mean anything by it, it was just a stupid song that doesn't mean anything. They're ignorant, entitled twits, obviously, but shouldn't a school's job be to talk to those kids, teach them, help them see a different perspective? But, on the other hand, in that situation, in that moment, *their safety* was not the issue.

What bothered me much, much more was the clear, unmistakable desire of the school to move on from the incident, to also, essentially, mimic my student's reaction, by saying *We're not like that*. They created a couple positions, they kicked out the bad apples, so the problem was solved. They even, in a move rich with empty symbolism, turned the old SAE house into a new Disability Resource Center. *Those were bad kids, kids who said the n-word, but we remain committed to diversity. They're bad, but we kicked them out, which means that we're good. How can we be bad, when we're not them?*

It's a move that's intended to put off introspection, that keeps you from trying to understand what it was about the larger community that made these people think it was okay to say that racist shit in the first place. It keeps you from understanding how you might be, inadvertently or otherwise, complicit, which keeps you from ever doing any better.

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### ***Me and Malcolm***

I talk about race and gender a lot, and I do so in very direct terms. I'm self-conscious about it, to a degree, but I can't think of anything more important to focus on (beyond animal rights, which I rarely address, because I don't know that I can maintain a healthy critical distance from that discussion). I try hard not to be overbearing about it (the opening anecdote notwithstanding), but I also say what I think.

I also bring it up in my composition classes quite a bit, which my students, as a rule, do not care for. During class discussion of "A Homemade Education," by Malcolm X (a section from his autobiography in which he describes how he used the prison library to educate himself while he was incarcerated), I'll typically ask them "What about the history books that he read? When he describes

them, he says that they taught him about the white man's wickedness. He talks about how he learned from them the history of how white people oppressed and exploited non-white people, right? If I read these same books, do you think that's what I would learn?" Sometimes there's confusion at this question. "What I mean is, I doubt the books said 'This is the history of the white man's wickedness,' right? It didn't say that, but that's how Malcolm X interpreted it, right?" They agree. "Okay, do you think I would agree with him? Do you think I would share that interpretation? I think he even calls it 'the truth' of the white man's wickedness—would I discover that same truth, do you think?" They're uncomfortable, but some people shake their heads. Maybe someone says "No" out loud. Now I do the thing where I act dumb: "Well, why not? I may not be Malcolm X, but I like to think I'm pretty smart. Why couldn't I see what he sees?" My classes are usually overwhelmingly made up of white students, and, maybe it's just my imagination, but I think I can feel the atmosphere in the room change, when I ask this question, the effect of so many buttocks tightening at once. (To be honest, I'm never entirely comfortable with this conversation, regardless of how many times I have it, or the fact that I'm the one initiating it. My own buttock, I need to own, is not *not* tightened.) The answer is obvious, but no one will say it. Finally, I lean forward, like it's a secret, and give them permission: "It's okay—you can say it."

Finally, someone gives the obvious response: "You're white." I enthusiastically affirm this answer, and the air is let out of the room. Maybe a few people laugh. Maybe I ask "Why does that matter?," causing everyone's sphincters to clench once more, but I let them off the hook, this time, launching into an explanation. *Of course* I wouldn't interpret the world's history as the history of white people's wickedness: *my white ass* and its lived experiences, my positionality are completely different

from Malcolm X's, so it's not likely that I'm going to interpret things exactly the way he does. Everything in Malcolm X's life, each of his experiences led him to that interpretation, led him to construct a lens that showed him that 'truth.' My life, and therefore my lens, looks nothing like his. I have one more question, though, I say: "Which one of us is right? I'm not looking for The Absolute Answer here, I just mean in your opinion: whose 'truth' is *more true*?" There's some more uncomfortableness, and I imagine buttoholes clenching again. Maybe someone gives the answer I dread: "You know, they're equally valid. Everyone's entitled to their own opinion."

At this, my asshole tightens so rapidly and intensely that I nearly pull a muscle.

Maybe I deserve the lesson to land with this thud, this wet fart of a sentiment. I'm aware what I'm doing when I lead my students into this conversation. I want them to be uncomfortable, to have to think about things that they'd prefer not to, with their 'all-opinions-are-equally-valid' asses, because I am convinced that there's value in that discomfort. I want to force them to acknowledge that I'm white, and Malcolm X is black, and that means that I can never see the world the way that he does, and to really think about what that means.

I need to own, also, that it kind of amuses me. I get a mild thrill from the palpable sense of danger that they all feel at the subject.

~~~

Dr. Abrams

I have always really admired Dr. Abrams. I had multiple important teachers, in my long, dark and tortured undergraduate career, and though there were a couple who I was surely more indebted to,

because they played a bigger role in dragging me through and helping to pick me back up when I stumbled (not to mention gave me opportunities that I had not, by any reasonable stretch of the imagination, done anything to deserve), Dr. Abrams was the one that I looked up to the most, the one who, if anyone, I wanted to be when I grew up. She's always prepared, almost hyper-professional, and ultra-competent, but somehow always manages to maintain a warmth and supportiveness that is truly remarkable. If I think about it, it's never less than clear that there is a strict line of professionalism that she never crosses, but, when you're talking to her, it feels as though you're just chatting with a friend. You feel like you can say what you think, because she treats you as an equal and accepts your ideas as inherently worthy of consideration. Also, she's just cool. She loves, basically, all movies, and is well-versed on pop culture. She remembers what you like and what you don't like, which, again, makes you feel like you're talking to someone who actually likes you and finds you interesting.

Because of these qualities, it wasn't all that strange that I made many trips down the hall to her office, for guidance, when I began teaching in the fall of 2011. *Dr. Abrams, how do you get them to talk? Dr. Abrams, it's not coming up on Turnitin, and I googled some passages and didn't find anything, but I really think one of my students plagiarized. Dr. Abrams, I think they hate me; how do you keep from crying in front of them?* If she tired of my questions, though, she never showed it, telling me that the fact that I was thinking about these things so carefully was actually a sign that I'm a good teacher, because I'm so conscientious. She never misses an opportunity to support you.

This is probably why I got too comfortable and starting talking about these middle-aged women in the MA program with her. I don't know what I'd been asking her about, but she had mentioned how

nice it can be to have non-traditional, older students in the classroom, because, as a general rule, they take their classes much more seriously. This reminded me of something that I had discussed with my partner frequently, and, as mentioned, I was feeling very safe and comfortable talking to Dr. Abrams, so I thought I would get her take on the issue.

“That reminds me of something Rebecca and I have talked about, actually. I first noticed this in the Victorian Lit class I took with Dr. Handler, but I also noticed it quite a bit in my other classes, too, and I wonder what you think of it.”

“Oh, what is it?”

“So, there are a lot of students in the masters program that are older; specifically, older women, and they have a tendency to make a really specific kind of contribution to the class.”

Dr. Abrams nodded her head. I wasn't uncomfortable, but I looked away, because maintaining eye-contact is always a struggle for me, even when I'm comfortable with the person I'm talking to. I looked at the collection of notepads on her desk, all opened and arranged like cards in a solitaire column, that comprised all the projects she was currently working on. She would pull out whichever one she needed, then, when finished, she would place it at the top of the stack, essentially at the bottom of the pile.

“Like, as an example, when I was in Dr. Handler's class, and we were reading *The Moonstone*, there were these three middle-aged women, and Rebecca and I noticed that, while they had a lot that they wanted to contribute to class discussion—which is good, obviously—their contributions all seemed to hit the same set of themes over and over.”

“Interesting. What were those themes?”

“It was all about their families: their husbands and their children. The husbands, especially. There was one woman, in particular, every time she spoke, it was about her ex-husband. It was like, everything Fosco did, it reminded her of her villainous and nefarious ex-husband. But all three of them were doing it, to varying degrees, kind of dependent on how much they contributed. It’s like this was their only lens, and they applied it consistently and thoroughly to every text we looked at. It was really weird, but I also noticed it in every other graduate class I was in. In the terrorism and Irish lit class with Dr. Hansen, it was husband and kids, every time; and the middle-aged women in that class weren’t even the same ones from Dr. Handler’s class. Literacies class with Dr. Crittenden? Same deal. It probably wouldn’t have seemed strange in the creative nonfiction class, that they all wrote about their families, but at that point, a strong pattern had been established.”

Dr Abrams continued nodding, thoughtfully. She had a poster for the movie *Monster* (the movie that Charlize Theron won a Best Actress Oscar for) on the wall of her office that I stared at as I continued. It felt good to talk about this with someone other than my partner, so I continued.

“You know, occasionally there’s an interesting point in there, but, for the most part, it’s just frustrating, because they keep pulling us away from the text to talk about their personal lives. Obviously, everyone does this when they read or watch or experience anything—the immediate reaction is to reference your own life, your own experiences, to make meaning—but it’s not helpful to make your own narrow life the absolute limit of your frame of reference, right? Wilkie Collins was *not* aware that your ex was unfaithful, and the fact that Fosco reminds you of him is only interesting to you.”

Dr. Abrams smiled. There were lots of photos of her nieces and nephews behind her, and they all split the difference between tasteful and personal impeccably. One of the frames seemed to be handmade by a child. Dr. Abrams didn't appear in any of the numerous photos, which I thought was cool.

“Rebecca and I talked about it quite a bit when we were in Dr. Handler's class, and we still do, occasionally. It really bothered us, because it just killed any productive, useful discussion of whatever was being talked about. I was trying to figure out what's the deal with this, because it's *so weird*, and it just kept happening, over and over in almost every class. What I finally came up with is this: it seems very possible—based on these women's ages and what they said—that these women might have given up pursuing their education further than a bachelor's degree, because they made the choice to have a family. And, now that their children are grown, they've decided to go back and get the graduate degree that they chose not to pursue earlier in life. I don't know if they feel intimidated or what (I'm assuming they probably do, at least a little, because I sure did), but they feel like they have to have *something* (again, just assuming this, because it's how I felt) to say, and this is what they have: their lives, for the last number of years, have been their families, so that's their frame of reference for things, so that's what they use. It's not useful, because it's literally all about them, but it's what they have to contribute. Rebecca agreed, she thought it made sense, but I'm really curious to know if you have noticed this same thing, and what you think about it.”

Immediately, I felt a sharp stab of embarrassment and regret at disclosing these thoughts, terrified that they made me look ignorant, at best, and insensitive, at worst. This wasn't strange, though,

because it's the feeling I have after saying pretty much anything to anyone. For her part, Dr. Abrams didn't miss a beat:

“That's really interesting. It reminds of an article I read recently.”

Already, I was relieved. I wasn't too crazy, because Dr. Abrams had made an immediate connection to something. And it was *interesting*.

“There was a study done, of college courses that were discussion-based, like the ones you're talking about. They were recorded, and then transcripts of the individual classes were typed up. Some versions of the transcript contained ages and gendered names for each of the speakers; female students were given female names to go with their contributions, and male students given male names, and everyone's age was included. In other versions, no names or ages were provided. Each individual student was assigned a number to go with their comments.”

I nodded, conscious of how I was moving my head. I was legitimately interested, but I wanted to *look interested* in a manner that would seem cool to Dr. Abrams. I looked over at the small collection of DVDs on a bookshelf by her door, pausing on the Criterion Collection's *Beastie Boys Anthology*.

“It was fascinating, because what they found was, when readers 'knew' the gender of the speaker, they were overwhelmingly more likely to judge the women's comments to be off-topic and not useful—especially when the woman was older. But when the speakers were left unidentified, readers judged the comments of men off-topic and useless as often as they did the comments of women.”

Oh, shit.

My mouth dropped open, subtly, hopefully imperceptibly. I was mortified. I had spent so much time thinking about this, and, somehow, even though what Dr. Abrams was saying made more sense than anything else and was so obviously the truth, it had never occurred to me. I thought back to Dr. Handler's class, remembering that the one middle-aged dude in the class, remembering how almost everything he said—and he talked *constantly*—was a bizarre non sequitur, and how we had remarked on his behavior and contributions at least as many times as we had the three women, but it never occurred to me to draw any larger conclusions from it. A panicked *But Rebecca thought the same thing!* flashed through my mind. I could not believe how stupid I was, but, even more than that, I couldn't believe how blithely and confidently I'd announced my ignorance to Dr. Abrams, this person whose approval and good opinion I was so desperate to secure. There was only one thing to say:

“Well, I'm humiliated right now.”

Dr. Abrams, as she always does, was supportive and reassuring.

“Oh, why? There's no reason to be!”

“Of course there is. I just served up my own ignorance to you, as though it was a real penetrating insight. I really thought I had discovered something, but all I actually discovered was my own prejudice.”

“I didn't take it that way at all.”

As though there was another way to take it.

“What you said just reminded me of that article. It's a very interesting thing. You don't have anything to be embarrassed about.”

I tried to focus on how cool Dr. Abrams was being, rather than the fact that I had just shit the intellectual bed right in front of her. I excused myself, saying I had to get back, because it was, actually currently my office hours. This was true, but it hadn't really been something I was concerned about, before that moment.

I sat behind the nondescript desk, in my nondescript office. I looked at the small collection of DVDs that my officemate had on our mostly empty shelves. I was, actually, kind of glad at what had just happened, I thought to myself. I had just began teaching, and interacting with my naïve, first-year students, along with my experience at the writing center (where I mostly worked with naïve, first-year students) had begun to cement a belief that they were, necessarily, naïve, and still subject to oversimplification; that they were unequipped to handle complexity and nuance. Not that it was their fault—they're children, right?—but they were not as smart as me, and, because of that, they were in constant danger of being controlled by all those invisible, pernicious assumptions about the world and other people that trip up those who are incapable of seeing past easy answers. While I absolutely wished it hadn't been in front of Dr. Abrams, who would surely never take me seriously again, I was glad that I had received this reminder that I'm actually, when it gets right down to it, not any wiser than my students. I try to focus on the value of this, the fact that it's an important thing to always keep at the front of my mind. I might be able to express my easy, faulty generalizations and assumptions in a more sophisticated manner, but I'm subject to all of the exact same bullshit as they are.

I suppose it's possible that Dr. Abrams is, as well. But I doubt it.

~~~

## *Ana*

My partner and I were at the University of Oklahoma for five years. I taught, while she pursued her doctoral degree. During this time, I made a single friend, which was an amazing achievement for me. It took me almost the full five years, but I made friends with one of the other PhD students in the same program as my partner. I liked a few of the other students in the graduate program, but Ana was the only one, besides my partner, who I felt comfortable around. Her insecurity and anxiety never took on an aggressive shape, unlike many of the graduate students. She was as intimidated and overwhelmed as everyone else, but those things never seemed to lead to ostentatious displays of her own competence or talent. She seemed to lack the instinct to fake it, which, while unfortunate for her, made me feel very comfortable with her.

During our last semester in Norman, Ana helped curate the annual Native Film Festival that's held by the Native Studies and Film Studies departments. In particular, she worked with a Native filmmaker from Mexico, coordinating a screening of her film her visit to Norman to appear at the festival, which was a lot of work, but Ana was really enthusiastic about the film, so she was thrilled to bring it to the festival and have it seen, regardless of the frustrations. She specifically invited my partner and I to the screening of the film, as well as the reception afterwards, at a restaurant in downtown Norman, and while my partner was not able to attend, I wanted to show up to support my friend for this thing that was a big deal for her.

Since Ana speaks fluent Spanish, and she had built a relationship with the woman while coordinating the screening and visit, she had the responsibility of chaperoning the director, we picked

her up at the bed and breakfast she was staying at, and had returned to (to change clothes), after the screening, and drove her to the restaurant. Once there, I was mildly surprised by Ana's demeanor. The director quickly assimilated into the larger group, chatting and laughing easily with a large group of complete strangers, while Ana stood stiffly and awkwardly with her boyfriend and I, the three of us separate from everyone and barely even talking to each other. A few people wandered over to us, and she engaged with them, it seemed, easily enough, but she seemed decidedly uncomfortable. I worried, of course, that her behavior was a result of my presence, that she felt obliged to stick with me, because she knows about my anxiety and she felt responsible for me, since she had invited me, but I also remembered that she had mentioned that part of the reason she was inviting me was because she felt so uncomfortable at these things, and it would be helpful for her to have me there. I knew, and had seen evidence of the fact that, she was not terribly comfortable in large social gatherings, but I had never seen her look quite this uncomfortable, to the point that her demeanor reminded me of myself. I decided to try my best to think that her discomfort stemmed from the situation, and that my presence was a help to her.

As the inside group thinned out a bit, moving to the restaurant's back patio area, Ana relaxed a bit, and seemed to have more fun. As the night wore on, she continued to relax, to the point that I thought that maybe I was mistaken. Maybe she had not been uncomfortable at all, or maybe it had been stress over her responsibilities looking after the filmmaker. Regardless, when I finally decided to leave, I felt confident that she was comfortable and having a good time, which felt good. I knew how hard she had worked, and she deserved to relax and appreciate the results.

When I got home from the film festival's after-party, I immediately emailed Ana, because I wanted to congratulate her on how smoothly everything went and to thank her, again, for inviting me. I felt like maybe I was overdoing it, but I also don't have a lot of experience having 'friends,' so I wanted to make sure that I was, like, putting in the work, or whatever. I went to sleep feeling good about things.

The next day, when I received Ana's response, I felt less good.

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Trump (of course)

I remember the night Donald Trump was elected president. I imagine most people do.

My partner and I are living in the college town of Norman, OK, and she is in the final year of her doctoral program at the University of Oklahoma. We went and voted that day, for Hillary Clinton. We watch *Bob's Burgers* on Netflix, keeping a close eye on the election results. As it gets later, we are bothered by the fact that it doesn't seem like the foregone conclusion (Trump losing in and at least decisive, if not necessarily embarrassing, fashion) many people had expected is playing out. My partner is becoming worried and anxious, for the first time seriously considering what it would mean if Trump won. I'm being my regular, laconic (at least, in relation to her) self. I say he probably won't win, and even if he does, things won't be very different. I tell her we should go to bed early, because staying up and worrying won't do any good.

But neither one of us sleeps. I always have a terrible time sleeping, and my partner is so tense and anxious about the election that she can't possibly sleep. I keep checking my phone, seeing where things stand. Eventually, I think when Minnesota is called for Trump, I tell her it's over, that he won.

She falls apart, instantly. I feel very little, partly because that's just me, and partly because she's falling apart, so I need to stay calm. She cycles through all the realizations, all the despair, all the helpless feelings. Normally, I would challenge her on some of the things she's saying, but it isn't the time. Her closest friend in the program, a Hispanic woman from South Texas (not Ana, a different woman), texts her, and they try to comfort each other. My partner intermittently runs her texts by me before she sends them, because she is worried about taking too much of the space in the conversation, knowing that, as a white woman, her pain is not as urgent. She begins having a panic attack, and I convince her to go draw a bath and try to relax. I text her friend and let her know that my partner isn't able to talk any more right now, that she'll get back to her later.

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The day after Donald Trump is elected president, I have to teach.

I get to campus around 7:30am, which is my usual. I always like to teach early in the day, so I usually get the morning classes, and my first class, a freshman composition class, is at 8:30am. I like to get to campus early, so that I can mentally prepare myself to stand in front of people and talk. There's almost no one around as I walk across the south oval to the English building, which is normal, as people don't start really showing up until around fifteen minutes before the first classes at 8:30am, and I like it like this. I walk along the west side of the oval, past the construction privacy wall that surrounds the site of the new physics building that is being built, on the site of the old English building that has recently been torn down. It's chilly, and I didn't dress warmly enough, so I'm walking briskly. I glance up and catch a glimpse of a light blue paper stuck to the fence, looking away just as quickly as I keep quickly



moving. I stop. I stand there for a moment thinking, then I turn around and go back to read the paper again. It says what I thought it said.

There's quite a bit of text on the page, but my eyes gravitate to the upper-right portion of the page, where it asserts, in a bold, serif font, "**It's Okay to Be White.**" I've seen this phrase many times, and I know what it means. It's something that white nationalists say, something that sounds just benign enough to be defensible<sup>1</sup> and still expressive of their aggressive, whites-first philosophy. The rest of the paper continues along this line, asking 'White People' if they ever feel attacked, if it seems like they're always being blamed for everything and made to feel guilty just for being white. All of this stuff is familiar. I look around the oval, seeing that I am still the only one there at this point. I imagine these fliers posted all over OU's sprawling campus, and I wonder if it was students who put them up or just local community members. I'm shocked that something like this has happened so quickly. I think about what I should do, and I decide to just throw it away. I consider recycling the sheet, but I guess I decide that throwing it in the trash is somehow a stronger symbolic rejection of the message.

I show up very early for class, as always. This class is a section made up of mostly international students, the idea being that writing classes can be particularly intimidating for international students (they can have an especially acute feeling of 'everyone knows what's going on except for me'), so they will feel less isolated in a class that is populated, mostly, by others in the same situation. I'm still thinking about that flier, wondering if I should bring up the election in my classes. As a general rule, I

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase leads nicely into a defense that it only tells people to feel good about themselves, and how can it be bad to tell people to be proud of their heritage? It also allows one to transition into the false equivalency argument that "if you substitute 'black' for 'white,' then it's magically okay, so how can it be bad?"

acknowledge the existence of the outside world in my classes, because it's ridiculous not to, but I also position the class as outside of the regular world, as thoughtfully as I can. But I wonder if this needs to be an exception. This is huge and impossible to ignore, so maybe I should use the beginning of class to talk about it? Can I even use 'the beginning' of class? If I start this conversation, can I turn it off, like "Oh well, enough humanity, back to Project Three!" What about the fact that it's an international class? I wonder how many thinkpieces have already been posted online about what a teacher's responsibility is and how they can best address the results of the election.

As I set everything up, a particular student who has a habit of either showing up either super late or super early came in super early, as well. She is from Mexico, and she's one of my favorites, because, while she's supremely temperamental (which can make her contributions unpredictable), she never hesitates to say what she's thinking, and even when her contributions are off-topic, they're always great, thoughtful stuff. She is not happy today. She doesn't wait for me to ask, she just speaks:

**"I hate white people."**

I mean, what am I going to say to that?

"I know."

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After my office hours, I walk to my 12:30pm class, back across the south oval. I leave early, as I always do, to get to the classroom early, but I stop at Dale Hall, which is the southwest-most building in the oval. There is a crowd gathered, and a young African-American man speaks from prepared notes he has on his phone. He speaks, loudly and passionately, about the clear message that Trump's election has

sent him and people who look like him, the message it sends all marginalized people. Though he is staring at his phone and reading his remarks, he is still charismatic and powerful as he asks everyone listening to not give up, reminding us that we needed to pick each other up and give each other strength, that we need to shelter each other from the rain that had now started to fall heavy on those of us who need the most protection. I feel out of place, listening to him, like the fox chilling in the henhouse, but it also feels good, like there is hope. He lets us know that, after a group of students sing a song, we're invited to take part in a march in which everyone will lock arms and simply walk from the south to the north end of the oval in a symbolic gesture of solidarity. I actually wish I could stay, but at this point I'm going to have to hurry not to be late for my class. Still, it does make me a little less depressed about the state of things.

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After class, I leave for home. My partner isn't on campus that day, so I don't need to wait for her, and I have no further office hours, so I begin the long walk back to the parking garage, the oval now bustling with people. It seems like a normal day. No one even appears to be talking about the election, as I walk back along the same path I walked this morning, past the construction fencing surrounding the site of the old English building. It's still chilly, but the sun shines brightly.

As I pass a newspaper box near the library, I stop to grab a bunch of school newspapers, which I use to line the cages of the parrots we live with. As I pull out a stack, a sheet of paper stack falls out of the box, dancing back and forth in the air briefly before hitting the ground. I pick it up and glance at it, and I am again surprised, though I probably shouldn't be; it's a cheap, black and white copy of more white

nationalist propaganda, this time with a more carefully focused message. And again, its contents are familiar, to me. At the top of the page, it exclaims: **NOTHING TO SEE HERE JUST A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT**. Below those words are images of two skulls, which are difficult to see clearly because of the quality of the copy, side-by-side. Despite the crudeness of the images, it's clear that one is a 'normal,' human skull, while the other appears less evolved, more closely resembling a primate skull. The normal skull is labeled 'Caucasian,' while the other is labeled 'Negro,' and underneath that it reads **DISCOVER WHAT YOUR PROFESSOR ISN'T TELLING YOU**. Again, I throw the sheet away, along with the others that are inserted into the copies I had taken.

Later in the day, an email is sent out from the administration expressing appropriate shock and disapproval at the racist messages posted around campus, followed by a similar email from the English department about the same thing happening, specifically, in the English building. Even more depressing, a few weeks later, I am discussing everything with my partner and her friend (the one she had texted with on the night of the election), and I noted how pleasantly surprised I was by the spontaneous gathering outside of Dale the day after the election, how it made me feel briefly better about the shitty world, and how disappointed I was that I had to go to class because I actually would have marched up the oval with everyone. I don't even get to the part where I found shoddy old pseudo-scientific racism falling out of copies of the school's newspaper before my partner's friend responds:

“Oh yeah, I was there and I did the march. Some frat guys yelled racist things at us before we ever got halfway.”

I don't say anything.

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By the Time I Get to Oklahoma, Pt. 2

Ana's email, which I am reading the day after I attended Native Film Festival she helped produce, begins pleasantly, thanking me for coming out to support her and the festival, and hoping that I enjoyed the film, but it quickly transitions to a gut-punch. Ana explains that, not too long after I left, she and her boyfriend, along with the filmmaker they were chaperoning, also left. As they walked, tipsy and happy, back to the car that was parked around the corner, the evening took an unpleasant turn:

“My night ended on a somber note. As [the filmmaker], Edward, and I were heading back to the car, this group of 5-7 frat-type guys directed a racially charged comment towards us as we walked [past] them. I found myself apologizing to [her] for the incident.”

I carefully try to imagine the path they walked to return to the car, attempting to recreate the scene in my mind. I want to reply immediately, feeling that it's important that I express empathy as quickly and clearly as possible. Like Ana, my first impulse is to apologize, as though my regret changes the reality of the situation. I want to say something to make it better, to balance the scales in some way, but that's not possible. Later (in another email or in person, I can't remember), I learn more details.

Apparently, they had been conversing in Spanish, and the guys must have overheard them, making a comment about them 'beaner-packing' their car. Ana was shocked, of course, and her first impulse, in her inebriated state, was to yell something back at them and challenge them, but she checked that impulse in the face of half a dozen young men, worrying about what might happen if she chose not

to ignore their remarks. She worried that her boyfriend might not be able to check his own anger, but fortunately he also stayed silent, and they quietly, quickly made their way to the car.

I can't stop thinking about the guys who made the comments, wondering if I know them. In my five years at the University of Oklahoma, I've had dozens of 'frat-type guys' as students, and it seems very possible that I've had at least one of them in one my classes. I think about how these guys behave in the classroom, usually respectful and deferential in the extreme. Certainly, none of them ever express racist sentiments, but I don't think that the majority of them (or the majority of all students, to be fair) ever express a thought or idea that they haven't carefully vetted, in their head, to make sure that it won't offend or alienate whatever idea of me that they have in their mind. For the most part, they seem like good guys, but it's also true that I have no way of knowing what they really think, what's in their hearts. These images, awkward and insecure, slams up against my imaginings of six young, aggressive and drunk white men, glowering ominously, half in darkness and half illuminated by a streetlight, their very presence a threat.

I also imagine them being confronted about their actions, being confronted with the fact that they, inarguably, directed racially-charged comments at minorities. What would they say? I imagine them saying that they didn't mean anything by it, that it was just a joke. I imagine them denying the possibility of aggression. I imagine them snapping back into deference, expressing contrition, saying that they're not like that, that it's just a misunderstanding. I imagine them believing these things with their whole hearts. I imagine them being furious that they're being forced to defend themselves over a joke. Just a joke.

I mean, what are you supposed to say to that?

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*Dr. Abrams Pt. 2*

My partner is on my case, and I'm rolling my eyes at her, Liz Lemon-style.

"I just don't understand why you think that's funny."

*Of course you don't*, I'm thinking; *no one is less funny than you*. Right now, we're falling into a familiar dynamic in our relationship: she's the officious, over-serious scold, and I'm the rascal, gleefully pushing her buttons and delighting in the response I'm getting. I suppose we both get some form of gratification from these exchanges (she gets to perform her sensitivity and responsibility, and I get to perform some sad version of masculine recklessness), but, in this moment, I'm just irritated.

"Honestly, that's part of why it's funny—because you're so bent out of shape by it. If you didn't get upset, it wouldn't be nearly as amusing."

"So, it's my fault?"

"No, there's no fault. It's just a joke."

"But it's not funny, and I know you don't think like that, so I don't understand why you say that stuff."

"*That's* why it's funny."

She shakes her head.

"Hipster racism."

I make a muted, exasperated noise. *This humorless bitch*, I think to myself, suppressing a smirk.

She continues.

“Especially considering what you were telling me, I just don’t know how you can think that’s a funny joke.”

I had been telling her about my conversation with Dr. Abrams, what I said and what she said, how small and embarrassed I’d felt, and how I’d decided that it was a good experience, but how that didn’t make me any less embarrassed and nervous about seeing her again. This is when I’d uttered the offending line:

“I already have a hard enough time looking her in the eyes, and this isn’t going to make it easier. I can just see her beady Jew-eyes staring right through me, down to my soul.”

I say things like this a lot, and it drives my partner crazy. She was really happy when she learned about the concept of hipster racism<sup>2</sup> from an article on *Jezebel*, deciding that it perfectly explained my sense of humor and, I guess, thinking that it would cause me to rethink my tendency to make jokes like this. I had heard of this concept, but I hadn’t really taken the time to learn about it, so when she shared the essay with me, it was my first real exposure to the idea, and the first time I had been challenged about this habit I had of making these kinds of jokes. It was immediately, obviously undeniable that I was falling into this particular trap, and, while I wasn’t going to give my partner the satisfaction of telling her

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<sup>2</sup> Briefly, hipster racism or ‘ironic racism,’ if you’re not familiar with it, is the practice of using racist language or making racist jokes in an ironic way, with the idea that the person doing it isn’t being racist, themselves—they’re making fun of racism, mocking the kinds of things that actual ignorant racists would say. It’s a deeply, deeply flawed idea, and it takes about ten seconds of actual thought to realize what’s wrong with it, but when you’re committed to not acknowledging something, ten seconds of actual thought is, actually, a long time.



this, I was cowed by learning about it, telling myself that I needed to do better. And I did, intermittently, but when I was feeling a little too comfortable, and when there was a particularly rascally joke to make—especially when that joke held the promise of making my humorless partner righteously and impotently upset—I would backslide, succumbing to my instinct to say something *so wrong*.

“I just don’t know why you would say something like that about Dr. Abrams, of all people.”

“Because I don’t mean it. You, *of all people!*, know that she’s like my hero or whatever, that I admire her as much as anyone, which makes it even more shocking and funny.”

“Don’t you think it would hurt her if she heard you say that?”

“Of course it would, which is why I’d never say it to her. I’d probably never say it to anyone but you.”

“Doesn’t that make you think there’s something wrong with it?”

“Well, I guess, but again, that’s what makes it really funny. The danger of it. The fact that, I say this stuff, and your asshole tightens up.”

She’s found a point that she thinks she can exploit, so she continues to press on it, which is annoying. Typically, I really enjoy these kinds of semantic debates, but I’m just not in the mood right now. She continues:

“When you make these jokes, like when you say the n-word or say some really ugly stereotype, don’t you worry that someone will actually hear you and be offended? Don’t you worry about getting yourself in trouble?”

“I do, actually, so I really only say this stuff to you.”

“See? You’re saying that you understand and acknowledge that this stuff is potentially harmful, and that you can only say it to me.”

“What I mean is that, if you don’t know me, you can’t possibly appreciate that I’m joking. The whole point is to be as deadpan as possible, to make it sound like I’m really saying something racist,”

“You *are*, though.”

“or misogynist, or homophobic or whatever. Yeah, I am, but I’m not being serious. The joke lies in the fact that it’s hard to tell, for a moment. That you don’t know how to respond. It’s the uncomfortableness.”

“That’s really messed up.”

“Which is why it’s funny. But that’s why I can’t make these jokes around people who don’t know me.”

“So, what you’re saying is that you have these jokes that you can’t tell in front of black people, gay people, women—how are these not just regular racist jokes?”

I’m losing control of the debate, at this point, which doesn’t happen often with my partner. She’s considerably smarter than me, in most respects, but in these kinds of debates I think on my feet much quicker, so I usually ‘win’ them, regardless of whether my position is stronger.

“Because I don’t mean them, and, if you know me, you know that.”

“Dr. Abrams knows you. Would you make that joke in front of her? If you were around a black person who knew you really well, would you make one of those awful, racist jokes?”

“No.”

“Why not, if they know you well enough to know that you don’t really think that way?”

I don’t want to answer, but I have to.

“Because they would probably still be hurt by it.”

“Doesn’t that say it all?”

*Fucking. God damn it. Humorless bitch.*

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About 8(ish) Seconds of Actual Thought

This is the second essay I’m submitting for workshop in a nonfiction creative writing seminar. The first piece I submitted was about the white nationalist online community stormfront.org. I share pieces like this regularly, about white nationalists, incels, MRAs, etc.. Every time I hit send on an email sending these pieces out to my classmates, I feel a pang of fear, anticipating what they’ll think, my butthole tightening. I always worry that my typical approach, mostly refraining from commentary and judgment of these eminently worthy-of-judgment subjects, will come across poorly, offending or alienating my peers. But I always send them. Usually, it goes fine.

I was questioned on this last piece, though. I was asked why I would choose to write about such an unsavory, unpleasant community in the first place, and my tone came across to at least one person like I was ‘normalizing’ an ugly, dangerous community and ideology. A couple people commented on my choice to spell out the n-word in full, and one classmate even ventured a guess that, as a white man, maybe there’s a ‘thrill’ for me in using it. My immediate reaction to these challenges was petulant, and I

wanted to rush to my email and respond, individually, to each one. That last one, about the ‘thrill’ of saying the n-word, cut especially deep, as it hit the sensitivity and confusion I’m still carrying around about my tendency to think that racism/sexism/homophobia/etc. is funny, as long as you do it *the right way* and don’t actually mean it. I wanted to walk them through my thought process, to explain how carefully I had thought before I decided to include the n-word fully spelled out and why it was for an important reason, to tell them why it was okay and help them see the things that they didn’t understand. I needed them to see that *I’m not like that*. I had—I *have*—*so much* to say.

But, on the other hand, in this situation, what I have to say might not be the most important issue.

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## Last, Do No Harm

Afrika Bambaataa was born Lance Taylor in South Bronx, New York City. A member of the Black Spades street gang, he became involved in the burgeoning hip hop scene of the late 1970s, itself as much a response to the grinding poverty of the area as the gangs themselves. When he began hosting parties himself, he used his influence to encourage kids to direct their energies toward hip hop, as well, forming the Universal Zulu Nation, an advocacy group organized around hip hop and providing a healthy outlet for young people. Bambaataa is universally recognized as one of the artists who created and shaped hip hop, his song “Planet Rock” being one of the most recognizable and enduring songs of the early days of hip hop. More meaningful than this, possibly, is the Universal Zulu Nation, which is still going strong and is established in many countries across the globe. The Universal Zulu Nation’s influence on generations of young people, as a positive alternative that may not have been present otherwise, is incalculable.

In 2016, however, Afrika Bambaataa was accused by Ronald Savage, a Bronx political activist, of molesting Savage when he was fifteen years old and a member of the Universal Zulu Nation. Along with Savage, two other men accused Bambaataa of sexually abusing them, as well, when they were minors. Once these accusations were public, it also became clear that whispers about Bambaataa’s relationships with underage boys had been something of an open secret in the community for years, and that at least one of his alleged victims had committed suicide. Afrika Bambaataa denied the accusations, and the Universal Zulu Nation (of which Bambaataa was still the leader) allegedly attempted to threaten and

intimidate the accusers. Eventually, Bambaataa was removed from his position as leader of the Universal Zulu Nation, and the group made a public apology to the victims for their role in Bambaataa's abuse.

Afrika Bambaataa, inarguably, enriched American life and provided opportunities for many young people, all while, most likely, inflicting horrific abuse on young men from the communities he was most deeply connected to.



I have social phobia, or, as it's often called *social anxiety disorder*. It's intense anxiety and fear of social situations, and it sucks. I guess I have always been like this. When I was a kid, during family reunions, I would spend most of the day in the backseat of my parents' car, hiding, because I was sure none of my own family wanted me there. It's kind of a weird thing, because everyone has anxiety and fear of social situations, and everyone has a degree of fear when meeting new people. This makes it difficult to explain to other people exactly what my problem is. Sometimes, I'll say it like this: you know the feeling when you have to speak in public, or you're at a party where you don't know anyone? That's where I start, my default setting when I'm around other people or I'm even thinking about other people. It's not the best expression of the condition (or, at least, my own experience of it), but it's the best way I've come up with to describe something that, honestly, seems like some made-up shit. What I mean is, if everyone has these feelings, then what's really the condition? Reality? Being an adult? It's difficult to not, at the very least, entertain the idea that I have no real problem; that I have the exact same experience as every single other person in the world; that I am only unique in my lack of ability to deal with these feelings and keep doing what I'm supposed to do.

That's not a helpful line of thinking, however, and it's one that contributed to me failing to get any help for my condition until my late twenties. Starting in junior high school (when my problems really began to manifest) I was forever thinking "I'm just being a lazy coward, and I'll grow out of it when I'm older," but things steadily got worse, as I got older, and I didn't grow out of anything—I just got more cowardly. For all intents and purposes, I failed out of college, and, while I had a job, going to that job was the only time I left my apartment. I made my girlfriend call to order pizza, when I wanted it, because I wasn't able to handle the stress of talking to a stranger on the phone. My strategy for navigating life had become "Hide under some coats and hope it all works out."<sup>1</sup> Finally, my then-girlfriend couldn't take it anymore, and forced me to go to the doctor.

The doctor gave me this sheet with a bunch of questions and situations on it, asking you to rate your anxiety for each one on a scale of 1-5. It was stuff like "Your dentist has a new receptionist," and then how much does that make you freak out. I circled almost all fives, and the assistant came and took the sheet, leaving me in the exam room to wait and consider my choices. As I waited for the doctor to come in, I became convinced that I had, most likely, overshot on some of my answers. I circled way too many fives, I decided, because some of those were probably more like fours, maybe even a couple threes. When the doctor finally entered, I blurted out a confession for what I'd done. He looked at the sheet, took a breath, and responded:

"I'm going to be honest with you: even if you overestimated on a number of these, you're still well into what we would call the 'severe' category."

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<sup>1</sup> Shout to the "Homer Goes to College" episode of *The Simpsons*.

I was at once humiliated and relieved by this pronouncement. He prescribed the generic of Paxil (Paroxetine) for me, and despite being terrified of what the drug would do to me, I took it.

Unexpectedly, things were better. It wasn't like magic, as I still had all the same thoughts and fears as before, but they were much less powerful. I noticed that I could *do things*. When I had my follow-up visits, he told me that, while it was obviously good that I was experiencing such a difference, medication was only half of the equation: I also needed to be talking to a therapist, learning and developing strategies for dealing with my anxiety. I knew he was right, but I wasn't ready for that, yet. But I promised him that I would eventually.

And I did. I also went back to school, which I was shocked to find that I hadn't actually flunked out of. I spent the rest of my undergraduate career on academic probation, digging myself out of the hole I'd dug being unable to make myself attend class (and too afraid to face the instructors to ask them to drop classes) for, literally, years. I still stumbled, like when I collected a bunch of area rocks for an intro-level geology class to bring to the teacher to complete a simple assignment, but I couldn't work up the nerve to bring them to her, and they just sat in the back seat of my car in a ziplock bag. Angst over that made me fail the whole class, but, for the most part, I succeeded. My partner helped me, and many teachers in the English department gave me way more consideration and encouragement than I deserved. I finally completed my bachelor's degree at thirty-three. I had to take one final class, an intro-level political science class, in the summer of 2011 to be able to graduate. I had (more than) completed all the required credits, but I hadn't yet pulled my GPA up to the 2.0 minimum required for graduation. I was also at the limit of ten years of undergraduate study, which meant that if I didn't graduate after that



summer I would be required to start over. So, I took a first-year level course “American Political Controversies,” needing an A to pull my GPA up to where it needed to be. By this point, I was doing pretty good, and the class was easy for someone who had been in college for more than a decade, so I got what I needed and I graduated.

One of the incredibly generous and supportive professors in the English department encouraged me to apply to the department’s relatively new MA program. I assumed she was being nice, and I thought nothing of it, but she kept pushing, and then two other incredibly generous and supportive professors, including the director of the program, pushed me to apply, as well, even offering to write my recommendation letters. Amazingly (and in a turn of events I can’t imagine happens to many besides white dudes who patently don’t deserve it), after graduating with a sweet 2.02 GPA, I was accepted into the graduate program. On a probationary basis, but still. Fortunately, I succeeded, and during the program I began tutoring at the school’s writing center (again, at the encouragement of the same teacher that pushed me into the graduate program in the first place). I really enjoyed the work, and I think I was pretty good at it. By the time I finished my graduate degree, while I didn’t think of it in this way, I was kind of a different person. I had, eventually, begun therapy, and spoke up in class regularly.

Kind of like when I blurted out to the doctor about how I overestimated on some of the social anxiety questions, I regularly, compulsively disclose to people that I struggle with social phobia (a fact that fascinated my first therapist). My only explanation for this is that I assume that it’s really obvious to people that there’s something off about me, so I want to give them that context. Maybe I’m hoping to get pity, I don’t know. For years now, though, this always seems to come as a surprise to people. They

consistently respond that they never would have thought that I had any major anxiety, that maybe I seem quiet, but nothing notable. Depending on my anxiety level at the exact moment, I either assume they're being nice and lying or, sometimes, I think they're being truthful. That I seem normal.

Which, I have no idea what to think of that. I know I am different than I used to be, I know I am healthier and more functional. I know that I get a lot of credit just for being older and a white dude (and who looks younger than he is), and it's also true that I've been in college so long (as a student and a teacher) that I'm more comfortable in that context—the context in which I encounter most people—than I would be in most others. But still, it's hard to know what to think of it, because while they might not see a person who is unable to force himself to endure the terror of *talking to a stranger on the phone*, I know that I am still that person. The same fears are still there, even if they are, usually, less intense than they used to be. Sometimes, they still get the best of me. Am I really that good of an actor? How is it possible that they don't see it?



Afrika Bambaataa is a name that's regularly tossed out when people discuss the figures responsible for the birth of hip hop culture and rap music. Another, lesser-known name to whom credit (or "credit") has been attributed is Robert Moses, the public official who held many official positions during his time in New York city and state government (including holding twelve positions simultaneously, at one point) and 'master builder' whose vision of modern life (and the place of the personal automobile in it) "influenced a generation of engineers, architects, and urban planners who spread his philosophies across the nation despite his not having been trained in those professions." To

live in New York City is to, quite literally, live in the world Moses built: “416 miles of highways, 13 bridges, 658 playgrounds and housing for 150,000 people. He constructed parkways, tunnels, beaches, zoos, parks, Shea Stadium, the New York Coliseum, the United Nations, Lincoln Center and much more.” Robert Moses, in actual fact, was a visionary, creating the world we (especially New Yorkers) live in.

Unfortunately, visionaries have blind spots. Robert Caro, whose Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Moses is considered the definitive picture of both Robert Moses and New York City politics, famously called Moses “the most racist human being I had ever really encountered.” And this assessment seems to confirm many criticisms and accusations that had been levied at Moses over the years. Critics have pointed out that the roads and parkways Moses built victimized New Yorkers of color by cutting them off from the rest of the city (including the beautiful parks, beaches and pools he was building) and hastening white flight from those neighborhoods. The problem was that the on-ramps to access Moses’ new roads were built so that buses were too tall to use them, and since people in poorer neighborhoods did not have cars, which would have been able to use the ramps just fine, they were effectively cut off from the rest of the city. More specifically, he was accused of “[ordering] his engineers to build the bridges low over the parkway to keep buses from the city away from Jones Beach—buses presumably filled with the poor blacks and Puerto Ricans Moses despised.” Then there are the accusations of stranger things, such as “purposely [setting the temperature of pools] built in Harlem to colder temperatures, believing, for whatever reason, that African Americans didn’t like to swim in cold water,” or the truly bizarre accusation that he “adorned the wrought-iron trellises in northern

Manhattan parks with images of monkeys, while parks in white communities featured curling waves on their trellises.” Much more seriously, he removed anti-discrimination language into a new neighborhood being built, which resulted in African American veterans not being able to move there. Even worse, “Under the guise of urban renewal, 7,000 African Americans and Hispanics were evicted from a diverse, working-class neighborhood for the construction of Lincoln Center.” And, adding injury to injury, “Promised relocation assistance from Moses’ Slum Clearance Committee never came. Those displaced ended up in the Bronx and Harlem, further segregating New York City.”

And this is where the idea that “Robert Moses is responsible for the birth of hip hop” comes from. The neighborhoods that were cut off from the rest of the city by Moses are exactly where hip hop was born. To try to deal with the poverty they were living in, and the very accurate feeling that there was no way out, young people gathered at house parties, where DJs like Afrika Bambaataa would perform and where the culture of hip hop was born. Robert Moses created the world that was shutting the people in these neighborhoods out from any kind of opportunity, so he is, indirectly, responsible. He created the world, the world created the people, and the people created the culture.

There are people who defend Moses, saying that claims that he was racist are inaccurate and that stories like the cold pools and monkeys on the trellises are ridiculous, saying that the problem wasn’t that Moses was racist, but rather “a megalomaniacal elitist who disliked public transportation” (though this is qualified by the observation that Moses “like everyone else in the 1920s and 1930s [...] believed that the future of American cities would revolve around cars”—presumably this ‘everyone else’ could

also afford cars). But even this defense does not dispute the fact of Moses' effect on the city, noting that he "guttered working-class neighborhoods" in order to realize his vision.

Whether Moses was a racist or not, the world he created negatively impacted the lives of countless millions of people. Whether he intended to or not, those people who fell outside of his vision had their lives harmed, not enriched by what Robert Moses worked so hard to create.



During the time I was working my way through the MA program, my partner was teaching and applying to doctoral programs. Eventually, she was accepted into the program at the University of Oklahoma, and we left for Norman, OK at the end of the summer in 2012. By this point, I had started teaching composition, encouraged by the director of the first-year writing program. To put it mildly, teaching was not something that had ever occurred to me as a job I could do. I had to be convinced, and, honestly, the only reason I took the job was because the other option was to start applying for jobs and going to interviews. The prospect of having to do that pushed me to take the job teaching, because I would have to do all the regular stuff to apply, but I was basically told that I could have the job if I wanted it, and I at least knew all the people I would be working with and around. It was terrifying, but working as a writing tutor made me feel confident that, at least, I knew what to do, even if the actual doing of it was terrifying.

As we prepared to leave, I had been teaching for two semesters. Another adjunct instructor in the department, who had also been a graduate student with me, asked me if I planned to continue teaching in Oklahoma. I told her that I guessed so. I had contacted the director of the first-year writing

program there, telling him that I was interested in teaching there, and he had actually offered me a full-time course load in the fall. I explained that I was really nervous about it, since OU is such a huge school and I'd only, at that point, taught literally three classes, but we were going to need the money, so I needed to do it. She was enthusiastic at my answer, and she responded insistently:

“I'm so glad to hear that you're going to do it. You *have to* keep teaching. *We need you shaping young minds.*”

I don't know if anything anyone has ever said to me has terrified me more than those words. *We need you shaping young minds.* I know she meant it as encouragement and validation, but she could not have said anything that could have left me more shook. My blood ran cold. I made some excuse and ran away.



I can't remember for sure where I heard this, but I remember being told that, when polled, it turned out that the overwhelming majority of instructors teaching writing at the university level had never, in fact, taken a college writing course themselves (at least not the first-year composition classes that everyone is required to take). They had been the students who tested out of those courses, so they never had the experience of being a student in one of the classes that they're teaching. I have no idea where this information came from, so I have no idea if it's true, but, as soon as I heard it, I believed it. Teaching writing is really hard, but being a student in a writing class is also very hard, and it's probably a shame that so many people teaching these classes never had the experience of being on the other side of the exchange.



Henry Kissinger is a legendary diplomat and political advisor, so much so that I won't bother to provide much of a biography. He won the Nobel Peace Prize for helping to end the Vietnam War, orchestrated the opening of US relations with China, and helped craft the Paris Peace Accord. He is hailed as one of America's great statesmen, a canny and resourceful realist. He is also, very accurately, called a war criminal.

Very few people can right be described as having as much influence on the shape of the world we live in as Henry Kissinger, but the one thing that always sticks in my mind about him is something he reportedly said during the period in which he was orchestrating bombings in Cambodia which killed one-hundred thousand *civilians*: "I refuse to believe that a little fourth-rate power like North Vietnam does not have a breaking point." In trying to comprehend the thinking behind this statement, I am at a loss. The issues that Kissinger dealt with were terribly complicated, and I am willing to accept (if not necessarily agree) that there were no 'good' options, that any approach was going to involve real suffering for real people, but to be this cavalier makes no sense. Masculine bravado, alone, does not account for this. It's truly beyond me how a person can be so convinced of their perspective, so absolutely and completely sure of themselves that they would not only order the murder of so many people but then also frame it like a personal pissing contest, like some perverse swag.

How can a person be *that sure* that they're right, when the cost is so high?



A curated selection of comments on an essay I wrote for Freshman Composition II (which I did have to take), from another instructor that was terribly supportive of me:

- *You're determined to avoid taking any heroic stance, because any stance is nonsense, right? Non-stance.*
- *You seem a little self-conscious about appearing to take anything you believe too seriously. Which may not be so bad a stance.*
- *The problem with stating basic life choice as one of deciding: To rebel or not to rebel, is to concede that we can only act in response to some majority tendency. Too bad.*



I taught a lot at the University of Oklahoma, many semesters teaching more than full-time. I taught first-year composition, technical writing, professional writing classes for nursing students, special sections of composition for international students, and I even got to teach a class focused on professional wrestling interviews. I got so much practical experience, I often thought I was getting more practical benefit out of being there than many of my partner's PhD cohort, most of whom would probably never find the tenure track job they would be looking for after graduation. It was, as I expected, terrifying at first, but I think (or, at least, hope) I became a solid, competent teacher.

After my partner graduated, she became director of first-year composition at Columbus State University in Columbus, GA. By that point, I was actually a pretty good candidate for university composition teaching positions, so I got hired to teach composition in the program she was in charge of.



I was hired as an adjunct, but a lecturer's health emergency bumped me up to full time lecturer for most of the fall semester and all of the spring. I was having some issues translating my curriculum and expectations from OU to a very different student body at CSU, but it was nothing that was strange or unexpected. At this point, I considered myself a teacher. It's who I am.

One thing I do, as a teacher, that I am constantly conflicted about, is forcing students to talk in class. I don't do a participation grade that requires students to speak, because I know as well as anyone that not wanting to talk is not the same as not being engaged, but I do require them to do the classic, first-day-of-class-introductions. To alleviate some of the stress, I put them in groups and have them interview and introduce each other, but still—they have to talk in front of everyone. It's an initial attempt to create community, and even though the Old Me would be (and is) aghast that I would subject others to something that would have put me off attending a class ever again when I was an undergraduate, the New Teacher Me believes that it's a valuable tool for beginning to create bonds between the students. And it helps me learn names. Also, I've taught a curriculum where the final project in the class is a speech (which is a whole other giant thing of angst), so this is a nice, low-stakes way to start to get them used to talking in front of people.

The second semester I taught at CSU, I was teaching Principles of Composition II, and I was running through this first day routine, which, at this point, I admit, I am kind of on autopilot for. I make superficial changes, mostly in the questions I instruct them to ask each other and my course introduction wrap-up at the end of the session. I mindlessly divided them into groups of three, gave them longer than necessary to obtain the required information from each other (so that they could hopefully move into

more casual conversation and get more comfortable with each other), and then asked which group wanted to go first. Each group awkwardly presented each other, and eventually it came to the last group to go, two young women and a young man. I made my regular joke, “Who wants to go last?” and asked them to go ahead. The two girls spoke, one introducing the other girl and the other girl introducing the boy, and it was time for him to go. He stood silent, looking at me. I smiled and said, “You can go ahead.” He stayed silent, looking at me blankly. I repeated myself, saying “It’s you, you can go now.” His expression didn’t change, and I realized that he wasn’t going to speak, so I awkwardly said “That’s no problem. Thanks, everyone, I know this isn’t the most fun,” and I moved on. He sat back down, and I watched him (while trying to disguise that I was watching him) for the rest of the period, absentmindedly going over the syllabus (and completely forgetting to do my course introduction wrap-up) while I worried about how I had embarrassed him and tried to think about if I should try to talk to him after class (and wondering what the hell I would even say). After class, he ducked out of the room while other students came up and asked first day-type questions. I was disappointed, but also relieved. After class, I deduced from the roster that his name was Adam.

The next day, I was having my first office hours of the semester. Almost no one ever comes to office hours that early in the semester, but I feel like I should be there. Just after the end of my scheduled time, the department’s administrative assistant appeared in my open door. She saw that I was sitting at the desk, and looked back to her left, gesturing towards me and saying “Here he is.” As she stepped back, the young man who was unable to speak in class yesterday haltingly stepped into the office. He was wearing the exact same clothes as he had been in class the day before: old, faded jeans, beaten down

Nikes, and a black pullover hoody that showed significant pilling of the fabric on the exterior. I immediately sat up straight, excited that he'd come to see me. I'd discussed with my partner what had happened with him in class, and I'd spent a good deal of the time since then thinking about what I should do. I asked him to sit, and he did, making furtive eye contact, but still not speaking. He had the shadow of a beard, and I recognized the bumps on his face as irritation from shaving. I mindlessly said my usual thing about how no one ever comes to office hours the first week, and I asked him what I could do for him. Adam sat still for a second, then he pulled one hand out of the kangaroo pocket on his hoody, handing me a small note, a corner torn from a regular sheet of notebook paper. There were only two words on it:

*Selective mutism.*

Upon learning that he was unable to speak, I began talking and talking. And talking. I apologized profusely for embarrassing him in class (to which he responded by not changing his expression in any perceptible way), and then I babbled on about what we could do to help him succeed in the class. I explained how the final major project was a formal speech, but that I was going to give the option to anyone who really felt like they couldn't do it to write a traditional paper, instead, and of course he could write the paper, instead. Additionally, there were other, smaller speaking assignments during the semester, but he could also do a paper option for those, as well. I suddenly thought that it might make him uncomfortable to have me make a special set of expectations and assignments just for him (because it certainly would have made me uncomfortable as a student, knowing that everyone else in class would see that I was not doing what the rest of them were doing, wondering what was wrong with me), so I told

him that, if he preferred, he could also do the speeches, or, if he wanted, he could do the speeches here, in the office, with just me as the audience. But, I thought, that might be just as bad (or even worse) to do a speech just for one dude, who's grading you on it, so I also mentioned that he could record himself giving the speech at home. I told him he didn't have to answer now, he could email me later, after he had a chance to think about it. I asked him if, during group work (which I do a lot of), if he would prefer being left out of groups or doing the group work with everyone else. He struggled to get out the word 'groups,' and I told him I understood (which who knows if I did, but in the moment I felt like I did). I told him that, typically, I try to mix up the groups, so that everyone works with everyone else and gets all kinds of different feedback, but that I would be sure to put him in a group with the same two young women he worked with yesterday. I told him that, if there's anything that teachers in the past have done that was helpful, to let me know, because maybe I can do those things, too. I told him that if he's uncomfortable talking to me one-on-one, he can just email me. I told him that he should always feel more than welcome to tell me about any issues he's having or anything I can do to help him, not just with this class but with other classes, as well. I told him that, if he hasn't already registered with the university, he should, because otherwise some teachers might not be willing to work with him. I told him that I could help him with that, if he needed, though I didn't know how it works. I didn't wait for him to respond to that offer, which he probably appreciated. Idiotically, I started telling him about my own anxiety issues. I realized that I was probably overwhelming him. I said that I realized that I was probably overwhelming him, and apologized for that. I asked him if he had any questions for me, and as soon as I said that I realized what a stupid, thoughtless question it was, but I wasn't sure how to save the moment,

so I awkwardly let it pass. I felt like he desperately wanted to leave, but of course he couldn't say it, so I said "You probably are ready to get out of here and away from my talking ass, so I'll let you go. Please don't hesitate to let me know if there's anything you need or anything I can do to help you succeed. Through email." He got up and might have made a gesture with his head before walking out. I was light-headed, and my hands were numb, like when they fall asleep. It's a sensation I recognized from the few times I've had full-on panic attacks.

The department's assistant appeared in the doorway a minute later, telling me that Adam came into her office and spit out the words "Gerdes-McClain," not making eye contact at all. She naturally assumed that he was looking for my partner, since, as the director of first year writing, that's the Gerdes-McClain that most students are looking for when they come to the department, so she showed him into my partner's office. My partner later told me that she quickly figured out that he was looking for me, but didn't realize that it was borderline cruel to send him back to the department assistant for help. We were both amazed that he was able to make her understand who he was really looking for. Even though she hadn't realized the extent of his issue, my partner, as well as the administrative assistant, immediately recognized that there was something off about him.

I spent much, much time that semester trying to think about how I might help Adam. I thought about what my more sensitive teachers had done for me, allowing me to complete alternate assignments and being willing to let me get away with not speaking and never calling on me. I thought about the teachers who weren't so sensitive, the ones who scolded me and told me that I needed to take their class more seriously. I thought about how much worse Adam's anxiety was than mine, and the fact that he

was African American and clearly poor, so the likelihood of teachers making allowances for him was so much less than it had been for me. I thought about the fact that, in the CSU English department, at a school where roughly half of the student population is black, that there were only two African American adjuncts. I wondered about who would see themselves in Adam and go out of their way for him. I thought about all the times that I had stayed at home and not gone to class, even though there wasn't even anything scary happening that day, just because I couldn't face it. I thought about the Ziploc bag full of rocks, sitting in my backseat, and how much worse Adam's anxiety is than mine ever was, and I couldn't believe how much strength it must have taken for him to come and go through the ordeal of telling me that he has selective mutism. A few weeks into the semester, I received a phone call from a woman from CSU's Disability Services, and she thanked me effusively for looking out for him, implying that his other instructors were not nearly as accommodating. She seemed, also, to be at a loss, as she told me how Adam's mom was entirely alone, advocating for her son and getting very little help from the administration. I saw myself in Adam, and I desperately wanted to help him.

But I also didn't know the right way to help. I thought about all the things that people tried to do for me, that I recognized (although sometimes only in retrospect) as attempts to help, but that, for me, were humiliating, rather than helpful. I remembered how, even when I was doing much better, when my favorite professor encouraged me to apply for the master's program, I initially thought she was just being nice, and then I thought she was being unrealistic. I worried that, if I pushed, he would be spooked, rather than feeling supported. I tried to think of the perfect move, the thing to do that would be exactly what he needed, not too aggressive and allowing him to feel empowered. I didn't think I could solve his

anxiety, but I did, I confess, imagine myself like the teachers who supported me and helped me figure things out for myself.

How could I do that, though? I fretted over pushing too hard, somehow doing damage to Adam. I wondered if I should try to do anything, if I was being presumptuous in assuming that he would even want any help from me. I saw myself in Adam, but who the hell am I to assume that he wants help from some weird, old white dude? All I really knew was that he had this issue; the rest was just me projecting like a motherfucker onto this kid. Everything I thought that I might do, I thought of multiple reasons why it would be overstepping or why it could do more harm than good. I thought about how, if I did nothing, I would just be another teacher who ignored him and let him pass by without making any attempt to help him. But I also thought about all the things that could go wrong if I forced myself into this kid's life. I wanted to help, because he reminded me so much of myself, which made me think of all the things that I wished people had done for me, that I might be able to do for him; but *he's not me*, so I really don't know what he needs. Maybe what *I* needed would be exactly the wrong thing for Adam. My overwhelming fear of hurting him made it impossible for me to imagine any way to actually help him. I was, essentially, a teacher who did his best not to affect my student's life in any way, abdicating all responsibility because I couldn't know what effects I might have.

Adam did well in the class, because he was uncommonly thoughtful for a first-year college student, and he was a strong writer. He never asked me for any support or anything, and I only managed to make myself email him to check in and see how he was doing twice in the course of the semester. Anything beyond that felt like too much. He didn't reply to the emails, and I didn't bring it up in class.

He got an A in the class and moved on, while I left CSU to be a student in an MFA program. Besides trying to be attentive and sensitive to his needs— which, I'm aware, isn't nothing— I didn't do a thing for Adam.





## White Space (Lost Souls of the Internet Part One)

When I was little, I used to worry constantly about how I understood the world, if it made sense to others the same way it made sense to me. I would lie awake at night wondering if the things I saw, the things I said and did, meant what I thought they meant. If I take a spelling test and I write down my answers, what does it mean when someone else looks at it? What if I hear the teacher say “automobile,” (but what they have really said is “-.-/\*\*\*”) and I write on my paper what I believe is “automobile,” but when anyone else looks at it they see

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~| |  
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And this is *not* the correct answer for “-.-/\*\*\*.” And when they try to tell me that I am wrong, that I have misunderstood, all I understand is “Oh, look! It’s time for lunch.” And repeated instances of this type lead to everyone being perpetually angry and out of patience with me, constantly yelling and dismissing me, which I understand to be them being enthusiastic about fractions. People hate me because I can’t see or understand the world. When I am supposed to be crying I think it is my turn at the drinking fountain. I think I am supposed to kick the ball when it is rolled towards me, but everyone is so because I won’t stop being orange. I don’t understand that over is under actually, that when the teacher look ats me it is because I’m not supposed to be that do, that when I help other other otrhh with remainders I am making actual laughs I’m ton speaking because English, raise her why her. I am a football fish at a cuddle party.

It's basically the "what if what I see as green you perceive as red?" thing, but raised to a terrifying, completely destabilizing and paralyzing pitch. It was an awful feeling. Fortunately, it doesn't happen very often anymore. Or it usually doesn't happen with the same intensity.

###

Here's something weird. Maybe.

If you go to stormfront.org, the largest, oldest white nationalist community on the internet, you'll see that, like most online message boards, they have a "Guidelines for Posting" section. As is common for these areas, it's closed to any additional posts, and you're instructed to "read before posting." It's pretty standard stuff. However, before you click into this section, you might notice its short description:

"Words have consequences."

I mean, it is true.

Inside the section, there is only one post, made by Don Black, whose user title identifies him as 'Proprietor of Stormfront.' It is full of the same kinds of rules that these sections normally contain (no flaming or spamming, no multiple usernames, etc.), plus the kinds of stuff you might expect from a white nationalist message board ("No attacks against other White nationalities"), but there's also this rule: "No profanity. *Avoid racial epithets.*"<sup>1</sup> This might seem odd, considering it's, you know, a white nationalist website, but as Black reiterates: "Before you post *anything*,<sup>2</sup> remember that words have consequences, both for you and others."<sup>3</sup>

Looking at Black's avatar, a low-resolution picture of himself—an older, middle-aged man with gray hair, wearing a blazer over a button-up shirt with the top button left open, half-smiling with

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<sup>1</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>2</sup> Emphasis his.

<sup>3</sup> The clear, practical purpose of this guideline is to protect Black (no relation, btw), and the forum itself, from unwanted negative attention and consequences, and while it does keep users from using some of the most obvious racial language, most users simply employ less well-known, somehow more uncomfortable racial euphemisms.

*Stormfront*'s logo (a Celtic cross surrounded by the words "White Pride World Wide") and a Confederate flag over his left shoulder—this advice makes sense. He *looks like* that dude who would remind you that words do, indeed, have consequences.

*Stormfront* is your father's white nationalist community.

###

My dad was pretty racist. Not like the Grand Wizard, but racist enough. When I was very young, I had no idea this could be seen as any kind of problem. I had never heard anybody question this worldview, so it was natural. We would watch the Lakers play the Celtics, and my dad would point out how the black players were overly concerned with showing off and looking good, while the white players were simply trying to do their jobs and win the game, and that's what was happening. I saw it. I even pointed it out to him sometimes. He wasn't angry or mean-spirited (he even directed my attention to how the black players on the Celtics team were just as admirably workmanlike as their white teammates, noting that not *all* black people were like this—apparently just those who lacked adequate white guidance), just matter-of-fact. You know, this is how the world works. White people like this, black people like that. It made sense.

One day in third or fourth grade, our teacher started talking about racism. She asked the all-white classroom if it was okay to judge a person based on the color of their skin. The class responded—*of course not*.<sup>4</sup> She asked if the class could tell her any racist things that were said about black people. They're criminals, they're lazy, they always want something for nothing, *they only care about looking*

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<sup>4</sup> Emphasis theirs (I'm pretty sure)

*good*, etc. She continued, asking if any of these things were true. Of course not. Class continued on as it had, but I did not.

The bottom dropped out of my stomach, my face burned and tingled.

Everyone knows that people are all the same; you can't judge a person based on their race. Of course not. That's racism, and we all know it's wrong.

I stared hard at my desk, afraid to make eye contact with anyone else in the room. Everyone knew about racism, and that racism was wrong, except me. It had been as obvious as anything could be, yet I had no idea. I thought about what might have happened had I spoken up and tried to answer the question ahead of everyone else in class. I frantically tried to remember if I had ever said anything that had betrayed my ignorance. Had I used the word *ni\*\*er* in front of anyone? I was sure I had at home, with the kids from my neighborhood, whose fathers thought the same way mine did, but I couldn't remember if I'd said it around the kids at school. I was the only one who didn't know, the only one who didn't understand, and I didn't even realize it. Could they see it?

###

Every page you click to on *Stormfront*, there's a randomized banner displayed at the top of the page. The content of the banner varies; sometimes it's an ad for *Stormfront Radio*, sometimes it's a simple identification of the site (with the announcement that the community is the "Voice of the Embattled White Minority"<sup>5</sup>), sometimes it's a celebration of some notable white guy (like Karl Benz,

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<sup>5</sup> Emphasis theirs

who received the German patent for “Vehicle with Gasoline Engine” in 1886).<sup>6</sup> My favorite of the rotating content is similar to the ones featuring the notable white guys, but it’s focused on achievements, rather than individuals. There’s one that shows the Parthenon (complete 438 B.C.), one that highlights the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, London (“Standard of World’s Time Zones”), and one that helpfully reminds one of the Wright Brothers first flight (December 7, 1903). Each one bears the same tagline: “*Every*<sup>7</sup> month is White history month.” I remember the first time I noticed this assertion. My first reaction was to, loudly and involuntarily, laugh out loud. *Yeah*, I thought to myself, *no shit*. What a bunch of fucking weirdos.

###

*Stormfront* is *huge*, both in the sense that it has a large number of members and in that, in comparison to most internet communities, it attempts to connect to every aspect of its members’ lives. There are eight sections and dozens of subforums (with even more sub-subforums contained within those), including an *Open Forums* section that allows non-registered guests to ask questions and engage with members of the community. Among the subforums available are *Nature and Environment* (for “Tree Huggers and Earth Muffins”), *Poetry and Creative Writing*, *Homemaking*, (separate from *The Women’s Forum*), many different regional forums, and *Classified Ads*. There’s even, under the *Music and Entertainment* subforum, a dedicated *Gaming* discussion area, intended “To sharpen your wits;

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<sup>6</sup> And it’s always a guy. And it’s always a guy who’s long dead.

<sup>7</sup> Emphasis theirs

however, *Stormfront* requires 20 pushups and 50 situps daily to participate in this forum.”<sup>8</sup> My personal favorite subforum is *Quotations*, which is legit dedicated to posting awesome quotes.

Most of these subforums (and sub-subforums) are not terribly active, but there is, in almost every one, at the very least a thread or two that is currently active. And they just talk about regular shit in some of these sections, like the “Favorite Dog Breeds” thread in *Nature and Environment*, which is almost entirely free of racial commentary (there’s a bit of a consensus that German Shepherds are the best breed, but that probably wouldn’t be notable if the conversation wasn’t taking place on a white nationalist board), except for one dude who, saying “I didn’t want to inject race here,” wonders about tendencies of specific races to be more likely to have a fear of dogs. Another user, however, calmly counters that it’s quite common for people to be afraid of dogs, and that it all depends on the individual past experience, and that’s it. They go on talking about dogs, just like any old non-racist might.

Most conversations often end up addressing race in one way or another, though. This particular obsession that the community is organized around makes its way into every aspect of their lives, which helps explain why there are so many subforums (and sub-subforums)—this is their life, they don’t turn it off. Being a ‘race-realist’<sup>9</sup> is not something they do online to relax; it’s their identity.

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<sup>8</sup> I haven’t seen any evidence that this requirement is strictly enforced, though.

<sup>9</sup> Their term.

Andrew Anglin, proprietor of internet hate blog the *Daily Stormer*,<sup>10</sup> is no Don Black. Not that he wants to be. Anglin's website is a true 21<sup>st</sup> Century Hate Boutique, focusing on memes and irony as much as it is on hate. For example, a long-present banner on the front page was a 50's-style sci-fi illustration of a radioactive zombie advancing on a handsome, blond Hitler Youth-looking dude, beneath campy horror movie-style text that reads "Creepy Glowni\*\*ers Are After the Stormer!"<sup>11</sup> took a visitor to a supremely ironic article assuring them that they are being surveilled by the government for their own protection. There's articles like "Christ is Risen!," a sincere exploration of the meaning of faith, both to western civilization and in Anglin's own life, but the strong focus is more on posts with titles like "Uzbekistan Still Not Going Anal, Jew NGOs Whine" and "Annoying Bitch Kristi Noem Goes to War With Satan Shoes." Besides Anglin, the contributors use internet shitposter names like "Snake Baker" and "azzmador," and there's a prominent "Free Ricky" banner on the site's front page, bringing the plight of @Ricky\_Vaughn99<sup>12</sup> (who was, apparently, arrested by the FBI) to visitor's attention. It's a weird joint, because, while on the surface, the philosophy espoused on the Daily Stormer (where you can pin it down, amid all the layers of irony) is similar to *Stormfront* (with the exception of a pronounced affinity for incel-style hatred of women), the vibe is entirely different. There's an ironic detachment from everything that, if you're not paying attention, might convince you that the whole thing is just a joke by a

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<sup>10</sup> According to the site itself, "The Most Censored Publication in History," no doubt referring to the many times it has been attacked, denied service and removed from the mainstream internet.

<sup>11</sup> Adding the slur is an extra touch, but the term 'glow' is a reference to Terry Davis, a schizophrenic computer programmer and cult figure who claimed that CIA agents (who he believed were after him) "glow in the dark."

<sup>12</sup> A major alt-right figure on Twitter, before being banned. His profile picture was a headshot of Charlie Sheen, from the movie *Major League* (where his character's name was Ricky Vaughn) wearing a red Make America Great Again cap.



very immature, angry little edgelord. Which, actually, it is. Except that it isn't. Which is kind of the point. Which, I don't know, seems a little weird.

###

I was in a literature class once, and the subject of authorial intent came up. It was a discussion of some book, and the conversation was somewhat stalled over concerns about what the author “meant to say” as it related to some character or event or something. It was argued by some people in the class that we couldn’t read things into the novel’s events or characters that the author would have had no way of knowing about, could not apply any old thing from our world to the world of the text, that if we do this then we are perverting the text, making it into something it is not. The instructor let the debate continue on for a while, possibly deciding how best to address this concern. Finally, she decided to respond to the arguments of those who were fighting to preserve their notion of the sanctity of the author’s vision by telling a story about going to see a reading by some writer that she loved. She sat delighted, listening to this man or woman read whatever book they wrote, but was then horrified when the event shifted to the question-and-answer portion. She was aghast to find that this woman or man apparently was, apparently, completely clueless about his or her own book, that she or he had absolutely no insight into the beautiful work of art that he or she herself or himself created. In this novel that my instructor loved, she had found a bounty of meanings and ideas; every time she read it, she discovered something new and exciting, and now the man or woman who gave it life was suddenly, violently imposing a single narrow, unimaginative “truth” upon the text. This man or woman made the whole thing up, and she or he seemed to have no idea what they really had done, what was going on inside their creation. The instructor concluded her story with a moral: *Authors often have no idea what their own works are about.* Or, *Authors are usually the least qualified people to tell you what’s going on in their work.* No. *It’s a mistake to consider authors to be authorities on the things they have created.* It was something like that.

The point was that we should not be slaves to authorial intent, because the authors do not possess any magic answers to help us get to the truth of their creations. Oh, and insisting on any single, stable truth in a work robs that work of its complexity and, ultimately, its value. At least, that's how I took it. I guess I don't really have a clue what anyone else in the class thought she was trying to say.

###

There's one specific conversation taking place in stormfront.org forum that I'd like to share, a single piece of the overwhelming whole that I've decided demonstrates the community's core truth.

In the *Music and Entertainment* subforum is a giant thread, permanently stickied to the top of the section's first page called "Yggdrasil's Movie List – of mostly pro-white movies" The thread's initiator, Yggdrasil,<sup>13</sup> began the thread way back in 2004 with the expressed purpose of "[beginning] to assemble our own media libraries filled with content we can watch repeatedly—content that will gradually isolate us from the surrounding popular culture, and allow us to pay a smaller share of our incomes to the entertainment industry." His intention is to create a list of films that celebrate the white race or that, at the very least, contain content that is instructive for white people, and the thread is meant to mainly encourage suggestions for inclusion and debate over individual films, but it also includes extensive discussion about Yggdrasil's (and others') philosophy as it relates to what has 'value' for the white race and how to read and interpret films. The thread's third post is from JohnJoyTree, the other

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<sup>13</sup> Fun Fact: Yggdrasil is Don Black's lawyer.

major contributor to the discussion, who helpfully posts Yggdrasil's initial write-up describing the project, which is only provided by a (now dead) link in the opening post and includes Yggdrasil's positive and negative criteria:<sup>14</sup>

The ideal that we seek—the positive criteria for inclusion (in addition to significant entertainment value) are any of the following, either alone or in combination:

1. Positive portrayal of whites in defense against the depredations of liberalism, crime, and attack by alien races.
2. Positive portrayal of heterosexual relationships and sex, marriage, procreation and child rearing.
3. Positive portrayal of impulse control and behavior - consideration of the feelings of others and of community mores. Positive portrayal of initiative, hard work, achievement, sacrifice for the common good, - discrimination, self discipline, and sexual patience in mate selection.
4. Portrayals of white males as intelligent, sensitive and strong - in positive leadership roles and or romantic leads.
5. Particularly intense portrayals of white female beauty, in non-degrading roles.

However, given the realities of Hollywood, the primary criteria for appearance on the list are the absence of the following disqualifying features.

1. Disgusting scatological imagery or excessive vulgarity (Belle de Jour, Mall Rats, Van Wilder, American Pie, Road Trip, etc, ad infinitum).
2. Sympathetic or attempted erotic portrayal of homosexual and lesbian conduct and themes (The Election, Mulholland Drive).
3. Vicious and often subtle rewriting of history to prevent us from looking back with regret. (Elizabeth - Cate Blanchett)

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<sup>14</sup> All quotes from the stormfront.org forum are presented as they appear, with no editing for grammar, spelling, or content, except for minor adjustments for clarity in this context.

4. Portrayal of White males as stupid losers or sadistic criminals. (Too numerous to mention)

5. Romantic comedies which portray visibly IP males as sensitive loving types who are worthy of the shiksa's heart, as contrasted with their brutal and insensitive White male competitors. (Where the Heart Is - with Natalie Portman ironically playing the Shiksa).

6. Interracial sex, romance, and marriage propaganda (The King and I, South Pacific, Love is a Many Splendored Thing, Guess Who's Coming to Dinner, View to a Kill, Save the Last Dance, Road Trip, The Fast and The Furious.)

7. The theme that Whites are not valid humans unless they have the all-knowing and wise Negro managing, leading or helping them. (To Sir with Love, Save the Last Dance, almost all Denzel Washington movies)

8. Negative portrayals of Christianity or the Catholic Church.

To some degree, the criteria are flexible. For example there is an emerging genre which I call "From under the Rubble" in which the White victims of culture destruction and multi culti manage to extricate themselves and find happiness. The best example is "Notting Hill." These movies often display several of the above disqualifying items, but as something to be confronted, contained, controlled or escaped from

Reading through this list, it seems like a relatively straightforward, yes/no equation. Are whites portrayed positively? Yes or No. Is there any interracial romantic activity? Yes or No. This list of criteria, as written, provides a very simple heuristic for determining if a particular film is acceptable or not, but as Yggdrasil notes in his closing observation, the criteria are 'flexible,' in practice, and the act of determining value is not quite as clear and clean, regardless of the insistence of many *Stormfront* members that it should be.

For example, take the film *The Wedding Planner*, a benign romantic comedy starring Jennifer Lopez that Yggdrasil deems worthy of inclusion, prompting the following response from another poster:

“that is the film starring Jennifer Lopez in which a white man leaves his white fiancé for the mestiza.

Why would you put a movie that promotes miscegenation on your list?” Yggdrasil’s response, which reflects an entire approach to experiencing and evaluating art, is worth including in full:

When I review a movie, I look to what appears and what is said within the four corners of the movie itself.

Perhaps you confuse the character Lopez plays and who Lopez is in real life.

In "Maid in Manhattan" Lopez specifically identifies her white lover as being "white" - a different race from her, and as a consequence, the movie would never make my list.

But in *Wedding Planner*, Lopez plays an Italian, and shows you her immigrant father who had an arranged marriage. The character in the movie is an Italian girl, and Lopez can plausibly pass as Italian. We have to respect that.

Thus, there is no miscegenation depicted in the movie.

It’s a considered, thoughtful approach, though it does meet with dissent from many other posters’ preference for a more purely reactionary approach. In fact, after Yggdrasil eventually disappears from the conversation, it’s kind of taken over for a long stretch by, mostly, recommendations for films made before 1960, resulting in content more in line with what one might expect from a community that is inordinately obsessed<sup>15</sup> with returning to an imagined, idyllic past.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Emphasis mine?

<sup>16</sup> Which, to be clear, is a strong component of Yggdrasil’s philosophy, as well. For example, while more sophisticated than simply, openly stating that it’s not okay to watch any film created by a Jewish director, it’s not a terribly difficult task to connect this idea with Yggdrasil’s contention that films about aliens visiting earth are okay if they were made before the 1980s, but that later films, influenced by Steven Spielberg’s massively popular *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *E.T. The Extra Terrestrial*, tended to present the aliens as gentle visitors, rather than aggressive invaders (which he reads as encouragement towards multiculturalism, and therefore damaging to the white race), are unacceptable for whites. Spielberg himself being, of course, Jewish (a fact that does not go unremarked on).

But the point here isn't to dwell on squabbling about what constitutes true worth for a community of white nationalists, but rather their creation and successful maintenance (by their own standards, if no one else's) of a clear, coherent set of values. There is plenty to question and find fault with, of course, but there is also a stable core worldview shared by members of the community. Others may question their philosophy, but, for them, it holds together. It explains the world to them in a satisfactory way. Another person may watch *The Wedding Planner* through a feminist or Marxist lens to help them order its contents and determine its significance, while the members of the stormfront.org have their own meaning-making system. Whether or not one finds this philosophy irretrievably janky or abhorrent, for them, at least, it works.

Obviously, the previous paragraph is engaging in some serious, no-holds-barred moral relativism. The kind you would *very* rarely, if ever, encounter in the stormfront.org community. They know what's right and they know what's wrong. The universe makes sense to them, and in spite of the modern world's failings, they know their place in it.

--/\*\*\*

Okay.

Okay.



As I'm sitting at a traffic light, I wonder: when the lights change, does it mean the same thing to everyone else as it does to me? Are the lights really changing? What will everyone think when my car goes forward? Am I about to die?

I think I clearly see the lights change from green to yellow, then yellow to red, stopping the cars passing in front of me. I feel like I see the light I'm stopped at change from red to green. I wait and watch. I see the wheels of the cars on the other side of the intersection begin to turn, and they move into the intersection, I believe. The car sitting next to me isn't moving yet, and I'm not sure if the driver is just not paying attention or if she knows something that I don't. There is a long line of cars behind me, waiting for me to move. I need to move.

I drive.

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Stormfront.org really is your father's white nationalist community, in the sense that they're something of an OG in the online space. While YouTube and social media are populated by innumerable racist/white nationalist/extremist voices and groups, stormfront.org *been hating* since 1996. David Duke is a registered poster. Before 8chan, before Pepe the Frog, before irony and accelerationism and Atomwaffen, there was stormfront.org. I can't place a specific date on this—it was some point during my teens—but it's possible that they were around when I was still wondering, damn it, why do they always have to make the white guy look dumb in every sitcom and commercial? (Why does the white guy always have to be the butt of the joke, am I right?<sup>17</sup>)

The community's status as a longtime hub of the white nationalist movement is reflected simply by its scope and its affirmative imaginings of an Edenic, whites-only future. While modern alt-right/white nationalist movements are often characterized (often correctly) as nihilistic and seeming to possess no clear core values beyond what they hate, advancing contradictory positions and embracing any tactics to achieve their ends—to, as everyone's favorite villain Steve Bannon poetically expressed it, “flood the zone with shit”—the stormfront.org community was built on the quaint notion that they would simply be able to prevail upon the great, slumbering white masses to see the way things are supposed to be. To, as a past slogan proclaimed, “Tell the truth and fear no one.” A stickied thread, started by David Duke right after Barack Obama's inauguration in 2009, is titled “**Hundreds of thousands of new SF readers, tens of thousands of new SF Members -- You MUST read My**

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<sup>17</sup> I wasn't.

**Awakening!**<sup>18</sup> And, okay, it's true that *My Awakening* is the name of a book Duke wrote, which some replies take issue with, but it's also true that, in practice, this thread functions similarly to other stickied threads, such as "A New Era Approaches" (a discussion focused on concrete, material actions white nationalists can take to achieve their goals), "National-Socialism for Newcomers," and "The Way Forward: Positive White Nationalism": discussions explicitly initiated to articulate a clear, coherent ideology and formulate plans to achieve their preferred reality. As opposed to new jack hate sites, like the *Daily Stormer*, whose entire raison d'être seems to be making posts with gleefully provocative titles like "Moslems Attack Transvestite After It Harasses a Woman Wearing a Hijab,"<sup>19</sup> *Stormfront* presents as serious and thoughtful. Whether one accepts the premise and logic of their thoughts is, of course, one thing, but they are not trolling or just trying to rile up the normies. They've thought about this stuff carefully, and they're for real. Or, they were.

Stormfront.org, unlike the white paradise they pine for, is a real community, and it doesn't exist in bubble. There's considerable overlap with other racist communities, digital and physical, as well as reactionary communities more broadly. Like any community, its membership is constantly in a state of flux, with new members joining and carrying new ideas and influences with them, as older members exit, for a variety of reasons, lessening the power of previous attitudes in the community. For example, David Duke's post exhorting new members to read his book explicitly acknowledges the fact that it was

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<sup>18</sup> Low key, *Stormfront* been talking about getting woke way before most of us.

<sup>19</sup> It should be acknowledged that violent crime perpetrated by Jewish people, people of color or other members of other marginalized groups is obsessively documented on stormfront.org, as well, and while they are banned from using the more recognizable slurs, *Stormfront* members use similarly creative slurs to the kind used on sites like the *Daily Stormer*.

prompted by the influx of new members precipitated by Barack Obama's election. In recent years, with the rise of the alt-right, many members have adopted some of the signifiers of places like 4chan or the *Daily Stormer*, displaying Pepe the Frog avatars and referring to 'normies' who need to be 'redpilled.' The stable core of the community seems to still be intact, but these elements are now unmistakably present, and most seem to welcome them, as new blood with a new approach, if nothing else.

Still, there is tension, as the mention of Andrew Anglin, in a thread titled "Beta White Men are the real cause behind the rise of feminism," demonstrates. The first response to the original post, which briefly mentions "Andrew Anglin from *Daily Stormer*'s white women hating articles," asserts that "Andrew Anglin is a moron who has taken away from the seriousness of this movement, as has Trump and a large part of the 'Alt-right.'"

###

"Derek Black succumbs, takes the blue pill."

Don Black, Proprietor of Stormfront and leading voice in the White Nationalist movement for decades, has a son, Derek. For many years, Derek was something of a golden boy in the White Nationalist community, attending events and appearing with other figures in the community. He even hosted a radio show, dedicated to the movement, with his father. After leaving for college, however, at some point, Derek began to question the beliefs of the community he had been raised in, and he rejected the ideology of White Nationalism publicly, on the blog of the Southern Poverty Law Center. His father was shaken, to say the least, and went to stormfront.org, the community he created and maintains, to address the situation. In his initial post, Don Black is, understandably, a little pissy, saying that his son

had made it “annoyingly obvious” that he no longer had interest in activism, and that he knew that “the Jews [...] were working hard, since he would be such a big prize for them. But he didn't give us a clue [that he would make this announcement].” The post is edited, as Black returns to it later to go into his thoughts in more depth, grappling with his son’s choice and talking about Derek with a mixture of grief, pride and anger. He details his son’s explanation for why he’s chosen to renounce the belief and value system he was raised with, as well as his own attempts to understand what has happened, including David Duke’s suggestion that Stockholm Syndrome can explain this turn of events, Don’s initial skepticism of that theory, and Derek’s rejection of it when Don offers it to his son. He doesn’t disown his son, and while he’s notably defensive in his portrayal of how Derek became so involved in the White Nationalist community, he does his best to be even-handed and fair even to the college that he believes brainwashed his son. Among some silly, angry responses, many of the replies are similarly sober and level-headed, including this post from Ekklesiastic:

I have scanned over (but not read every word of every single post) and I see the word "betrayal" a lot. That is not what I see.

Derek is a young man, raised and steeped in the ideology of White Nationalism. He has stepped out into the world-at-large and found a new world of perspectives. It is not uncommon for young people to reject parental ideas and values but it doesn't necessarily mean it's forever. How many young people go through this phase only to learn later in life just how smart their parents really are/were?

I have never met or spoken with Derek, but he is on his own life's journey. He is not Don's clone and no one should have ever expected him to be such.

Honestly, if this wasn't all about his son rejecting his vicious, toxic ideology, Don Black would come across as sympathetic, as it's a story about a man who loves his son very much, who has raised him to stand up for the truth and what he thinks is right, and whose son has now made the choice to reject the truth that he was raised to believe. And his own faith in that truth is not shaken, despite the fact that it is now driving a wedge between himself and his son. He ends the lengthy post with an acknowledgment of all the pressure Derek was under, saying "But Derek still handled it for years. So I'm baffled he'd do this now. I guess there's a downside to being self-driven. Or just Stockholm Syndrome."

###

One particular thing (among dozens upon dozens) I could never figure out about my dad was how he reconciled his frequently stated, confident and unrepentant racism with the black people he liked. As an example, he *loved* Walter Payton, the legendary Chicago Bears running back, to the point that, in later years he would just refuse to continue acknowledging the talent of legendary Detroit Lions running back Barry Sanders, once it became clear that it was possible that Sanders might break Payton's all-time rushing yardage record. (And he never did get over it when Emmitt Smith finally did break Payton's record.) I remember him telling me how great of a *man* Payton was, contrasting him with 'the others.' In particular, there was a story about how Payton had read about a couple (white) children whose parents had died in a fire (or something like that) and had taken them into his home to try to help them through their unimaginable loss, with my dad focusing on how Payton didn't care that they were white and that he was criticized by other African-Americans for this action. I think my dad's implication here was that they resented him for helping needy white kids instead of black kids. And while, as usual,



his regard for a black person was mostly dependent on their adherence to whatever standards of ‘white’ behavior he held, this was still a black man that he unreservedly, enthusiastically admired. Even more puzzling to me was when he would talk about the African-American guys he worked with. For the most part, he complained about his black co-workers in exactly the terms you might expect, but there were always two or three that he made a point to exempt from his criticism. Sometimes, the last thing he said would be along the lines of “Except for Henry and Louis. Those are good guys, and I wouldn’t hesitate to invite them into our house.” Though I never presented him with the concern, I always wondered what he did with these obvious, seemingly irreconcilable contradictions to one of his core beliefs. If he ever did question himself, though, he never betrayed any uncertainty, and it seemed, to me, like I gave it way, way more thought than he did.

On the other hand, as his son, I probably saw him less clearly than I ever saw anyone (not counting myself).

###

One particular thing that seems to be pretty true about running a hardcore hate site in the vein of *Stormfront* or the *Daily Stormer*: there’s not much money in it, apparently. A couple years ago, Don Black announced to his community that the costs of running stormfront.org had become overwhelming (having to pay a premium for all the services that go into running such a huge website, without any of the advertising revenue that would normally cover those costs), and that, while the site wouldn’t disappear, it would have to, going forward, be a closed community, restricted to members only, because the cost of keeping it open had simply become too great. The response from the community was

immediate, with many members sending in donations and becoming “Friends of Stormfront,” “Sustaining Members,” and even “Lifetime Members.” The overwhelming sentiment was that stormfront.org needed to stay open to the public, so that the truth of their cause could be spread and ‘awaken’ others. Again, pretty heartwarming stuff, if it wasn’t coming from a bunch of virulent racists.

Over at *The Daily Stormer*, a similar situation played out differently. Faced with an even more dire situation (as, unlike *Stormfront*, Andrew Anglin is determined to stick his racist finger in as many eyes as possible, leading to an even more difficult time finding hosts for the site and having to pay even more for their services), Anglin is forced to make continually begging for support a major feature of the site, with a large “shekelz plz goyim” button a permanent, prominent part of the site’s home page. In January of 2020, Anglin posted a sincere (and sincerely exasperated) plea for support, titled “Daily Stormer Lost \$50,000 in 2019 Due to a Lack of Donations.” Explaining the exorbitant cost of maintaining the site and how previous bitcoin donations have almost run dry, Anglin explains that the situation is “not sustainable,” and unless visitors (the number of which are “higher than they’ve ever been” and, by his math, equal the kind of traffic that would result in “making 7 figures a year” for a normal site) begin supporting the site, he will have to lay off all contributors besides himself, meaning that valuable content like “That Ni\*\*a Charles Stab a Twelb Years Old Chald at the McDonalds” will be lost. He even provides a set of instructions, with images, for how to donate using Bitcoin, since the *Daily Stormer* is so radioactive that that’s the only currency they’re able to accept. He sums it up in stark terms, saying even though “last time I put the donation request front and center, the results were pretty disappointing [...] all of you were told we were broke, and 99.9999999999% of you chose not to send

money,” and “It’s up to you guys to keep the site going.” Apparently, not enough of those guys sent money, because, soon after, the site was populated entirely by writing by Andrew Anglin (an impressive amount, it should be acknowledged).<sup>20</sup>

Is it weird that the members of the *Stormfront* community, which is organized around a sincere, deeply held value system and set of core truths, snapped into action to save their virtual home, while visitors to the *Daily Stormer*, which features the same type of virulent racism and bigotry, but is organized, in the main, around the lulz, didn’t? Maybe not.

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<sup>20</sup> As of April 2021, however, additional contributors have reappeared on the site (though not the same ones as before), so it’s possible that some of those guys did, finally, send money.

Reading back over it, as I revise this essay, I was thinking about that experience where I was exposed (in my own mind, if nowhere else) as a racist in grade school. Actually, the class wasn't *entirely* white—there was one kid who was Lebanese. He was my best friend, actually, and I totally forgot about him. That is really weird. Right?

###

## Anxiety Fuel (Lost Souls of the Internet Part Two)

I remember the first time I heard the phrase *social anxiety disorder*. I was twenty-one years old, and I was watching television with my family on Christmas Eve. We were at my father's parents' house, and we were all watching *A Christmas Story* (or something like that), because otherwise we would have had to talk to each other. I was (like everyone else, I assumed) running out the clock, patiently waiting for someone else to announce that they needed to leave, so that I could quickly announce that, well, I, too, should probably get going. My grandma was drinking her usual; Sprite 'with a little vodka' in it that contained so much vodka, and so little Sprite, that you could never locate a single bubble in her glass. She occasionally announced, impatiently, that she had no idea what was going on in the movie. My grandpa was laughing whenever he saw my dad laugh, to make it seem like he was following the action on the television. My dad was laughing extra loud to make sure my grandpa could notice it. My mom made disgusted faces every time my dad did or said anything. My brother was on the phone with one of his friends. We all ignored my grandma when she exclaimed, again, that she had no idea what the hell was going on.

As I was wondering if I could just go ahead and be the first to announce I was leaving, a black and white animated commercial appeared on the television. It was really simple, just a little oblong blob with a dot for eye, a line for an eyebrow and a downturned line, indicating distress, for a mouth. The narrative voice-over began, softly inquiring if you ever had the feeling of being uncomfortable. Well, yeah, of course.

*Like you're afraid of being criticized?*

Um, kind of. I began to pay attention.

*Like everyone is judging you?*

Yes. All the time. I was becoming uncomfortable.

The little animated blob was trying to enter a party, but he was unable to. He stood in the doorway, watching all the other happy blobs having a good time. He contorted and became red with shame.

*You're always embarrassed, but you're not sure why.*

At this point, I was trying my best not to betray how interested I was in what this guy was saying.

*You always stay back, away from the group. You worry that you're the only one who has these feelings.*

I realized that he was talking about me. At the bottom of the screen were the words *Symptoms interfere with regular life*. Yeah, they do. The thought flashed through my mind that this was a joke, that somehow this commercial was produced and someone paid for it to air on cable television just to fuck with me and humiliate me, to make me think there wasn't anything wrong with me, because that would be funny. The narrator said that I might not be alone, that I might be one of millions of Americans who suffered from social anxiety disorder. I was elated and mortified.

*It's possible to overcome this anxiety.*

I doubted that, but I was still very interested in the concept. Social anxiety disorder. This was a real thing that someone decided it was worthwhile to name, a diagnosis. Even if it was just pharmaceutical companies who invented a condition to sell drugs, that was still good. They recognized

that there are enough people with this anxiety to bother exploiting them. To bother exploiting *us*. At the bottom of the screen, new words appeared:

*Social Anxiety Disorder is a serious medical condition.*

Capitalized—a proper title.

As the narrator did all the disclaimer stuff, the sad little blob's redness faded, and his mouth line gradually curved in the opposite direction. He joined the other blobs and began having fun. I needed to do some research. I wanted to burst out of my seat and rush back home to my computer, but I stayed as still as I could. I was positive that everyone else (including my oblivious grandpa, drunk grandma, and disinterested brother) was noticing the commercial, and that they were making the same connection that I was, and that they could see how it was affecting me. I knew that they knew it was talking about me, so I couldn't react. I had to act like I was as bored and detached as I had been all night. I took off my glasses and pretended to inspect them, scratching at some non-existent speck on the lenses. I knew they knew, so I had to do my best to make sure that they didn't know that I knew that they knew, or even that there was anything to know. I needed them to know that I didn't care.

&&&

Elliot Rodger was a bad guy. If you're having trouble remembering why that name sounds familiar, he was the guy who went on a shooting spree in Isla Vista, CA in 2014, killing six people (two female and four male) and wounding more. A brief summary from Wikipedia:

*The attack began when Rodger stabbed three men to death in his apartment. Afterwards, he drove to a sorority house and shot three female students outside, killing two. He drove*

*past a nearby deli and shot to death a male student who was inside. He began to speed through Isla Vista, shooting and wounding several pedestrians and striking several others with his car. Rodger exchanged gunfire with police twice during the attack, receiving a non-fatal gunshot to the hip. The rampage ended when his car crashed into a parked vehicle and came to a stop. Police found him dead in the car with a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.*

Also included in the entry for the incident is Rodger's motive: *Revenge for perceived sexual and social rejection*. This is not a guess pieced together by investigators from ambiguous evidence. Rodger left behind a manifesto and multiple videos online documenting his thought process, his intentions, and explaining his reasons for the assault. While thousands of words can be (and have been) spent analyzing these artifacts and Rodger's philosophy, distilling it into a glib punchline, honestly, doesn't rob it of much nuance:

tl;dr— these bitches made him do it.

In his final video, which begins with a resigned declaration that "It all has to come to this," Rodger stares into the camera and calmly informs the viewer that "Tomorrow...is the day of retribution." After a dramatic pause (half of the video's run time is filled by dramatic pauses), Rodger continues, "The day in which I will have my revenge against humanity...against all of you." Sitting in the driver's seat of his car, with a thick band of warm sunlight illuminating his face, he proceeds to lay out his case against all of us, explaining all the suffering he's endured since he hit puberty, "all because girls have never been attracted to me," watching girls give their "affection, and sex, and love" to other men. "It's not fair," he claims. He addresses these women who have wronged him directly: "I don't



know why you girls aren't attracted to me," he begins, then, pointing at the viewer he concludes his thought by saying "but I will punish you all for it." Rodger explains that he's "the perfect guy," but in spite of his obvious quality "you throw yourselves at these obnoxious men instead of me, *the supreme gentleman.*"

In the course of the video, during many of his dramatic pauses, Rodger chuckles to himself softly and malevolently, a bad actor who thinks that he's not overacting because he's not yelling. At one point, he even follows his laugh by saying "Yes," like he's Cobra Commander or something. His speech is absurd, filled with overwrought descriptions of his suffering and self-consciously sinister descriptions of his intended revenge, punctuated by explanatory moments in which he says things like "You do deserve it, just for having a better life than me," and refers to the guys that all the girls throw themselves at as "obnoxious brutes." While he seemingly tries not to focus on it (making sure to register his disgust for everyone, and claiming that, if it were possible, he would "reduce all of [humanity] to piles of skulls"), it's clear what the ultimate target of Rodger's rage is: "If I can't have you, girls, I will destroy you." He lays out his plan to "enter the hottest sorority house of UCSB," where he will "slaughter every single spoiled, stuck-up blonde slut" he sees. In the pause between those two parts of the opening phase of his grand plan, he looks from side to side quickly, pursing his lips mischievously, as though he's trying not to laugh. He's momentarily breaking character, it seems, before he pulls it back together. In his estimation, we've "forced [him] to suffer," and now he'll make us suffer.

In the aftermath of his attack, as has become standard practice in cases of mass shootings, Rodger's online presence was exhaustively investigated and dissected. In particular, people were

interested in the violent misogyny he repeatedly expresses in the statements he left behind. His fury is so over the top, his logic so tortured, it would be funny, if it wasn't funny at all. Focusing on that overwhelming hatred of women led to a focus on the internet communities he took part in, specifically PUAhate (PUA being an acronym for 'Pick-up artist,' a community of men who subscribe to a philosophy in which women are to be approached like wild game to be outwitted and conquered) and r/foreveralone. While both forums were troubling to those learning about them for the first time, it was the latter, an incel forum (incel being a portmanteau combining and abbreviating 'involuntary celibate') that Rodger became most strongly identified with.

A brief explanation of incels: this is an online community of men (mostly young, but there are older members) bound together by their collective frustration and desperation at the belief that they have been rejected by women because of some objective deficiency (usually physical, but also mental and/or emotional) that is out of their control. The unifying philosophy of the community is that success/happiness in life is determined entirely by a genetic lottery in which they were born losers; you are either a Chad or Stacy (incel terminology for attractive males and females) or you're not, and if you're not then, in their words, "It's over."

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One of the first things I did, when I learned that I suffered (I believed) from Social Anxiety Disorder, was to begin lurking on an internet forum dedicated to providing support for those with the condition. I never participated in the discussion—you know, they probably wouldn't like me—but I received a great deal of comfort just from reading others express fears and anxieties that were identical to

my own. The guy who posted about ducking into the bathroom, even though he didn't have to go, and locking himself inside a stall (even going so far as to pull down his pants and sit down like he was using it, just in case someone came in), because a beautiful girl was walking down the hall towards him and he couldn't bring himself to walk past her. The guy who had a panic attack because his doctor got a new receptionist and he hadn't been able to prepare for this before he showed up for an appointment and saw her, forcing him to get back in his car and drove away. The guy who was failing out of college because he couldn't work up the courage to attend class consistently. Honestly, I didn't need to post, because they were saying all the things I would have said, anyway I was both immensely grateful for and deeply shook by the guy who talked about not being able to force himself to attend class, because his post, in almost every detail, was identical to my own experience, right down to the detail about a concerned professor calling him and leaving a message wondering after him that he forced himself to listen to while literally hid under the covers in his bed. It was a community of dudes who *got it*. They understood how real the struggle is.

The posts that stick in my mind the most are the guys who posted threads talking about hiring a prostitute, because they were afraid it was the only way they'd ever have an opportunity to have sex. There were two major types in this genre of posts: the guys who were thinking about doing it, looking for advice, and the guys who had made their mind up that this was their only shot at being with a woman and they were just announcing their plans. Lots of the responses tried to talk the original poster out of the action. People tried to explain that simply having sex wouldn't solve anything, particularly if the other person was being paid to fake it. They explained that it was just as likely that you would feel worse

afterwards. Sometimes, another poster would even offer their own experience with a prostitute as a cautionary tale. Others would simply wish them good luck, always with at least one person asking them to report back if they went through with it. No one ever mocked them, however, because everyone understood the pain and desperation that motivated their (objectively) foolish plan. One thing I actually never noticed, at the time, was that there didn't seem to be any female posters. Or, if they did exist, I don't remember it.

The flipside of the suffering expressed in the community was an ever-present, if not always explicit, anger. It was easy for supportive discussions about shared frustration over not being able to participate in group conversations or attend parties to slip into expressions of rage at the fact that groups never made the attempt to include them in conversation or that they were never actually invited to parties in the first place. Members of the community possessed a lot of self-pity and self-hate, but there was still plenty of extra hate to go around. I was usually put off by these eruptions, but there was one discussion that really spoke to my own anger.

One particular discussion, about small talk, that had begun with the original poster asking for advice about how to participate in pleasant conversation at a work party, had quickly devolved into a vicious indictment of the vacuousness of the general public and modern culture as a whole. No one actually ever wanted to talk about anything of substance, was the common sentiment. How can you talk to someone who doesn't actually want to talk about anything important? I'm not sure if anyone even gave the original poster any tips for how to navigate the situation he had asked for help with, because everyone quickly diagnosed the real issue: *it's not you, it's them*. I felt energized by this conversation—I

had never wanted to create an account and actually participate in the discussion more than I had reading this thread. This exact subject was actually something that I had given lots of thought to, and I was thrilled to encounter a group discussion in which other people seemed to actually get it.

Small talk has always been mystifying to me. I just, really and truly, have never had any idea how to do it. Even when I have an idea what the other party is expecting me to say (which is rare), it's an absolute struggle to force words to come out of my mouth. I feel like any response I give will be so inadequate, so transparently foolish, that half the time I'm only able to muster a single syllable that is more panicked, inarticulate yelp than recognizable human communication. Trying to make casual, benign conversation with another human being who I don't know well is an exercise in humiliation for me, and every time it's required I wade into a fresh, bewildering hell. And since I can't make any sense of these situations, my distress led me to the conclusion that there was, objectively, no sense to the practice.

Small talk, I reasoned, was bullshit. A superficial waste of energy. Asking a person 'How are you?' when there was only one possible, proscribed answer was a farce. In fact, it's offensive, because, in reality, you're not in the least bit interested in how the other person is doing; you're just forcing them into a little dance that by its very nature precludes any kind of real human connection. The fact that I couldn't figure out how to participate in this dance, by this logic, was a virtue. I was too authentic, in fact, to even begin to make such a false, superficial 'connection.' *It wasn't me, it was them.*

When I came to this realization, it felt liberating. Here was an opportunity to stop constantly feeling like a defective, helpless misfit—from this perspective, I was the only one who really saw things

clearly. I was the guy who wasn't willing to compromise, to force a false smile and pretend that things aren't totally fucked up. My refusal to play their game wasn't a weakness. It was almost heroic.

The problem was that, the more I thought about it, it didn't actually make me feel any better. After the initial rush of righteousness that accompanied the realization, no sense of satisfaction or contentment followed. I was still alone, and I still wanted to connect with other people. More than that, if I kept thinking about it, I had to admit that, even if my insight were true—even if my characterization of casual conversation as a hollow charade was 100% correct—I wasn't rebelling and taking some principled stand; I was simply too scared to even try to play the game. Even if, in fact, it was them, I couldn't pretend that it wasn't me, too.

Because of that, when I encountered conversations like this—which, once I noticed them, seemed to be everywhere—on the social anxiety forum, they bothered me. I knew I wasn't any better than any of those guys: the guy who would make a post raging at his classmates for standing in a cluster next to his locker, joking and laughing uproariously, like he wasn't even there; the guy who posted about how hurt and angry he was because he heard his coworkers whispering about a gathering after work that he hadn't been invited to; the guy who resented his mother for pulling him out of public school and homeschooling him, making it impossible for him to develop social skills. They were all me, and I knew it, but watching these conversations play out over and over made me uncomfortable. They were so angry, and even if I could empathize with their anger, it was also clear that it wasn't accomplishing anything. I mean, there was always some other guys who were more than happy to co-sign their anger, but that was it.

Once you decide that everyone's an asshole but you, where do you go next?

Eventually, these discussions that became more about venting shared anger than offering empathy and support slowly caused me to stop visiting the social anxiety forum regularly. I would check back in occasionally, but I never stuck around. I was still one of those guys, but it had begun to feel just like one more place where I didn't really fit.

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There are a lot of incel communities online, but the main one of the moment seems to be the incels.is forum, previously incels.me, until that domain was recently suspended, because, as explained in an announcement from 'SergeantIncel' (user title 'Admincel'), despite the fact that they had deleted some problematic content as requested, the registrar had still "shut us down regardless, no concrete reason given." However, he notes, incels.is is based in Iceland, "a country in which we have far more confidence in for many reasons, one of them being their stance as pro free-speech enforcers." I lurk on this forum regularly, as I have a very strong interest in subcultures and other psychically walled communities, particularly communities that are organized around any kind of non-mainstream or 'broken' performance of traditional masculinity.<sup>1</sup> So this message board is another stop on my regular itinerary of white nationalist, alt-right, and hardcore or gay pornography communities (among others).

Incels.is only has four subforums: *Inceldom Discussion*, *OffTopic*, *Meta & Feedback*, and a separate *Ban Appeals* area, which is necessary because people get banned like crazy on that site.

*Inceldom Discussion* and *OffTopic* account for the overwhelming majority of the activity on the site,

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<sup>1</sup> 'Broken traditional masculinity' is redundant, I suppose.

though the difference between the two sections is not always clear. *OffTopic* contains things like a music megathread and a gore megathread (where posters share what music they're listening to and what videos of real people dying gruesome deaths they've been enjoying lately), but for the most part, both sections are equally as likely to house discussions with titles such as "the world can suck my dick tbh" and "Feminism is an excuse for women to whore around." The ways in which the community thinks about race are baffling, and one of the ever-present debates in the community being over the idea of 'JBW' or 'Just Be White'—the idea that being white automatically makes you more attractive, particularly to non-white women, with some nonwhite incels making the case that, if you are white, you can't accurately be called an incel, because, like women, you will always be able to find someone to have sex with you. Posts are categorized with titles like *Suicide Fuel* (for topics that will make the reader want to commit suicide, or 'rope' in incel terminology), *Life Fuel* (for topics that will give the reader hope), *Blackpill* (for posts that force the reader to confront the awful truth of life for those who have lost the genetic lottery—an extension of the alt-right idea of the 'red pill'),<sup>2</sup> or *JFL*, (for posts where you just have to laugh, either at normies, roasties, or a particularly absurd blackpill example).

Even for an internet niche community, incels have developed a notably dense and intimidating lingo. Because I frequent these kinds of communities, I've gotten pretty good at figuring this stuff out from context, and it also helps that there is a great deal of overlap between the incel community and

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<sup>2</sup> One of the popular memes of the incel community is affixing 'pill' to words as a suffix. For example, "take the racepill," in reference to the 'fact' that whites are (at the least considered to be) genetically superior, and therefore always more attractive. Or "take the dogpill," meaning to acknowledge the fact that women would prefer to have sexual intercourse with a dog before an incel, and (according to commonly accepted wisdom in the incel community) many do.



other alt-right, MRA/PUA, and white nationalist communities, but even I had to do a great deal of googling when I first started observing this community. It's common to see a post that says something like "jfl at this roastie who thinks she's going to find an endless string of betabuxxers after she hit the wall to watch Tyrone's kids while she's out sucking Chad's cock." And if trying to decipher comments like that doesn't drive you away, normies (non-incels and/or those who haven't taken the black pill yet), Chads (attractive men that can have sex with literally any woman they want at any moment), and women (because women can't be incel) are banned on sight. You can also be banned for LARPing (pretending to be unattractive or be incel for any other reason), bragging (talking about being attractive or having any kind of successful interaction with a female), or talking openly about how you 'ascended' (had sex). You can also be banned for "discussing illegal activities," but it's not really clear exactly what that means.

Elliot Rodger himself is actually kind of a divisive figure on incels.is. Some people use him as their avatar and hold him up as a hERo for all incels. (It's common practice to capitalize the letters 'ER,' in respect to the Supreme Gentleman, a title which some use to refer to Rodger.) Posters will often encourage another member who has recounted some frustrating tale of being shunned or rejected to 'go ER,' meaning that they should do what Elliot Rodger did and take their revenge. To a lesser extent, Alek Minassian, who murdered multiple people—mostly women—in Toronto in April of 2018 and Cho Seung-Hui, who murdered thirty-two people on the campus of Virginia Polytechnic Institute, are also lionized, along with occasional, lesser-known mass murderers whose motivations appear to align with the incel community. However, others don't care for Elliot Rodger, citing his inflated opinion of himself

(he brags constantly in his videos) and the fact that he killed more men than women in his rampage. Rodger's philosophy is echoed in the community, though, in non-stop conversations about how the world has wronged them and the injustice of a world in which such impossible standards have been set for one to live up to. At times, they're close to a really powerful critique of traditional masculinity and attitudes about race—if they were interested in such things—rather than just pitching a giant fit because girls don't like them.

Honestly, it's really hard to know what to think about these guys. They say really outrageous stuff, and there's a very dark and disturbing ideology (one that's steeped in racism, violent misogyny and even pedophilia) that's festering in this community, but it's also (like alt-right communities) so relentlessly smothered in suffocating irony that it's impossible to pin down an actual, sincere belief beyond the absolute basics: physical attractiveness is everything and women are incapable of rational thought. The other stuff they say could either be evidence of a horrifying psychopath convention or just the tendency for people on the internet (especially male people) to say the craziest shit they can think of to get a reaction.

The only other genuine emotion, besides rage, that's expressed on the forum is pain. If the social anxiety forum I frequented glowed with loneliness and anguish, incels.is is positively radioactive. It can be hard to look past the vile things they say (and it's debatable whether they even deserve that consideration), but there are dozens of threads created every month with titles like "I almost cried in front of my father today" or "Why I stopped showering..." Threads regularly announce that the poster will be committing suicide, either soon or at some point in the future. One of the categories for posts is

*It's Over*. There's even a popular gif that is regularly posted of a former member of the community literally blowing his brains out with a shotgun during a live stream. It's impossible to know exactly what a person's intentions are when they post on the internet, but even taking into account that some of the people posting are not being sincere, it's impossible not to recognize the pain that these people are in.

To be clear, none of this excuses any of the vile sentiments they express. Their hateful philosophy and things they say are inexcusable, and they are responsible for those things, but it makes it easier to see what's motivating these thoughts. From their perspective, it's not like they're alienating anyone—they've already alienated everyone, just by not being Chad. The world treats them like they're less than human (many of them even refer to themselves as 'subhuman'), so why shouldn't they return the favor? It's over, anyway, right?

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Possibly the key term/concept employed on incels.is is 'mog.' To mog = to dominate, and there's constant declarations from members of the community that someone 'mogs' them in some way, meaning that this person is superior to them. This can be in reference to a specific feature or quality (frame mog or wrist mog, for example) or it could just be an overall, wholistic mogging. Taking their words for it, all of them are constantly being mogged to oblivion by literally every single other person in the world, including each other. You're either the mogger or the mogged.

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In high school I wrote a lot. Poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction (mostly just the most obnoxious movie reviews in history). Tons of confidently awful drama. I even wrote a novel. It was only 100 pages,

but I feel like I'll give myself that one. One specific thing I wrote about a lot was this teenage girl. She was the hero of many, many short stories. She didn't have a name, and she went to high school. She felt really awkward and out of place all the time, and for the most part she just watched everyone else. Usually, the high point in every story would be whenever she had to interact with other people (most often other teenagers), moments that were almost always traumatic, so they were presented like assaults or even complete breaks in reality. These spectacularly heightened episodes were always contrasted with a laconic, matter-of-fact narration in which she would describe the world around her with the air of a simultaneously amused and (mostly) horrified observer.

A sample story: the first day of school, she arrives to one of her classes early enough to grab a seat in the back of the room, but another student shows up right before the class starts and asks her to give up her seat, so that this girl can sit next to her friend. She moves to the only other open seat at the front of the room, trying to hide her anger, confusion, and shame. The End.

Every story was, essentially, different versions of this. One that I remember particularly fondly was a trip to the mall, where, among other things, she observes a group of obnoxious teenage boys acting the fool outside the toy store and playing with a display of electronic pet dogs. One of them makes eye contact with her and holds her in his gaze. She's not impressed by him, and the piece ends with her inner monologue, directed at the boy: *You're a dog, don't look at me. I'm not impressed by you, dog.*

I remember, even when I was writing this girl, thinking that, objectively, she's kind of objectionable. She's impatient, curt, ungenerous. But I also had deep affection for her, and I must have

written dozens of short stories about her life. In retrospect, it's pretty easy to know why I was so enamored of her.

She was me.

I'm embarrassed I didn't realize it at the time. It was *so obvious*. Every single situation that I put her in happened to me, to one degree or another. The story about being asked to change seats so some girl and her friend could sit together? That shit happened to me my sophomore year, in my government class. Most of the mall story is invented, but it's made up of real features from the local mall, and the final line '*I'm not impressed with you, dog,*' which was the initial inspiration for the whole piece was something I thought, word-for-word, when watching this knucklehead act like a doofus in my mass media class while everyone cheered him on. It was perfectly, unmistakably me, just with a canny switch of gender that wouldn't have fooled anyone (if anyone else had ever been allowed to read these stories) except me. Besides the fact that the pronouns I used gendered her as female, there was nothing there that suggested an understanding of any kind of authentic feminine perspective, because, as a socially inept teenage boy, I had less than no idea (and no interest, if I'm being honest) what that might look or sound like. It was just a lame, transparent feint that allowed me to pretend that I was writing fiction, instead of transcribing my thoughts and feelings in a diary, which is essentially what I was doing. I needed to give some kind of voice to my own issues (which I didn't know what social phobia even was), so I used some girl to take care of all that messiness. As one does.

A particular, recurring theme in my stories about Me as a Girl is her obsession with her physical appearance. She spent long stretches of time staring at herself and specific parts of her body in the

mirror. There was even a story that was entirely her looking at her own eyes in the mirror, despairing over the reality that her face was always really puffy. Grabbing a handful of stomach fat and squeezing it as hard as she could for as long as she could, feeling satisfied by how much it hurt and especially by the red marks left when she released her grip. She obsessed over how her bangs didn't lay the exact same perfect way on her forehead as every other girls' bangs did, and she worried constantly about the darkness of the hair on her forearm, which led her to wear long sleeves exclusively. Fortunately for her, it was the 90s, so it was easy to hide yourself in baggy, nondescript clothing. She was grateful that she had taken the only required year of high school gym her freshman year, because her body had become so disgusting, in so many ways, since then, that the idea of putting on a bathing suit or being in a locker room and showering with others was so terrifying to her at this point that she imagined she would have (or at least have to fake) an emotional breakdown to get out of it. She was ugly, and she knew it. Boys never talked to her, even though they talked to everyone else, it seemed, and she knew why. Well, that was a lie. It's not like boys *never* talked to her, they just never talked to her, you know, *like that*, because she was ugly.

Her appearance dominated her thoughts, and, in those thoughts, it dominated other people's thoughts about her. This is why no one talked to her, she knew. There were so many attractive, happy kids (because who wouldn't be happy when you're beautiful?), why would they waste their time forcing themselves to talk to an ugly, sadsack loser?

She sat in class and fear shot through her disgusting body when the teacher casually directed everyone to get into groups of four. She was frozen in place, trying to pretend that she hadn't heard the

instructions, while everyone else quickly, naturally fell into groups with such ease that she wondered if there had been some meeting before class that she hadn't been invited to where groups were formed ahead of time. She tried to remain perfectly still, not making eye contact with anyone, because if people could just forget that she was there then maybe they wouldn't be reminded how much they wished that she wasn't there. But it didn't work. It never worked. The teacher asked if there was anyone not in a group, and she was compelled to weakly raise her hand. Trying to keep things moving, he just told her to join this group in the front. Humiliated, she trudged up the front, trying her best to look like she didn't care. Her only possible move at this point was to act like none of this mattered, that she was indifferent to the whole enterprise. She felt every eye in the class on her, and she knew that her unwelcome presence in this group that she'd been forced on was a burden to them. The only thing she could do was stay quiet and try not to humiliate herself any further by behaving as though none of this mattered to her.

Because that would be the worst. Betraying any trace of caring about what was going on would be a disaster, because if anyone knew that she cared then she would be the pathetic, disgusting loser who wasn't just ugly—she wants to pretend like she isn't ugly! She wants to interact with regular people like she's like them, when all you have to do to know that she isn't is *look at her. She thinks she's people!* As her 'partners' gamely attempted to disregard her presence, she snuck quick glances at the two other girls in the group. They dressed in the way she imagined dressing, but knew she never could. Rather than trying to hide themselves and their body, they wore clothes that drew attention. She wondered where they even bought their clothes, assuming that it was at one of the stores in the mall that she was always too afraid to go into, because while she knew that the employees would be nice to her, she also knew that

they would be thinking she didn't belong there. She looked at these two other girls and imagined how stupid she would look if she tried to dress like them. People would look at her and think *Why would she even try? Trying to dress like she's a regular person just makes her look even worse, like a monkey in human clothing. It's funny, not attractive.* She imagined how stupid she would look if she even tried to talk to these girls, like they were friends. Like they even lived in the same world. She couldn't imagine what it was like to be them, to be able to go into any store you wanted without thinking about it, to belong everywhere without even trying. She locked her eyes on her textbook and didn't look up. Just run out the clock.

On some real looking-glass type shit, I even wrote a couple stories about this girl writing short fiction pieces about her anxieties. She didn't write about a boy, though. So, you know, totally different. I wasn't able to make the connection back to me. JFL.

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The obsession with physical appearance in the incel community is all-consuming. Even in a larger culture obsessed with looks, it's jarring and unsettling. Reading their discussions, I learned what a philtrum was, how important the midface is, and I learned of the Norwood Scale and where I fell on it. Because they believe it dictates every part of one's life, their every thought revolves around physical attractiveness. If you are sub-8 (on a scale of 10), whether you realize it or not, your existence is a cosmic joke. If you're not a completely hideous troll, like they are—if you're roughly between 4 and 7—you might still be able to get a woman to have sex with you, date you, even marry you, but you will always be at the mercy of the Chads. If she has a chance to have sex with Chad, she won't think twice, because



women are hardwired to go after Chad. If you aren't familiar with the word 'hypergamy,' ("the act or practice of marrying a spouse of higher caste or social status"—though for incels it just means women fucking someone who is more physically attractive than their current mate) you will learn it by lurking on an incel forum, because this is the concept that incels believe motivates every single action taken by every single woman. Their outsider's view on the socially constructed nature of femininity allows them the insight that women are programmed on a biological level to be whores who are unable to resist their innate desire to have sex with any really attractive dude. Because of this reality, if you are a sub-8 male, whether you realize it or not, it is (as they say) over.

However, even taking the blackpill and accepting this harsh reality, some of them are reluctant to LDAR ("Lay Down and Rot"), choosing instead to do what they can to try to ascend. There are constant posts announcing plans to or providing updates on a member's plan to 'surgerymaxx,' 'thugmaxx' or some other type of 'maxxing.' As you might guess, from context, 'maxxing,' refers to a concerted attempt to increase one's SMV ('sexual market value'—a generic 'manosphere' term) relating to specific attributes.<sup>3</sup> And they've identified many attributes that might require maxxing, including (but not limited to by a long shot) complexion, hairline, weight and overall fitness, chin, and wrist circumference. (It's over for wristcels, apparently.)

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<sup>3</sup> '-cel' being another suffix added to a word to define that member's deficiency (i.e., the objective flaw that makes them an incel). For example, 'mentalcel' would refer to a member who is incel because of some mental or emotional issue, such as autism, that makes it difficult for them to interact with other people in the commonly expected manner, or 'chincel,' referring to a member who is incel because their chin is recessed.

A specific discussion on incels.is that grabbed my attention is titled “Do any of you not have social anxiety.” The original poster, Reprobis, began by claiming “I feel like it’s so easy for you to say you have social anxiety or a mental illness,” to which the first response was “Being ugly makes you develop social anxiety because people treat you bad.” Reprobis responds to that point by explaining “See that I get but the people going on tangents about how they have every mental illness in the dictionary is overdone.” And just like that, I’m back at the social anxiety forum, reading about how people who can make small talk are awful, because this sounds very similar to something that I’ve often been bothered by.

I am consistently irritated when I hear people claim that they suffer from migraines or that they have a sensitivity to gluten, because these are not common conditions, yet they’ve somehow become, like, popularized to the point where it seems like everyone claims them. Migraines are a severe, serious thing, and few people actually have them, I argue, but every single person who has a bad headache wants to say they suffer from migraines. I don’t express this frustration often, however, because I’m afraid that I come across as angry and ungenerous. I’m also afraid that I’ll be asked the very reasonable question of why the hell do I care if people want to say they have migraines? Because I do have a reason. It’s just not defensible.

I compulsively disclose my social phobia to people. Much to the fascination of my former therapist, I tell pretty much everyone that I have intense social anxiety and I’m, usually, terrified that everyone doesn’t like me and doesn’t want me around. I think I do this to lower expectations and give context for what I’m sure is my inappropriate and unwelcome presence. People are generally nice about

it, and if they ask for an explanation I try my best to describe how the very common feeling of being uncomfortable in unfamiliar social situations rises to the level of a clinical condition, they will often respond with “Oh, that sounds like me! I think I have social anxiety, too.” It bothers me when they say this, because while I’m sure they don’t intend this (and it’s possible that they do suffer from social anxiety, for all I know), it feels like my own anxiety and struggle is being minimized. It feels like they’ve heard about something novel and interesting and decided that it would make them a little more interesting if they had this ‘social anxiety,’ too. Like it’s some superficial little quirk, a fucking affectation they can put on instead of a deep emotional issue that affects every single aspect of your life. Like they deal with paralyzing fear every time they have to be around their own extended family. Like they broke down in tears when their girlfriend tried to make them go out to dinner with a mutual friend that they hadn’t seen in a few years, because they were afraid of what he would think of them now. Like they practically flunked out of college and lost the entire decade of their twenties because of depression related to that anxiety. Like the only reason they finally got on medication, when they were twenty-seven, is because their girlfriend threatened to break up with them because she couldn’t take it anymore, and the only thing scarier than going to the doctor was losing the only thing good thing in their life. They don’t know a single thing about what having social anxiety is like.

Fuck them. *It’s not them. It’s me.*

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It was five years after I finally went to the doctor and started taking Paroxetine (the generic of Paxil) before I was able to start taking the necessary step of also talking to a professional about my

anxiety. I knew that it would help, and I even wanted to do it—it just was super scary, so I kept putting it off until (déjà vu) my girlfriend (now my partner) made an ultimatum and forced me to go. Talking to my therapist this one day, something had gotten me onto the subject of my disdain for small talk. While the guys on the social anxiety forum had made me a bit more self-conscious about it, I still had a pretty healthy resentment for the practice and those who engage in it.

As I explained my beef, I was already ashamed of myself and I was making less eye-contact than usual (eye-contact being something we had spent a good deal of time working on when I started talking to her). I looked at the plant she kept in one corner of her office, a medium-sized leafy plant with seven or eight white index cards wedged between the branches. Facing out, each one had a word printed on it in black marker identifying emotions like ‘Helpless,’ ‘Grief,’ ‘Shame,’ etc. When I had finished laying out my case against the scourge of casual conversation, I moved my eyes to my shoes, which were in constant movement. She responded:

“What you’re saying is very logical. You’ve thought this through really thoroughly, and I’ve definitely had similar thoughts when I’m in situations where I don’t know anyone. I feel confident saying that you’re not the only one who feels this way, to be honest.”

She was setting me up, pretty obviously. I was now back to the plant, focusing on the ‘Fear’ card, as I often did, because it wasn’t facing me and I could only see the ‘F’ and the curve of the left edge of the ‘e,’ which made it more interesting than the other cards. She continued, getting to the part where she gently explained why I was wrong:

“Most of us feel very nervous when we are around new people or in a situation that’s not familiar. You feel it more than most, but everyone has that fear.”

She was about to fuck my shit up, but I couldn’t argue this point. It’s actually something I try to remind myself of.

“We all have to find a way to deal with that anxiety, and talking can help us with that.”

I was starting to see where she was going.

“Of course, you’re right when you say it’s pointless, empty talk, but what if that’s okay, because the content of the conversation isn’t the point? What if the purpose of the conversation is to help each other feel more comfortable and safe? If the goal isn’t communication; it’s taking care of each other?”

I had no response.

“When we talk about silly things like the weather or last night’s game, what we’re really saying to each other is ‘It’s okay, you belong and you’re doing fine.’ We’re supporting each other.”

One of the index cards in the plant, placed in the bottom branches, read ‘Worry.’ The left side of the card hung much lower than the right, and it looked like it was going to fall. Someone must have brushed against the plant and knocked it loose. I wanted to fix it.

“What do you think?”

I told her I needed to think about it some more, which she said was fine. We could talk about it next time. I could have answered right then, but I wanted to save a bit of embarrassment and pretend like I needed to consider it further before I admitted she was right. She needed to get up and go grab some new appointment cards, because we weren’t going to be able to meet for the next couple weeks and she

wanted to make sure that she gave me our next appointment written down. While she was out of the room for a moment, I had an opportunity to fix the ‘Worry’ card. I didn’t, because I was afraid I would somehow mess the whole plant up.

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It’s impossible to spend any period of time observing the incel community and not have the phrase ‘body dysmorphia’ pop into your head. I won’t quote any specific posts here, because I don’t want to single out anyone whose post might be a sincere expression of desperation, but every single possible physical imperfection (along with some that seem impossible) is claimed by different members, often with flaws being stacked on top of each other in a perverse intersectionality, like the person is claiming to be some kind of Voltron of Unattractiveness. In one sense, it’s actually a recognizable phenomenon—guys trying to one-up each other and assert dominance—but the context makes it absurd: “I’m the most ugliest and hopeless. You can’t step to me, because anyone who gets too close has to throw up ‘cause I’m so hideous” (paraphrasing there). They’re claiming victimhood from a system that they believe rejects them and denies their worth as human beings, while simultaneously setting up their own bizarro-world where being the biggest possible outcast is currency.

For an intensely hot minute, there was actually a thread on incels.is where users could post selfies and get rated by the other users. Being incredibly charitable, it was a flaming, spectacular shitshow. In-between repeated protests that a ‘real’ incel would never post his picture on the internet and obvious troll posts in which users with less than ten posts would post pictures of handsome Chads, every other post prompted accusations of LARPing or, at the least, claims that the poster was nothing

more than a ‘fakecel’ (someone who thinks he’s incel but is actually a solid 4-7 and has no business feeling sorry for himself). Members were banned left and right, and more than one user expressed concern that these trolls, LARPerS and fakecels were confirming the normie belief that incels were, more than anything, regular-looking guys with emotional problems, rather than truly afflicted victims of genetics and female hypergamy. The occasional poster would share pictures that seemed to be real, and these were met with an odd combination of unsparing ‘honesty’ (“Facially you’re a 6, but since you’re a 5’3” manlet, it doesn’t matter—you’ll never be happy”) and lamentations that, *as over as it is for you, it’s worse for me*. This is one of the leitmotifs of the community. While there isn’t the same disdain for other incels as there is for society at large, and there certainly is a measure of support, there’s also the constant presence of this one-downsmanship. *I’m the worst, the ugliest, the most busted*. Crabs fighting to get to the bottom of the bucket.

This is where the incel community’s overlap with other similarly regressive ‘manosphere’ communities begins to make a lot of sense. For all the talk of an ‘incel rebellion,’ they don’t actually want anything of substance to change. They don’t care about systemic inequality in terms of race or gender, except as it relates to them getting a girlfriend. Inequality, from the general incel perspective, is real and natural (they are evidence of this fact, by their reckoning), and life is a zero-sum game. Everyone is an asshole, including them, so they might as well get theirs. It’s a pretty nihilistic outlook, but again, from their perspective it has the ring of truth: if you can’t join ‘em, beat ‘em.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This is where it all comes together, in a depressingly full circle. There are endless threads with titles in the vein of “Behavioral masculinity is a setback post WW2” or “It’s not a masculine trait for us to be as self-aware as we are trying to be” (JFL at that one) that, when you first see them, seem like they might hold the promise of a deeper examination masculinity’s

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Finally, I'm ready for the part where I tell you that, you know, *there was this girl*.

Of course, there's been many of these girls, but I'll talk about a specific one right now: Allyson.

She was the girl I was just absolutely smitten with during all of junior high and most of high school.

There were a couple breaks in high school where I became briefly enamored with other girls, but they never lasted long and I felt terribly guilty about them. I thought she was the most beautiful, sweetest, funniest girl I'd ever seen. I was friends with her in junior high, before I drifted away from all my friends in high school, and she was always warm and generous and interesting. And beautiful, of course.

During most of junior high, she was the girlfriend of one of my friends, Josh. I hated Josh, not because he was with the girl I wanted to be with (because there was no chance of her ever thinking of me in that way) but because he didn't deserve her. I had to admit, Josh was handsome, but I knew him pretty well (I believed), and that's literally all he had going for him. I would listen to him talk about her—about anything, really—and he was so thoughtless, so ignorant, so casually cruel that it seemed to me to be an injustice that a guy like him could get a girl like her. I was years away from growing out of the adolescent fantasy that “If I ever had a girlfriend, I would treat her right and never hurt her or do anything to upset her like these other guys do,” and it was infuriating to me in the extreme that fucking *Josh*—an obnoxious brute if ever one existed—and guys like him didn't even have to try to get amazing girls like

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contradictions and its actual toll on men, but the incel community, as a general rule, is not interested in that. The only response is to snap back even more violently into performative masculinity, attempting to show dominance at every recognizable opportunity (think Elliot Rodger's corny supervillain laugh), by any means necessary. Even if it means that they have to assume the role of villain, the only goal is to mog.



Allyson. There was no reality that I could imagine where Allyson would even think about me for a split second in that context,<sup>5</sup> while this piece of human garbage could get this unbelievably beautiful, sensitive (and hot) girl just because he dressed well and had good hair and a good complexion. There was no way to make sense of it, other than to accept the reality that life is unfair. Shitheels like Josh would always be able to get girls, because he's good-looking and confident, but I never would, because I'm not. It's not just over—it never even began. (I stole that from incels.is.)

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There is a thread on incels.is that was started on May 23, 2018 and currently has more than 141,000 views and over 2100 replies. It was started by the user 'uninstall' and given the 'Lifefuel' tag. The thread is titled "I will approach 1000 girls and find a girlfriend," its title a literal mission statement. He starts the conversation by asserting his belief that "there is no way in hell that not 1 girl in 1000 will like me," and explaining that he has already approached 22 girls. "978 to go fellas." What follows is hundreds of posts telling him not to bother (because if he fails it will destroy him) or encouraging him (including some even calling for some kind of memorial to be created in his honor and calling him a

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<sup>5</sup> During the final week of eighth grade, we received our yearbooks followed by the frenzy of everyone rushing around and getting everyone else to sign their book. I had been mentally preparing, because I had to get Allyson to sign my yearbook. I didn't care about anyone else's signature, but I needed hers. As I watched her on the other side of the cafeteria, I was delayed by other people who gave me their signature and wanted mine. I tried to remain calm, but the longer it took the greater my anxiety became. She was my friend, of course, and it shouldn't have been a big deal, but it was. Finally, I was able to catch her while she was not talking to anyone for a moment, and I asked her if she would sign my book. She said "Of course, but only if you sign mine." I was elated, and we swapped yearbooks. I knew what I would write in hers, but I put on a little performance, pretending to have to think for a moment to come up with something, while she finished mine quickly. One of her friends dragged her away, and I walked away happier than I'd ever been in junior high. Later that day, when I got home, I read through everyone's signature, saving hers for last and being careful to not even catch a glimpse of it and spoil it for myself. I even walked away from the yearbook for a while, because I wanted to preserve the anticipation. Finally, I allowed myself to read what she wrote: "Thanks for a great year! Make sure you don't fall asleep in class in high school, because it will really hurt you!" Dot dot dot.

hero (not hERo) to all incels), with regular updates from uninstal describing his latest approaches. Which, if they are real (a big if, of course), are brutal, as they consist of him practically running up to strangers and attempting to engage them in unnatural, forced conversations (and often becoming belligerent if they are not responsive). Many posters try to explain to him that his 'cold-approach' method is very unlikely to produce positive results for anyone (besides Chad, presumably), but he sticks to his strategy.

On November 1<sup>st</sup>, he actually had a date:

Anyway HER FACE IS A SIX (a weak one but close enough)

She says she is in a rush and cannot stay for more than 2 hours.

Which actually IS WAY MORE THAN I WILL STAY.

I AIN'T GIVING THIS BITCH MORE THAN 40 MINUTES OF MY TIME.

I DON'T EVEN WANT TO GO

BUT WILL GO

IF I DON'T, THIS ADVENTURE WILL NOT BE AS LEGIT.

Surprisingly, although the date went better than he expected ("She wasn't totally retarded although her IQ was that of a foid"), she explained afterward that she didn't think they had a lot in common. In spite of this, uninstal remains undaunted: "134 to go."

Another member asked him if he will 'rope' after 1000.

"NO"

It's not over yet.

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It did end, though, in November of 2018, in a post that detailed uninstal's final thirty-one approaches ("31 to go...Let's gear up buddy boyos."). It's a marathon post, with descriptions that resemble what has come before: "I am with my bike."; "I said bye you are stupid."; "She honestly almost ran."; "Anyway, 1 minute later some dude comes and kiss her. He was ugly."; and so on. Finally, he hits number one-thousand:

Approached some foid waiting for the bus.

She ignored me

Yep

1000 official rejections

Lmfao

As Vorbei, another user, points out, "It's such an anticlimactic end to this journey, yet at the same time so fitting." Uninstall also, at the end of the same post that details the final approaches, links to a couple audio recordings, one of them allegedly documenting one of his approaches. In the recording, he tells the woman (a stranger who he has just met) that his name is David, and that he likes her, asking "What do you have to say about that?" She responds that she has nothing to say, and when he asks why, she replies that she has a boyfriend. He responds to this with the question "Is this your first lie today?"

So fitting.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> uninstal was actually banned from incels.is, resulting from the revelation that, at some point between the start and end of his project, he had actually had sex with a woman. However, the sentiment was that his 1000 approaches project was legit (or legit enough), so it remains.

If you can believe it (and you can), there's a *Law & Order SVU* episode about incels. It's exactly what you would expect, right down to the scene where one of the detectives does a book report and explains what 'incels' are to a room full of cops who have worked on sex crimes for years (with Ice-T's character wondering why in the world they don't just go to prostitutes). Because it's *Law & Order*, they jazz up the proceedings, throwing in a *Strangers on a Train* twist where different incels take revenge for each other. The episode's final scene is a doozy, with the surviving victim of the crime that opens the episode (a guy disguised as a pizza delivery man forces his way into a married couple's apartment and kills the husband, all the while calling them 'Chad' and 'Stacy') confronting the dastardly incel who masterminded the whole scheme. He explains to her that this is all her fault, because he knows her. As she looks on horrified, he explains that they went to high school together, reciting her phone number (and laughing malevolently— a bit like Elliot Rodger, actually), which he remembers because he called her and asked her to the prom, and she "didn't even have the decency to call me back," treating him as though he didn't even exist and, obviously, sending him down the dark, tortured path to incelism. The final revelation, however, comes from Carol, the victim: she never got his voicemail, because the phone number he had been carrying around with him for years, that was burned into his brain as a symbol of his failure in the genetic lottery, was "never [her] phone number. You called somebody else." As she struggles to hold back tears, she screams in his face "You stupid, *evil* bastard!" Yikes.

### ***Chung-chung.***

It is *over*.

## Differents (Lost Souls of the Internet Part Three)

### *My Therapist Says (Prologue)*

I started seeing a therapist, in my early thirties, to work on my *issues*. During one of our first meetings, as we talked about my goals for therapy, I casually tossed out the word ‘anti-social’ to describe myself and my intense feelings of anxiety around strangers or in unfamiliar social situations, and my therapist’s pleasant, affirming tone shifted immediately. She was still pleasant, but her voice took on a new firmness. She spoke evenly, staring at me in a way that made it impossible for me to maintain eye contact for even a moment. I looked at her computer monitor, an old CRT monitor that I couldn’t believe she still was using.

“You are *not* antisocial. Antisocial means that you hate other people, and that’s not you. You have a lot of anxiety about other people, about what they think of you, but you *do not* hate them at all. You recognize and appreciate your connection to people. *You are not antisocial.*”

I said I was fine with that, but, in the end, I ended up avoiding other people in, basically, the same way. There had even been occasions where my aloofness—caused by anxiety and fear—had been interpreted by other people as antipathy, so it seemed like a distinction without any meaningful difference. If people can reasonably take away from my behavior that I don’t like them—if my behavior, objectively, appears antisocial—then why does it matter if, technically, I’m not antisocial? She was firm:

“It matters.”

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### *Different (Cute)*

A long-running discussion, between my partner and I, focuses on adventurousness. This is a poor term for it, but it is, essentially, about our divergent impulses relating to experiencing new things: new foods, new books, new movies, new music, etc.. I have always, as a general rule, tended to favor experiencing new things, things that are unfamiliar, even unexpected (as long as these new things don't involve social situations). My partner, on the other hand, decidedly prefers the familiar, the known and the comfortable. She knows what she likes, and she prefers to stick with that. I, on the other hand, know what I like, and I want to see what else is out there that I might like (or not like). It's kind of a debate, between the two of us, over which approach to life is superior, and though, occasionally, it rises to the level of argument (usually when other aspects of life or our relationship have one of us spoiling for any kind of disagreement that might provide the opportunity to pop off), it's not a huge deal. She can like old stuff, and I can like new stuff, and it's not a problem.

It can cause friction, though, because sometimes our individual impulses can ensnare the other, forcing us into a choice we would not make on our own. Again, it's low-stakes stuff, but I've watched every season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, like, nine times—beyond becoming even more sure that I hate Xander's guts, I'm not getting anything else out of that thing. Likewise, my partner is, at best, indifferent to rap music, so it's not clear what I'm expecting to happen when I hector her into listening to some new artist I've gotten excited about, just because they don't embody one particular element of the genre that she doesn't care for. Similarly, it doesn't matter to me that, say, Papa John's might have some new vegan option, because it's still pizza, and I'd rather try something different, just like it doesn't matter to her

that, yes, there might very well be something on the menu at this new Korean place that she would like, but why does that mean that we should just ignore these other restaurants that she already *knows* have things on the menu that she loves? These are minor, however ongoing disputes.

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One of my absolutely favorite discussions online is the yearly “Hot Pro Wrestling Thread” on the justusboys.com forum (“The Original Gay Porn Community,” so they claim). I am a major professional wrestling fan, my own self, and I often get frustrated at the level of discourse online about my favorite pseudo-sport, but the Hot Pro Wrestling Thread is a nice change of pace. There are absolutely some bad, truly mystifying takes bandied about (if you think the Young Bucks are sexy, fair enough, but the idea that they are the best tag team in the world is truly bullshit), and there’s way, *way* too many pictures if you don’t find meaty, sweaty guys attractive (which I don’t mean as a criticism, because what do you expect to find in a “Hot Pro Wrestling Thread” on a gay porn forum?), but the focus remains firmly on observations like “I’d love to spread Miz’s asscheeks apart and lick his asshole” or daydreams about sucking on Brock Lesnar’s nipples. There’s something satisfying about professional wrestling, which is one of, if not the most, homoerotic things you can choose to follow, being discussed in a way that focuses on that not-even-concealed subtext.

### ***Different (Intimidating)***

Somewhat less minor, though still contained in the universe of the aforementioned, long-running conflict with my partner, are my personal internet habits. True to form, my partner’s familiar internet haunts are, you know, *familiar*. She spends most of her time dealing with work issues (research

and correspondence with colleagues and students), but she also looks at friends' social media pages; she spends time doing focused, intentional research; she reads the news from traditionally trusted sources; and she reads a ton of fan fiction. Only the last habit seems surprising, but I've decided that it folds neatly into her habit of watching the same half-dozen television series repeatedly, since the fan fiction she reads focuses on is based on those handful of shows. She has read her favorite copy of *Pride and Prejudice* so many times that she knows what page (and exactly where on that page) her favorite bits appear. When, in a fit of frustration or whatever, I challenge her on these preferences, she responds similarly to the way she responds when I catch her reading *Middlemarch* for the umpteenth time, or when I roll my eyes because she's suggested watching *Clue* yet again: "My job is stressful. The whole world is stressful. I want things that are comfortable and familiar—things that reassure me and make me feel safe." It's a fair argument, though I rarely concede its logic. If I'm in particularly dickish mood, I'll even attempt to shame her for the 'unsophisticated-ness' of her preference, pointing out that it's the exact opposite of being cosmopolitan and intellectual. (It's a spectacularly bad-faith argument, but these are the things you do when you love someone.)

For my own internet habits, on the other hand, *adventurous* might be a polite choice of words. I loathe the idea of mottos or credos, or even quotes, as a way of expressing identity, but my philosophy, at least in this aspect of life, can be summed up fairly in few words: *click on that shit*. If I read about something, I want to go find it and check it out. If there is a thing that exists, and I haven't seen it yet, I need to see it. I need to know what people are doing, what they're talking about, what they believe, what they think is going on in the world. Some of it will be boring, I know. Some of it will be confusing and



nonsensical. Some of it will be unsettling, and some of it will be scary. Most of it—even more than I thought, as it turns out—will, inevitably, be porn.<sup>1</sup> But I have to check it out, *I have to know about it*. Because of this, I am not allowed to use my partner’s laptop to look at the internet, **ever**. She is willing to countenance my fanciful explorations into the vast, weird ether, and she’s even amused to hear stories about how I will force myself, despite being prompted to literally vomit,<sup>2</sup> to watch a not-insignificant portion of the *2 Girls 1 Cup* video that I’ve arbitrarily decided qualifies as ‘giving it a fair viewing,’ but she’s not about to allow herself to be dragged, even by association, into that kind of shit. Her exact wording is “I don’t want to end up on any of the lists that you’re on from looking at that stuff.” I dispute her belief that my name is irrevocably stamped on some government watchlist for dissidents who read about and sample outsider pornography or gore sites,<sup>3</sup> but the upshot is the same: I am only allowed on her computer to do offline work (and that only if the work is urgent and there is a compelling reason I can’t use my own laptop), her fear of my freaky footprint being mistaken for her own is so great.

She’s missing out on all kinds of interesting stuff (though she hears about some of it secondhand, through my breathless reporting of what I’ve just been looking at/reading/listening to/etc.), and though I am, somehow, continually amazed by what seems, to me, to be a profound lack of curiosity,

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<sup>1</sup> I won’t pretend that this is a problem for me, though.

<sup>2</sup> It’s important to note (mostly to try to preserve my own sense that I’m not coming off entirely as a fucking freak) that, while I do have an indiscriminate need to check everything out, that does not imply that some of it is objectionable to me. Please trust, I’m really a good guy.

<sup>3</sup> I guess I want to go a little further here (to hopefully make sure I’m coming across like the kind of person I’d like to come across as), that I don’t spend too much time on the gore stuff, as it’s a little too much (and, honestly, I find it boring), and I draw a bright red line at any kind of animal abuse. That is something I know exists, but I can’t bring myself to watch it. Same with child abuse.

I try to respect her. I steer clear of her computer, and I remind myself that her preference for comfort food over exploration is a valid one.

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Asami Mikita is known by the professional name Merzbow, taken from the title of a work of German dada artist Kurt Schwitters. Asami is a prolific musician, having produced over 400 recordings, and is best known for his work in noise music, creating aggressive, confrontational, overwhelming songs that can easily seem intended to be endured, rather than enjoyed. In 2000, a 50-disc boxset of his work was released by the underground Extreme Records. Merzbow has collaborated with many artists, and has worked with (pretty excellent) Japanese metal/noise/experimental group Boris regularly, including the 2016 project *Genosho*, which consists of two separate discs (one by Merzbow and one by Boris) that are intended to be listened to simultaneously. One of Merzbow's more well-known records, *Pulse Demon*, features a song called "Woodpecker No. 1," and a comment on Youtube probably sums up what the experience of listening to the song is, for most listeners: "This is what I imagine a bug hears when it's being flushed down the toilet." The pinned comment on the same video notes that "The good news is, if you like this, he has 100 other albums with 1,000s of songs just like it!"; though, if you are actually listening to the song, this might easily be understood as a threat.

### *Different (Uncomfortable)*

My and my partner's last name is hyphenated (gerdes-mcClain), a decision we arrived at together. Personally, I am not a fan of the whole idea of marriage, and I would have preferred not to do it, but the practical benefits outweigh my principles (or whatever), so when we got married, I had a

handful of concessions to those principles (or whatever) that were important to me, one of which being that we take each other's name. My partner liked this idea, but plenty of other people didn't,<sup>4</sup> and it regularly causes small irritations, like most of my students choosing to call me Mr. Gerdes *or* Mr. McClain (usually, it's McClain, and I think they believe that *Gerdes* is my middle name) or confusion when picking up prescriptions or anything else where someone has to look us up in a computer.

One story I get a lot of mileage out of is when we had to go to the social security office to legally change our names. The middle-aged man who helped us seemed genuinely confounded by what we were requesting, first assuming it was just the standard thing of the woman changing her name, but then getting confused when we explained that we both wanted our names changed to take on the other's. His initial response, once he understood what we were asking for, was to check with another guy, asking if it was even possible. The other guy confirmed that, yes, it's a thing they can do, and he had done it for a couple a few months ago. It seems like an odd thing for a guy whose job involves helping people change their names, but he seemingly was shocked by this answer. My partner and I were kind of weirded out by this, since we didn't think it was that big of a deal, and we had the idea because we knew someone who had done this exact thing. He had turned to his computer, to begin the process, but he made one more turn back to speak to me, specifically. He leaned forward, almost conspiratorially, like he didn't want my partner to hear, asking "Are you *sure* you want to do this?" I answered affirmatively, and he carried out

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<sup>4</sup> People like our parents. My mom doesn't have a problem with the hyphenated last name, but she refuses to acknowledge the validity of using the term 'partner,' rather than 'husband' or 'wife,' and addressing mail to "Mr. and Mrs. William Gerdes-McClain." My partner's mom, on the other hand, is even more passive-aggressive about it, apparently not even believing that her daughter would make such a choice and laughing it off as another example of me being 'counter-culture,' like how I am vegetarian. (I have no idea what 'counter-culture' means to her.)

the change. After we left, my partner and I wondered what he might be saying or thinking, now that we were gone, imagining scenarios like him calling the cops, because he thinks I might be in danger, or deciding that it's just time for him to hang it up, because he doesn't recognize what this world has become. Maybe he used the term 'Stockholm syndrome.' That was fun.

Less fun, however, is the actual friction that my 'counter-culture' tendencies have caused between me and my partner. While she is very much on board with the taking of each other's last names, my insistence that we refer to each other as 'partner,' rather than the traditional 'husband' and 'wife' has been legitimately difficult for her. We had engaged in a pretty in-depth conversation beforehand, and I knew that she didn't particularly care for the idea of being 'partners,' but she understood how important it was to me and did agree, in principle, with my position, so, in exchange for a couple other concessions, she agreed that we would refer to each other as 'partner.' However, she has struggled to actually follow through on this agreement, consistently characterizing me as her husband to others, while still using 'partner' when we are alone together. At first, I didn't think much of it, because the term wasn't her idea, and I decided that she needed time to get used to it. I would chide her for it, then forget about it.

However, after a few years, it really started to bother me, and her failure to use the term we had agreed upon started to make me legitimately angry, causing actual fights. My position was that we had agreed to use the term 'partner,' and it was important to me, so I was angry at her refusal to use it around others. She couldn't really argue with that, but her response was twofold: first, she doesn't always realize she's doing it, and second, she feels very anxious when talking to other people, afraid that using the term will make them uncomfortable. I wasn't buying either of these explanations, because (beyond the simple

fact that they contradict each other), for the first one, she's aware enough to use the term around me, and for the second point, my critique was that she's really underestimating people if she thinks they are unable to handle a fairly minor thing like the word 'partner'; at the most, people ask me to explain, and no one falls to pieces over it. Not to mention the fact that not using the term, when she knew it was important to me, was upsetting *me*. As this argument took place repeatedly, I began to wonder out loud if the problem wasn't other people's uncomfortableness with the term, but *hers*. She denied this vehemently, which was frustrating, because it left the conflict at an unresolvable dead-end. She would say that she'd stop doing it, she wouldn't be able to, I would hear it, we would fight, she would say that she'd stop doing it, and so on.

I'm not sure why, but finally my partner admitted that she felt uncomfortable using the term 'partner' with other people. She still insisted that it was partly for their benefit, but she also acknowledged that she felt a little ashamed of what they would think. That our relationship wasn't real, that we were married but it wasn't an actual commitment, because I refused to make the leap of using the words 'husband' and 'wife.' And this issue is entirely about her, about how what she feels and believes. She believed that she was fine with using the word 'partner,' and she was—in the abstract, or for other people to do it. She wanted to be fine with it, she wanted to be cosmopolitan and free like that, but she wasn't. When it came right down to it, for her, this was not a valid thing, and she couldn't force herself to let other people know that she was in a relationship that lacked that marker of real, lasting commitment. In the end, it was just too counter-culture for her.

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Bobby Garcia was/is a pornographer, sort of. I say ‘sort of,’ because, while you can easily find his work on the internet, and it’s definitely pornographic, it seems wrong to call him a *pornographer*, because his goal was never to distribute the incredible number of home videos he created, to entertain and arouse *other* people; Bobby Garcia was just trying to get himself off, indulging his fetish for Marines by taking advantage of his proximity to Camp Pendleton, in San Diego, CA (and, it must be acknowledged, absolutely taking advantage of most of the Marines he recorded). Garcia hung out at Marines bars and, essentially, picked up Marines, lying to them and telling them that he wanted to film them for an audition for roles in straight pornography. Plying them with alcohol and drugs, as well as porn videos to get them in the mood, Garcia videotaped them masturbating and sometimes allowing him to give them a blowjob or even having sex with him (or each other!). A persistent fantasy, in gay porn, is the idea of ‘turning’ a straight guy, persuading a guy who is not gay to engage in gay sex, and Garcia’s oeuvre is one of the closest examples of that fantasy actually coming to real life. Surely, some of Garcia’s stars were actually gay, but most, undoubtedly, were not, and yet there they sat, cocks in hand, in a strange house, taking stage directions from a pudgy little Hispanic man with a cartoonish, high-pitched voice, some even allowing him to engage them in varying degrees of intercourse. Apart from the fact that, taken in their totality, they absolutely obliterate any notion that human sexuality does not exist on a continuum, the videos are truly transfixing, riveting viewing. Alpha males with close-cropped military haircuts sit, blankly staring off-camera at a television displaying hardcore (heterosexual) pornography, almost absent-mindedly massaging their penises. Maybe Garcia’s hand pops into the frame every couple of minutes, trying to assist them, before being swatted away (before, every once in a

while, succeeding). If there's more than one Marine, maybe they joke around uncomfortably, not sure of what how they should be taking all of this. No doubt, Garcia probably got his ass beat on plenty of occasions (and considering the fact that what he was doing was dishonest and sleazy as hell, if not criminal, it's hard to feel *too much* sympathy for him<sup>5</sup>), but there's also no doubt that he didn't care. He gained a small measure of mainstream notoriety later in life, when he was featured in John Water's book *Role Models*, but the only reason Bobby Garcia even sold his tapes in the first place<sup>6</sup> is because he needed the money to continue feeding his Marine habit.<sup>7</sup>

### *Different (Threatening)*

My partner, in the past, has marveled at my enthusiasm for the unfamiliar, observing that it seems to fly in the face of my anxiety. "It's amazing that you can have a meltdown at the prospect of having dinner with someone who you worked and were friends with for three years, because you haven't seen them in ten months, but you also can't wait to watch a movie that's literally just a stationary camera recording a woman doing housework for three and a half hours."<sup>8</sup> It's kind of a fair critique, but I have two responses: first, these examples are only superficially similar. The likelihood of me being humiliated

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<sup>5</sup> I won't lie; I do kind of see him as a sympathetic figure.

<sup>6</sup> A portion of Garcia's work can now be found on [awolmarines.com](http://awolmarines.com), though I must admit I watched all the stuff I've seen on tube sites.

<sup>7</sup> Equally fascinating are the recordings made by fellow outsider pornographer David Hurles, who made audio and video recordings of similarly 'macho' guys (though Hurles focused on ex-cons, junkies, and homeless men, rather than Marines). A key distinction between Hurles and Garcia, however, is that Hurles paid his subjects and they knew exactly what they were agreeing to, so there's less ickiness inherent in checking out his work, and it's much less complicated to feel sorry for him that he definitely got his ass kicked regularly.

<sup>8</sup> *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. I can't recommend it highly enough, but I should also acknowledge that this synopsis is not entirely unfair.

by an old, French feminist art film is significantly less than sitting at a table with a bunch of people who can *absolutely* see right through me and *definitely* hate me. Second, part of the reason I feel so compelled to take risks and push into the unknown in all of these less high-stakes contexts is probably, at least partly, because I am unable to make myself take the larger, more meaningful interpersonal risks. You know, I can't talk to strangers at parties, but I'll eat anything. My fear that I am inadequate, in every conceivable way, might be so all-consuming that I'm only able to shop for clothes online, but I'm not afraid to check out ISIS beheading videos. It's entirely possible, if not probable, that my need to push into unfamiliar things, in these contexts, has something to do with asserting dumbass masculinity, since that impulse is thwarted in all the traditional areas one might expect it to manifest— you know, the boy can't talk to strangers, but he won't flinch when it's time to listen to the guy from Faith No More making weird sounds with his voice for forty-five minutes.<sup>9</sup>

This last explanation seems like it has to be at least partly valid, since I consider my willingness to search out and try anything something of a defining character trait. I even remember thinking about how growing older, at least as it relates to popular music and culture, would be easy for my brother, because his tastes have always been, to my mind, at least, punishingly bland. How could it be possible to, one day, find that you've been left behind, culturally speaking, when your favorite musicians are Dave Matthews Band and the Eagles fucking *Jimmy Buffett*? If you're always lame, there's no comedown. I've long been bracing for my own comedown, for when everything passes me by and I turn into my own

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<sup>9</sup> *Adult Themes for Voice*, by Mike Patton. Patton's voice is a marvel, but, in terms of traditional entertainment value, the record is unlistenable, which probably says a lot, coming from me.



version of the person who reads *Pride and Prejudice* over and over for the rest of my life. It's going to be awful. Even worse, I'm afraid it's already happening.

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### *The Actual Fuck (Interlude)*

Very similar to the mystery tweet I mentioned at the beginning, for more than a decade, I've not been able to get this essay by Sherman A. Jackson out of my head. Reading it, I instinctively knew that it explained everything; like, how the world works. (So it's a good thing that I noted the author.) In "Islam(s) East and West: Pluralism Between No-Frills and Designer Fundamentalism," Jackson describes the struggle to define the Islamic religion following the attacks of September 11, 2001. Jackson identifies two main groups whose interpretations of the Muslim faith seem to be at war to define Islam in the popular imagination: Middle Eastern Muslim extremists who "insist that 'the Islamic' and 'the West' are mutually incompatible" (and whose "tortured interpretations" led to the attacks of 9/11), and "American Muslim romantics," who argue that Islam is not the "antithesis of modernity" but rather the "repository of all that is beautiful, civilized and responsible." He points out the shared failing in both groups' interpretations; that they claim to have the one and only "correct" vision of Islamic tradition. These claims, Jackson argues, are not only incorrect, but also discount Islam's singularly pluralistic tradition. He points out that classical Islam operated under a doctrine of "prophetic infallibility," meaning that prophets were "divinely protected" from committing errors of interpretation. However, it was only the prophet who was infallible. In the absence of a prophet, matters of interpretation were left up to the interpretive community, and only interpretations that reached unanimous consensus could be considered correct. Without unanimous consent, "various disputed views simply had to be left standing." Jackson explains that "[a]s long as an advocate's view was grounded in authentic and authoritative sources and based on recognized interpretive methods, no one could deny him the right to

express it— regardless of its substance —as long as it did not violate preexisting unanimous consensus.”

This capacity to accommodate divergent and even conflicting viewpoints would appear to be a strength of the Islamic faith, but Jackson notes that the consequence of the “hyperpluralism and ‘constructive chaos’ of Islam’s golden age” was that “the agreed upon sources and methodologies could sustain and embarrassingly broad range of lamentable, dangerous, or even downright repulsive views.” A huge range of views had equal right to a claim of “*an* ‘Islamic’ position,” even if very few could lay claim to “*the* ‘Islamic’ position.” “Good” interpretations were as likely to be embraced as “evil” ones, and “[i]nfelicitous views could only be displaced through the production of other views that...were broader and deeper in their appeal within the interpretive community.” Since there was no prophet, no divine authority, everything boiled down to what infinitely fallible humans would come to a consensus on and endorse as truth. All interpretations were created equal and, terrifyingly, “the entire system turned on both a willingness to throw one’s ideas into competition with those of others and to accept the results of this unpredictable enterprise.” This tradition, Jackson claims, is what Middle Eastern Muslim extremists and American Muslim romantics deny when they claim that their understanding of Muslim faith is the one true tradition of Islam, seeking to bring all other followers of the faith under their beliefs. They are motivated by specific conditions and histories to arrive at these interpretations, which they then claim to be universal truths (Jackson uses the term “false universal” to describe this practice: “history internalized, normalized, and then forgotten as history”) that Muslim everywhere is subject to. For American Muslim romantics, it is the pressing desire to appease the “anti-Muslim ‘mania’” in the United States after September 11<sup>th</sup> that motivates them to insist that their vision of Islam is the one

unassailable interpretation of the faith, a false universal that, Jackson points out, falls uncomfortably in line with dominant Western values. Meanwhile, groups like ISIS or the Taliban make similarly sweeping claims about the “true” Islam, based on a specific history and perspective, for all Muslims. Both groups, Jackson stresses, in claiming their versions of Muslim tradition are absolutely correct, dismiss and attempt to bypass Islam’s true history: “the excesses (and even failures) of the classical tradition are glossed over, and its commitment to true pluralism and tolerance is abandoned in favor of a false universal.”

This is life, right? Everyone’s beliefs, values, interpretations, bouncing off one another, trying to find purchase. It’s awful and it’s wonderful. Thrilling and horrifying.

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Patriots.win (formerly thedonald.win, and before that r/thedonald<sup>10</sup>) is an internet shithole.

When I first read about Russian agents impersonating Americans on the internet, posting divisive things to exacerbate and exploit divisions between Americans, I thought it sounded silly. Like, I have a low opinion of people, just overall, but how could something like that possibly work and be effective?

However, when I began lurking on r/thedonald, the Donald Trump-focused subreddit that functioned as a “non-stop rally” for Donald Trump the presidential candidate and then President of the United States, I was forced to reconsider. The ideas, arguments, and general tenor of the community was so bizarrely regressive, confrontational and hostile, not to mention so stridently incoherent, that suddenly the only plausible explanation was a Russian troll farm out here throwing whatever crazy shit they can think of at the wall and hoping some of it sticks in frustrated and angry American minds. How else to explain posts cheerfully celebrating people losing jobs during a government shutdown, or a thread reminding fellow patriots that leftists *literally* wish death upon Trump supporters and celebrate their misfortune sitting half a dozen posts below a thread wishing that Ruth Bader Ginsburg was still alive, so that she could be thrown from a helicopter, Pinochet-style?<sup>11</sup> When there’s overwhelming support in a community for the argument that *all* liberals are pedophiles (either complicit or in actual practice), how can it *not* be one

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<sup>10</sup> r/thedonald, which was constantly and gleefully in conflict with Reddit administrators, was restricted and finally shut down by Reddit in July 2020 for activities deemed to be in violation of its codes of conduct. Most users migrated to thedonald.win, which has a much more lenient code of conduct. After Joe Biden was sworn in as the 46<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, the community rebranded to patriots.win (a fitting choice, since users regularly, insistently refer to each other and themselves as ‘patriots’).

<sup>11</sup> Pinochet and other murderous dictators are regularly praised on patriots.win, and there’s even a “FREE CHOPPER RIDES” label for threads.

huge put-on? How can the belief that a cannibalistic cabal of elites, bent on bending the world to their progressive/NWO agenda, are secretly in control of all levers of power, in almost all governments, be put out there with a straight face? It has to be fake, right?

But it's real people who believe these things, who hold these positions, however tortured and constantly-in-violent-flux they are. While it's true that there was reported proof that Russian trolls were, in fact, all over communities like r/thedonald, there are also, very obviously plenty of real people there, as well, not just spreading disinformation and hate for fun and profit, but because they truly believe what they're saying. They believe, since democrats/liberals/progressives/feminists/antifa/etc.<sup>12</sup> are truly evil, and that their explicit goal is to literally destroy America and take away freedom, that anything goes. A new Civil War is frequently discussed, with seemingly giddy anticipation,<sup>13</sup> while also maintaining the apparently straight-faced conviction that liberals are forcing this inevitable war, through their relentless persecution of real Americans who just want to be left alone to commiserate with like-minded Patriots, posting spicy memes and pictures of their gun collection.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Since the move to the .win site, the homophobia, transphobia, racism, antisemitism, etc. of the community has really been unleashed, with white nationalist members pushing mentions of 'the Jewish Question' and "(((them)))" into topics regularly. Sometimes there is pushback on these mentions, but the dominant reaction is either affirmation or silence.

<sup>13</sup> One popular meme questions how long such a conflict will last, when one side (theirs) owns the overwhelming majority of personal firearms and the other "can't figure out which bathroom to use" (a transphobic joke about the issue of allowing people to use the bathroom of the gender they identify as).

<sup>14</sup> A regular feature of all incarnations of patriots.win is "Sunday Gunday," in which users post photos of their guns, often in humorous set-ups (a collection of guns arranged to spell out "TRUMP WON," above bullets arranged to spell 'BY, LIKE, A LOT') or with clever tags ("This is what I bought with my stimulus check! Thanks Biden!"). This ritual perfectly encapsulates the absurd performativity of the community, in which it is apparently understood that one must, at all times, be asserting their membership in the loudest, most borderline comical fashion possible.

What truly makes patriots win a shithole, however, is not their vile ideology, or even their truly despicable rhetoric and attacks on anyone and everything that they deem less righteous than they are; it's the persistent, infuriating retreat into irony. It's the insistence that people who judge them aren't just intolerant, but that these intolerant lefties *can't take a joke*. This particular element of the community has been steadily less pronounced, as the full-on white nationalist elements have become more comfortable simply owning their true positions, but the kneejerk habit of insisting that any argument<sup>15</sup> or even joke made by outsiders be understood as a literal threat to exterminate them, while simultaneously LOLing at the snowflakes getting triggered by a cartoon frog or an 'okay' hand-gesture, still lingers. It's the kind of absolute nonsense that can only be reconciled by the fact that, as they believe themselves to be in possession of the one absolute, indisputable truth,<sup>16</sup> they just don't need to worry about it. More's the pity for the normies and shitlibs.

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<sup>15</sup> A popular meme, made in response to the announcement that six Dr. Seuss books with problematic racial content would be discontinued, circulated in the community. The image placed Dr. Seuss' *The Cat in the Hat* (which was not one of the books being removed from printing) next to the Bible. Over the books, there is text that reads "Wake up... It has never been about Dr. Seuss... It is simply their groundwork for a more important target," clearly insinuating that taking away some Dr. Seuss books that no one even reads is simply a prelude to the elite's attempt to cancel the Bible and Christianity.

<sup>16</sup> This is a bit of a tangent, but one thing I truly wish no one had ever taught them is the concept of 'narratives.' This idea is tossed around blithely in the patriots.win community (and other alt-right spaces) in constant critiques about pushing back against the dominant, mainstream 'narrative' presented by the 'liberal' media. On the one hand, they're absolutely correct to characterize it as a narrative and to point out that we can, and should, be ready to challenge it. Unfortunately, their shallow understanding of the concept means that they are unable to recognize *their own* narrative as *also* a narrative and not The Truth™, which is just powerfully irritating, to me. (Occasionally, they will use the term 'narrative' to describe their own preferred version of reality, but these moments don't seem to be connected to any deeper consideration, just a word being used because it's part of the lexicon.)

### *The Sacred Landslide (Breakdown)*

It's not breaking news to say that 2020 was a tough year, and for a certain type of person (and I am not *not* that type of person), the whole four years of Donald Trump's presidency has been one long, tough year. And during this time, I have begun to notice that I am not quite as fearless as I once was, as it relates to exploring uncharted, freaky cultural vistas. I have, as often as not (and lately considerably more often than not), found myself content to simply read about the existence of something strange or unsettling, rather than rushing out to gain firsthand knowledge of it. I rarely watch new movies, and I am more interested in watching *Bob's Burgers* episodes that I've seen a dozen times than pushing myself to watch something new and challenging. I still am engaged with many different kinds of music, including the extreme and experimental, but in every other area, I am, increasingly retreating to safe, known pleasures.

This is, at least in part, I think, due to the political and social climate of the last four years. I've always been fascinated by niche communities and subcultures, and the internet provides me the opportunity to lurk and observe all manner of outsiders, particularly maladjusted and disgruntled misanthropes. Sometimes, the groups I find are fun and interesting, if problematic (like parrot owner message boards, or the porn website that is all about women getting their cars stuck in mud<sup>17</sup>), and sometimes they are troubling and interesting (like white nationalists and MRA's), but the troubling spaces have become exponentially more troubling to me, in the last four years. And while it's ridiculous to say that these communities didn't exist before the Trump presidency, it's equally ridiculous to say that

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<sup>17</sup> The Webby Award-winning [carstuckgirls.com](http://carstuckgirls.com)



Donald Trump's rise to power didn't empower some of these miserable, angry people to really step up and show the world all the ugliness inside themselves.

Put simply, the world (as I see it), has gotten a lot scarier over the last few years, and I wonder if my retreat into safe, familiar pleasures is a reflection of that. Where I used to understand websites like [veinywoman.com](http://veinywoman.com)<sup>18</sup> and [stormfront.org](http://stormfront.org) (the world's largest white nationalist community) as, in a way, equal—in that each was simply evidence of the spectacular diversity of how we understand and interact with the world—I'm less sure of that now. While I, of course, never believed they were *really* equal, I'm now worried that the one is not something that can be allowed to persist. It's interesting, fascinating and so dangerous that its existence terrifies me.<sup>19</sup>

This is the difficulty with real difference, of course—along with possibility, it necessarily leads to discomfort and conflict. And, though I have always sought out that discomfort and conflict, and even found it exhilarating, it feels like I'm reaching the point where that discomfort is starting to become too much. It's not as embarrassing as liking Jimmy Buffett, and I can blame it on boogaloo bois, accelerationists or Donald Trump (and they deserve it), but it feels like a surrender, a failure. I want to see every different perspective as a possibility, something exciting that I can learn from. I can't tell you how excited I was when I stumbled on that site with the girls getting their cars stuck. I was just like, *holy shit*, I never would have thought of this as something that would make people sexually excited. Like, how hard must it have been for these people to get aroused before the internet? It was invigorating, and it

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<sup>18</sup> "The internet's home for the most beautiful women with strongly pronounced veins in the world...."

<sup>19</sup> I'm talking about those womens' veins, obv.

made me excited to see what else these freaks were getting off on out there. And, I mean, I'm still looking. I'm still clicking on links and finding stuff, but it's scarier, and I'm always a little worried about what I'll learn. Every scroll is, to some degree, a doomscroll now.

The easy explanation is that this is really just all about getting older. You fear things more than you used to, because you have a clearer understanding of how we hurt each other. I don't like that explanation, because it's the most irreversible, but it's also the most natural, as it's a fairly common belief that we become more conservative as we get older. On the other hand, maybe it is entirely the fault of Donald Trump and all the chuds whose butthurt he's activated and supercharged. I don't like that explanation, either, because it's almost as irreversible, and it makes me worry that somehow the worst of the world's diversity, the ugliness of the conflict caused by all the difference is the thing that's making me a different person than the one that I'd like to be.

Another explanation, however, seems inescapable: I haven't so much gained a clearer understanding of how we can hurt each other as I have begun to understand, and fear, how some of these things can hurt *me*. Lurking in the places I choose to lurk, it's ridiculous to think that I didn't see pretty clearly what kind of ugliness existed out there, yet I was able to make the choice to see it as fascinating, rather than threatening. While I never truly equated David Hurler with, say, Steve Bannon, I could and did choose, in practical terms, to treat them the same; as case studies to be examined, dispassionately. Just two more ideas for me to explore. It's an easy choice to make, because there is no danger for me. However much I might hold their ideas in contempt, I am in no real, material danger from the worst of the people I am looking at. When explaining to people how I was fascinated by these

kinds of communities, I would often qualify my interest with the disclaimer that I was fully aware that my interest in these communities was a function of my privilege, that not everyone could be expected to sit back and stroke their chins, like “These *fascinating* racists!” I wanted them to know that I was aware that this wasn’t a normal reaction, that *I* knew and understood what was going on here. But I’m increasingly worried that I never understood it at all.

Observing these communities for the last bunch of years, I have moved from fascinated to threatened, because it’s become more and more clear how the anger that suffuses them can reach out and touch *me*. Watching an army of angry people, a significant portion of which look like the people I grew up around, burst out into the real world—*my real world*—and do things like storm the capital building and attempt to overthrow the government, the ugliness is no longer theoretical and abstract. When I am teaching my first-year composition classes, I focus how to try to understand and engage with the beliefs and values of someone who doesn’t think like you, but, more and more, I’m also thinking to myself how pointless these skills are when the other person is operating in bad faith and refusing to extend you the same courtesy, because they don’t want to understand or be understood— they just want to dominate everyone who isn’t like them. This is terrifying, and I don’t know what to do with it. It’s much easier to simply watch *Bob’s Burgers*.<sup>20</sup>

I have wanted to write about the patriots.win community for quite a while, but I was never able to figure out a way in. For the other less-than-savory communities I looked at, there was always

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<sup>20</sup> I hope it’s not coming across like I am suggesting that watching *Bob’s Burgers* is shameful. It’s truly wonderful, and you should watch it right now.

something I could recognize under all the ugliness and hate, something that I could understand, even if how they chose to proceed from that thing I could understand was something that I couldn't understand. But the patriots.win community made it impossible for me to do that. The only thing I could find to hold onto there was their anger, their desire to boil everything down to something simple enough that it can be expressed in meme-form and easily recognized as one of them or just another enemy. Confronted with this, repeatedly, it's hard not to abandon the impulse to look for nuance and simply write them off with the same way they write off others: *I don't understand them, and they make me uncomfortable. Fuck them.*

When I have told people the kinds of places and people I'm interested in, the obvious question "Why *those* people?" (i.e., why white nationalists or groypers or incels) is always asked. And the answer is, basically, because I want to understand. I want to appreciate how they see the world, because it's a way of being and thinking that is so different from my own and that I don't understand. It's a possibility, which is, inherently, cool. But this philosophy really only works if I am able to keep everything at arms-length. If I truly appreciate some of these 'ways of being and thinking' for how they actually operate in the actual world, then some of them are, obviously, threatening, and my natural reaction is to assume a defensive posture against them. And this sounds impossibly childish, not to mention something that one can only truly imagine a straight white male being naïve enough to say with the kind of sincerity I am intending, but *I don't like that*. I want to see difference as possibility, so being forced to acknowledge that I'm extremely uncomfortable with, that *I might not be willing to tolerate* even the least defensible, most

intolerant perspectives, feels like a defeat and a first step towards becoming like these people who scare me so much because they hate everyone not like them.

Not antisocial (at least, not yet), but a little more scared of things that are unfamiliar; things that I can't understand; things that don't comfort me; things where I can't easily, immediately recognize myself reflected back at me. Which seems like the worst. The end of possibility. The long, dark Jimmy Buffett concert of the soul.

## Bullet Points

- At the commitment party for me and my partner, my brother got truly, heroically drunk. He challenged my partner's cousin to a fight, because the guy has a graduate degree, which my partner's cousin didn't bring up, but my brother heard someone else mention it, and that was enough for him to decide that this motherfucker thinks he's better than him. My partner's cousin tried to explain that he's a high school teacher (the implication, I guess, being that he doesn't think he's better than anyone), but my brother was seeing red. Fortunately, mom and cousin finally calmed him down. A little bit later in the evening, he hit on my partner's mom.
- My mom grew up in a strict Catholic house, and she went to Catholic school. She hated it, and she was determined to not make my brother and me go through what she had to, so faith was not really a part of our lives. (My dad might have been an atheist, but he never talked about those things.) When I was a teenager, I decided I was an atheist, and my mom told me to make sure I never let her mother know, because it would break my grandmother's heart. As I got older, and stuck to my atheism, I think my mom regretted not making faith a part of our lives. My brother eventually embraced Catholicism, and while it was as much an acknowledgment of what he needed to do to get ahead in the fire department as anything else, it made her happy. I wonder if my atheism broke her heart.
- My dad walked in his sleep. A particular story, about right after he got home from Vietnam and was staying with my grandparents: it was the middle of winter (in northern Indiana), and my grandfather was awakened by the sound of the open front door banging in the wind. He went to

close it and saw my dad, in his underwear, halfway down the block, sleepwalking through the snow in his underwear. My grandfather hurriedly put his boots on, ran down my dad, and guided him back to the house.

- My mom hates cats. When she comes to visit, she makes a show out of just how put out she is by having to deal with our four aggressively friendly cats. They walk up to her expectantly, surely waiting for the same appreciation they receive from every other guest, but she's not having it. Her disgust is over the top, to the point where I almost doubt its sincerity. I'm not sure what would be the point of faking such behavior, but it's hard to take seriously.
- When we were little, my brother was sometimes referred to by the equivalent of his name in Hungarian (which my mother's Hungarian grandmother always called him). We loved it, because it sounded really funny to a bunch of English speakers, and he hated it for the same reason. At least once, I got in trouble because I called him by the name until he cried. I also had a Hungarian name, of course, which he tried to turn on me to similar effect, but it never worked, because mine wasn't funny and didn't bother me.
- It seems likely that my mom, at one point, loved my dad, but I don't have many memories of that. The last two decades of his life, she openly hated his guts. It was ugly, and my brother and I would occasionally ask her why she didn't just leave. One time (when we were both in our twenties), she responded, glibly, "Don't worry, you won't be children of a broken home." We were both just like, "It would be better that way," which she didn't respond to. The only

explanation I could ever imagine, that made sense, is that she was scared to leave because, as unhappy as she was with my dad, she'd never really been without him.

- I rarely talk to my brother. It's deeply upsetting to my mom, but we barely have a relationship. I know that it bothers him a lot, as well.
- My mom is scared of everything. There's seemingly nothing she doesn't tell me and my brother to be careful and/or suspicious of. Other drivers are crazy and reckless, people at the store are thoughtless and careless, other people at work are trying to take advantage of us, etc. One of her favorite phrases is "It's a jungle out there," and she means this in a very dark, ominous sense. My brother and I both tease her about her paranoia, and she will laugh about it, always summing things up by 'jokingly' reminding us that "They're all out to get you."
- My dad adored my brother, and they were much closer than I ever was with my dad. This is not to say that my dad didn't love me, but he had no idea how to relate to me, nor I to him. Though he was often cruel to my dad, my brother made sense to him, made him proud in a way that I couldn't have done even if I had wanted to (which I didn't). My brother wrestled and competed in the state finals, he brought different girls around all the time, he did stupid stuff with his friends and got into trouble, he drank too much. I imagine my dad recognized himself in my brother (which makes me wonder if my brother recognized the same thing, and that's why he was often so cruel to my dad).
- My brother and I both learned that Santa Claus was fake at the same time. I'm not sure of the exact year, but we were little and it was Christmas Eve. We were sent to bed, where we lay awake.



I carefully crept out of my room to discover my mom and dad, in the living room carefully arranging a massive pile of presents in and around the tree. I backtracked to my brother's room and informed him of this revelation, bringing him to see the evidence. I was pretty proud of myself, but I've always wondered what he felt about it. Or whether, if I brought it up now, if he'd even remember what I was talking about.

- My dad worshipped his father. He made time to go over to my grandparents' house multiple nights every week just to spend time with him. He drank beer with him, went fishing with him, watched television with him. He told us repeatedly that he wanted to make sure that, when my grandpa was gone, that he didn't have any regrets and that my grandpa knew how much he loved him
- My mom loves music. She loves Janis Joplin, Sly and the Family Stone, Neil Diamond, Bob Seger, and lots of others. I bought her a figurine of Janis Joplin one time, which she thought was cool.
- My brother was pretty cruel, even abusive, when we were both teenagers. There was the stuff with my dad, where he would ridicule him in front of his friends, but he treated me similarly, and, in a lot of ways, worse. He seemed to make a point of talking about me in ways where I was sure to be able to hear him and hear his friends laughing. He seemed angry at me at every moment, which I could never figure out, and he took whatever he wanted from me when I wasn't around. A couple of times we almost came to blows, but I always backed down. He was two years younger than me, but once he entered junior high he quickly became bigger and

stronger, and he had always been more ready to throw a punch than I was, so I always let it go.

He was also pretty brutal to his friends, who, with a couple exceptions, he seemed to actually hate. Sometimes, one of them would just disappear, and I would later learn that he had done or said something (usually multiple somethings) that was so harsh that they had simply walked away from him. I hope he's different now, but I honestly don't know.

- My dad broke his arm this one time. He and a friend were performing at the annual Ladie's Stag at the VFW. They were annual performers, and in previous years they had been The Blues Brothers and Sammy Davis Jr. and Dean Martin. (In retrospect, either my dad or his friend most likely donned blackface for the Sammy Davis Jr. role.) This year, they were Sonny and Cher. The big climax would be Sonny (my dad) leaping into Cher's arms and her carrying him out. My dad's friend, however, was quite drunk, and as he stumbled out the door during their exit, he dropped my dad, who dislocated his shoulder upon landing. I woke up the next morning to find my hungover father smoking a cigarette, his arm in a sling. The sling had to be explained to me.
- I've hurt my mom deeply a few times by being selfish. It's easy to convince myself I don't need to worry about her feelings, because she doesn't often show them, and I've taken that as an excuse to disregard them entirely. I hope I won't do it again, but I'm afraid I will.
- When we were little, a running joke was that my parents didn't know where my brother came from. They claimed that they got him at a garage sale and brought him home in a brown paper bag.

- My mom loves to buy gifts. She's where I learned to show love by buying gifts for other people. My brother and I got presents all the time when we were little, because she couldn't help herself. For example, we had more Nintendo games than all of our other friends combined, nearly 200 grey plastic cartridges spread all over the house. My dad had a good job, but the amount of stuff she bought us would have made you think we were much more well-off than we actually were. Everything was an occasion for a gift. It still is, actually, and when she sees something she likes she just buys it for someone else's kid or socks it away for future opportunities.
- My dad fought in the Vietnam war. My brother and I spent a good deal of time at the VFW as children, and we would hear members talking and talking about their experiences fighting in Vietnam, Korea, or in WW2. My dad never participated in, or commented on, those discussions.
- My dad did all kinds of weird shit in his sleep that he never knew happened. One night, when I was probably nine or ten years old, I was awakened in the middle of the night by my brother. I could hear a steady stream of water running, which was strange. As my head cleared, my brother moved aside and I could see my dad on the other side of my bedroom, near the wall. He was wearing only his underwear, and his back faced me. I could still hear the water, but it wasn't clear where the sound was coming from. My brother, seeing that I was now alert, solved the mystery: "Dad's pissing on your floor." It was true. My dad was taking his regular giant, middle of the night leak (a result of all the beer he drank every night), mostly on my bedroom floor, but also a little bit on the wall. "He's asleep?," I guessed, which my brother confirmed, further explaining that he had heard my dad jabbering particularly loudly in his sleep before getting up

and wandering up and down the hall, finally ending up in my room. My brother had tried, unsuccessfully, to lead him to the bathroom when it became clear what he was going to do, and now our father was emptying his prodigious bladder on my bedroom floor, and a little bit on the wall. We tried our best not disturb him with our laughing, as he finished up. Once he was done, he wandered to the kitchen and sleep-ate leftovers while sleep-watching HBO and finally went back to bed, while my brother and I cleaned his urine off my floor, and a little bit off the wall.

The next day we told him about what happened, and he denied it. We confronted him with the piss spot on the floor and the smaller piss spot on the wall (we didn't do a great job cleaning up), and he, at first, claimed that he didn't see any stain, and then claimed that the dog had done it, even though the dog had been dead for more than a year (his argument being that the stain had been there for a long time). My mom told us to let it go, because he didn't remember what he'd done and was embarrassed, so it just became an inside joke for the two of us from that point, except for when my brother (probably) brought it up in front of his friends to humiliate my dad.

- Like my dad, my brother idolized my grandpa (my dad's dad). He and his friends would go over to my grandparents' house constantly and play cards and hang out with my grandpa, because my brother thought he was so cool and was so proud of him. When my grandpa's mind started to go, it was really hard for my brother to handle, and like my dad he was devastated when my grandpa died. After his passing, my grandpa somehow became even more sacred to my brother, which I guess didn't surprise me. I was surprised, however, when the process repeated with my dad when he died. He mostly treated him like shit our whole lives, but once he was gone my

brother almost deified my dad. It made me wonder what their relationship really looked like, what might have been true that I never got to see. Though it took him about five years, my brother scattered both my dad and grandpa's ashes together in their favorite lake to fish at.

- It was really hard to see what my mom and dad ever saw in each other. By the time he died, they hated each other, and they essentially lived separate lives under the same roof, her constantly sniping at him and him moping around, perpetually wounded. My mom was furious to find, after he was gone, that my dad had been making tens of thousands of dollars a year more than she ever knew for the last years of his life, “drinking it away and giving it to the other drunks down at the fucking bar— not a god damn thing to show for it.” The last few months of his life, he had been telling everyone that he was going to retire in a couple years and finally leave my mom. I didn't believe it would have ever happened, but I never challenged him on it.
- One time when I was like sixteen or seventeen, I was walking through our house when I noticed a pile of old photos on our dining room table, so I stopped to look at them. They were what I expected, old pictures of my mom's mother and father, and a few of her brother. There was one that was kind of spooky, though. It was a black and white picture of three kids, posing and smiling for the camera. One of the kids was so weird looking, she was freaking me out. There was something about this girl that I couldn't put my finger on that was making me really uncomfortable, but I also couldn't stop staring. I must have stood there for ten minutes, just staring at this girl. I tried to look at the other kids, to give me a clue, but they weren't familiar. All of them were wearing the kind of tight, close-fitting summer clothes that I guess all kids wore in

the fifties. The girl had light brown-blond hair, with bangs that had been brutally, awkwardly chopped off in the middle of her forehead. She looked pretty happy, I guess. I tried to think if I had any freaky-looking relatives, but I was drawing a blank. I was home alone, so the house was silent as I stood trying to decipher this picture. Finally, it came to me: it was my mom. This was a picture of my mom as a young girl. And the reason that the picture was so unsettling was that *she looked just like me*. Right down to the busted-ass bangs, it looked exactly like me if I was a girl. I'd seen pictures of my mom when she was young before, but I guess I'd just never noticed it. It was uncanny. It was like finding myself in that photo at the end of *The Shining*, but also realizing I'd been a girl the whole time. I walked away from the picture, determined to forget that I'd seen it.

- My brother has a dog, a sadsack basset hound, that he loves more than anything in the world. I've never actually seen him care about anything more than that dog. My brother will probably never marry or have children, and the dog seems to fill an important place for him. My mom and I have discussed how worried we are about what he'll do whenever that dog finally dies.
- My dad was oblivious. After I had, essentially, failed out of college, he was telling people that I was working on my second masters degree. According to my brother (who would have known), he believed it was true.
- As much as my brother hates other people— and it's a considerable bit —he hates himself more. When he says awful, cruel things about other people, it's usually when he's in a fury over something or because they've upset him, but when he talks about himself, it's very different. He

will just matter-of-factly tell you, with no emotion in his voice, and in a way that tells you that he won't entertain discussion about the subject, "I'm a piece of shit."

- My dad, according to my mom (who, I guess, would have known), had a really small penis. His 'Irish Curse.'
- At least once, my dad tried to commit suicide. After our dog (his dog) died, my mom found him in the garage, drunk, with a revolver in his mouth. She had to talk him down and get the gun away from him. She made him sell his guns after that.
- My mom is alone. Now that my dad is gone, she lives alone, and though she has people that she is social with, she's close with my cousin's family, and my brother still lives in town and takes care of her, she spends most of her time in the house by herself. She does puzzles, she cooks, she gardens when the weather and her knees allow it. I've encouraged her to take classes (she loves photography) or go to exercise at the community center, but she's not interested. I remember when I was little, and she would never take us places like my dad would. We never went to movies or went to events like my friends' families did. And I wonder, when I listen to her talk about how much she hates to go to the airport or drive by herself, if she suffers from something similar to my own social phobia. She only ever wanted, and she only wants now, to stay in the house. I've mentioned this to her, but she disregards it, saying "I'm sure I'm crazy, but I'm too old to do anything about it now."
- Like his father, like his friends, like most of the other guys at the VFW, my dad was a racist. His racism was very matter-of-fact, and he self-identified as a racist. Growing up, I heard a lot about

how black people want something for nothing, they don't ever want to work and only care about looking good, and he wasn't saying that there weren't *any* attractive black women, but if you look you'll notice that the really good-looking ones are at least partly (if not mostly) white.

Walter Payton was an exception, along with Henry and Louis from work— those two guys would be welcome in his home, because they were just good guys. Two of the good ones. He had his truth.

- The funeral home literally couldn't hold all the people who came to my dad's viewing. Everyone had to stand, and people were overflowing out into the parking lot. As my brother and I stood in front of the casket, an endless parade of people who I'd either not seen in years or never seen in my life kept telling me how much they loved my dad, and how much he loved me. How great it was to finally meet me, how much they'd heard about me. Many people came and left quickly, because they had to make room for others. As my dad's best friend spoke, while old infantry guys fired into the air to honor him, my mom sat on the edge of her chair, in-between my brother and me, holding our hands tightly.
- My brother is a huge Notre Dame fan. He used to have all of his friends over, every game day, and they would all get ass-drunk in my parents' basement, where my brother had built himself a large bedroom. Every weekend, they would drink and watch *Rudy* before the game, raucously celebrating Rudy's big triumph at the end. He had a friend who was a nice guy, but also an incorrigible thief (and who one time stole dozens of cases of Jack's frozen pizzas off of a truck, and we had those fucking things exploding out of our freezer for months), and this one time he



stole a bunch of equipment from the Notre Dame football team's locker room. He gave my brother a real-deal Notre Dame football helmet, which my brother thought was the coolest thing in the world. When his friend later got caught stealing something else, my brother disposed of all the stuff he'd gotten from this guy, just to be safe, but he kept the helmet, deciding it was worth the risk.

- My dad never missed one of my or my brother's extra-curricular activities, especially if those activities were athletic. Our family bought a video camera (a still not-insignificant investment in the early- mid 90s) so that he could record my brother's wrestling meets. However, he quickly learned that he would have to ask another parent to handle the recording, because he couldn't keep himself from yelling, gesticulating wildly and literally jumping up and down during the matches, particularly when my brother competed.
- My brother takes good care of my mom. I live a thousand miles away now, and she's old and on her own, and he takes care of everything she needs. It snows, he comes over and shovels. She needs a new refrigerator, he takes her shopping and then sets it up. Her car is dirty, he comes over and takes it to be cleaned. He fixes everything around her house, drives her to family events, even goes on cruises with her. (She does love to travel, it turns out, but only if she's not alone.) I live a thousand miles away, so I do none of these things. Even when I still lived in town, I almost never did these things. My mom, because she is sensitive to my anxieties and limitations, has never gotten upset about me not taking on my share of these responsibilities. My brother, however, who is not sensitive and patient about anything, surely has gotten upset, and it's hard

to blame him. It legitimately never even occurred to me how much he does for her, and how little I do, until my partner stunned me into silence by pointing it out. He has good reason to resent me.

- My mom has always protected me. She always made excuses when I didn't go to family events and when I acted strange and aloof at the ones I did attend. She let me get away with not going to weddings, funerals, all kinds of events. She explained my absences and tried to make them seem reasonable. She shielded me from my dad when he wanted to force me to do things. She never pushed me about my grades when I was in college, because she knew that I didn't want to talk about it. The degree to which she made excuses and protected me probably wasn't helpful to me in a big-picture sense, but it means a lot to me that she understood what I needed, even though I couldn't say it.
- When my brother was thirteen years old, his best friend killed himself. The kid took his dad's gun and blew his brains out. Obviously, my brother was devastated. He taped the obituary to the wall in his room. The room around it changed multiple times, but that scrap of newspaper stayed in the same spot on the wall for more than a dozen years. I wonder how often my brother thinks about his friend now.
- Like lots of people, I am afraid that I will become my mom. I'm worried that I already have.
- Two of the three scars on my face are around my left eye, the result of my brother hitting me in the face with a baseball bat. We were playing baseball at my grandparents' house, and I was beating him and taunting him. He got angry and threw the bat at me. I saw it coming and

ducked, but I didn't account for the fact that the bat would also be closer to the ground by the time it reached me, and the heavy end hit me square in the left eye. My grandma screamed.

Everything was black long enough for me to be afraid that I was going to be blind, and when I could see again my grandma and my brother were shrieking and bawling. My dad, who had been in the process of walking to his car (he was dropping us off for the weekend), came running back and rushed me to the emergency room. I was righteously indignant, because my brother cried so much that he didn't get a beating for almost blinding me and ruining my new Cubs t-shirt. Later that year, we were doing a thing (again at my grandparents' house) where one of us would sit on the couch with our legs held out straight and the other would run and jump over their legs, I guess like a hurdle. I have no idea what the point of this game was. During one of my brother's turns, as soon as he jumped, I lifted my legs up slightly higher, which of course tripped him up, and when he came crashing down he got a cut on his cheek that, I mean, didn't seem that bad to me (he didn't even get stitches), but he was wailing and crying so much that my dad took him to the emergency room. I honestly didn't know why I'd done it, but, after having some time to rationalize everything to myself, I was furious that I caught a beating for that when he got away clean with smashing my face with a baseball bat. I had calmed down by the time they got back, but no joke, while they were gone I was seriously trying to think of some heinous shit to do to my brother to even the score when I saw him. Little bitch.

- When I was fifteen or sixteen, my brother let me know that my dad had said to him "You know I love your brother, but I don't like him at all. He just doesn't make any sense." My brother,

naturally, relayed the message to me as soon as he could. Years later, my dad tried to apologize, and I told him it wasn't a big deal, just to get out of the conversation.

- I call my mom every Sunday. It's difficult to talk to her, because we push each other's buttons, instinctively and automatically. I mock her bizarre (to me) obsession with her neighbors' behaviors and assertions that the whole neighborhood is going to hell, and she scolds my lack of interest in my partner's niece, reminding me that it's my niece too and becoming even more frustrated by my facetious reply that this doesn't make the kid any more interesting to me. She becomes exasperated when I mention some minor (to me) detail about our life, like how my going back to school is going to mean for us a few more years of scraping by financially. I tell her not to worry, but she responds by reminding me "It's my job."
- My dad walked in on me masturbating this one time. I was thirteen or fourteen, and I needed to take a shower really fast before we were leaving for something. We had this unfinished basement (before my brother converted it into a bedroom for himself) with an extra bathroom that had our house's only shower (and a door that didn't lock), and I guess I thought I would get a quick one off. With the sound of the shower, as well as my surely furious concentration, I didn't hear him approaching until he burst in, shouting one of his favorite salutations/exhortations: "DROP YOUR COCK AND GRAB YOUR SOCKS!" I clumsily tried to comply, and my dad tried to pretend he didn't see anything.
- In addition to being a belligerent drunk, my brother is a maudlin, emotional drunk. He gets sentimental as all hell when he's really loaded, and this might actually be my least favorite

quality of his. Sober, he will sometimes tell me how much it bothers him that we aren't closer, and when he drinks he will expound on this lament. A particular time, after I had started college but when he was still in high school, I came home one afternoon to find him in the basement, so drunk that he could not stand. I'd gone down to find a CD of mine that he had taken, and there he was. I'd found my CD, and I was trying to leave, but he wanted to talk. I was listening to him jabber on about how I should come out with him and his friends and how he actually hated most of them anyways and how much he really loved me, and then he threw up. He vomited all over himself, like, a lot. I went to the bathroom and got a washcloth and came back, pulling him up to a sitting position to clean him up. He coughed some bonus puke right into my face, apologizing profusely. As I held his head still, so that I could clean the little spot in-between his lower lip and chin, he grabbed my wrist, which was disgusting, because he had throw-up on his hand still. He looked right in my eyes, saying "Hey, man. I'm serious. You're my brother, I fucking love you." That's it, I was done now. I told him to put his arms up and pulled his nasty shirt off, and I tossed him a clean one as I went back to the bathroom to wash my hands. He kept going: "You know, we talk shit, but we don't ever talk *about* shit." I was profoundly grateful that he probably wasn't going to remember any of this. I came back and helped him onto the couch and pulled his pants off, telling him to go to sleep. He was already half gone as I carried the disgusting clothes and washcloth out of the room. He said something that was too garbled to decipher, but I didn't ask him to repeat it. As I walked upstairs, I realized that I had forgotten my CD, so, making sure

to not disturb my passed-out brother, I went back for it. I have no idea if he remembers this episode. It seems unlikely that he does.