# Trick Mirror

*Reflections on Self-Delusion*

Jia Tolentino

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## Аннотация

From one of the brightest young chroniclers of US culture comes this dazzling collection of essays on the internet, the self, feminism and politicsWe are living in the era of the self, in an era of malleable truth and widespread personal and political delusion. In these nine interlinked essays, Jia Tolentino, the New Yorker's brightest young talent, explores her own coming of age in this warped and confusing landscape.From the rise of the internet to her own appearance on an early reality TV show; from her experiences of ecstasy – both religious and chemical – to her uneasy engagement with our culture's endless drive towards 'self-optimisation'; from the phenomenon of the successful American scammer to her generation's obsession with extravagant weddings, Jia Tolentino writes with style, humour and a fierce clarity about these strangest of times.Following in the footsteps of American luminaries such as Susan Sontag, Joan Didion and Rebecca Solnit, yet with a voice and vision all her own, Jia Tolentino writes with a rare gift for elucidating nuance and complexity, coupled with a disarming warmth. This debut collection of her essays announces her exactly the sort of voice we need to hear from right now – and for many years to come.

# Содержание

# TRICK MIRROR
# REFLECTIONS ON SELF-DELUSION

**Jia Tolentino**

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# Dedication

For my parents

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# Introduction

I wrote this book between the spring of 2017 and the fall of 2018—a period during which American identity, culture, technology, politics, and discourse seemed to coalesce into an unbearable supernova of perpetually escalating conflict, a stretch of time when daily experience seemed both like a stopped elevator and an endless state-fair ride, when many of us regularly found ourselves thinking that everything had gotten as bad as we could possibly imagine, after which, of course, things always got worse.

Throughout this period, I found that I could hardly trust anything that I was thinking. A doubt that always hovers in the back of my mind intensified: that whatever conclusions I might reach about myself, my life, and my environment are just as likely to be diametrically wrong as they are to be right. This suspicion is hard for me to articulate closely, in part because I usually extinguish it by writing. When I feel confused about something, I write about it until I turn into the person who shows up on paper: a person who is plausibly trustworthy, intuitive, and clear.

It's exactly this habit—or compulsion—that makes me suspect that I am fooling myself. If I were, in fact, the calm person who shows up on paper, why would I always need to hammer out a narrative that gets me there? I've been telling myself that I wrote

this book because I was confused after the election, because confusion sits at odds to my temperament, because writing is my only strategy for making this conflict go away. I'm convinced by this story, even as I can see its photonegative: I wrote this book because I am always confused, because I can never be sure of anything, and because I am drawn to any mechanism that directs me away from that truth. Writing is either a way to shed my self-delusions or a way to develop them. A well-practiced, conclusive narrative is usually a dubious one: that a person is "not into drama," or that America needs to be made great again, or that America is already great.

These essays are about the spheres of public imagination that have shaped my understanding of myself, of this country, and of this era. One is about the internet. Another is about "optimization," and the rise of athleisure as late-capitalist fetishwear, and the endlessly proliferating applications of the idea that women's bodies should increase their market performance over time. There's an essay about drugs and religion and the bridge that ecstasy forms between them; another about scamming as the definitive millennial ethos; another about the literary heroine's journey from brave girl to depressed teenager to bitter adult woman who's possibly dead. One essay is about my stint as a teenage reality TV contestant. One is about sex and race and power at the University of Virginia, my alma mater, where a series of convincing stories have exacted enormous hidden costs. The final two are about the feminist obsession with "difficult"

women and about the slow-burning insanity that I aquired in my twenties while attending what felt like several thousand weddings per year. These are the prisms through which I have come to know myself. In this book, I tried to undo their acts of refraction. I wanted to see the way I would see in a mirror. It's possible I painted an elaborate mural instead.

But that's fine. The last few years have taught me to suspend my desire for a conclusion, to assume that nothing is static and that renegotiation will be perpetual, to hope primarily that little truths will keep emerging in time. While I was writing this, a stranger tweeted an excerpt of a *Jezebel* piece I wrote in 2015, highlighting a sentence about what women seemed to want from feminist websites—a "trick mirror that carries the illusion of flawlessness as well as the self-flagellating option of constantly finding fault." I had not remembered using that phrase when I came up with a book title, and I had not understood, when I was writing that *Jezebel* piece, that that line was also an explanation of something more personal. I began to realize that all my life I've been leaving myself breadcrumbs. It didn't matter that I didn't always know what I was walking toward. It was worthwhile, I told myself, just trying to see clearly, even if it took me years to understand what I was trying to see.

# The I in the Internet

In the beginning the internet seemed good. “I was in love with the internet the first time I used it at my dad’s office and thought it was the ULTIMATE COOL,” I wrote, when I was ten, on an Angelfire subpage titled “The Story of How Jia Got Her Web Addiction.” In a text box superimposed on a hideous violet background, I continued:

But that was in third grade and all I was doing was going to Beanie Baby sites. Having an old, icky bicky computer at home, we didn’t have the Internet. Even AOL seemed like a far-off dream. Then we got a new top-o’-the-line computer in spring break ’99, and of course it came with all that demo stuff. So I finally had AOL and I was completely amazed at the marvel of having a profile and chatting and IMS!!

Then, I wrote, I discovered personal webpages. (“I was astonished!”) I learned HTML and “little Javascript trickies.” I built my own site on the beginner-hosting site Expage, choosing pastel colors and then switching to a “starry night theme.” Then I ran out of space, so I “decided to move to Angelfire. Wow.” I learned how to make my own graphics. “This was all in the course of four months,” I wrote, marveling at how quickly my ten-year-old internet citizenry was evolving. I had recently revisited the sites that had once inspired me, and realized “how much of an idiot I was to be wowed by *that*.”

I have no memory of inadvertently starting this essay two decades ago, or of making this Angelfire subpage, which I found while hunting for early traces of myself on the internet. It's now eroded to its skeleton: its landing page, titled "THE VERY BEST," features a sepia-toned photo of Andie from *Dawson's Creek* and a dead link to a new site called "THE FROSTED FIELD," which is "BETTER!" There's a page dedicated to a blinking mouse GIF named Susie, and a "Cool Lyrics Page" with a scrolling banner and the lyrics to Smash Mouth's "All Star," Shania Twain's "Man! I Feel Like a Woman!" and the TLC diss track "No Pigeons," by Sporty Thievz. On an FAQ page—there was an FAQ page—I write that I had to close down my customizable cartoon-doll section, as "the response has been enormous."

It appears that I built and used this Angelfire site over just a few months in 1999, immediately after my parents got a computer. My insane FAQ page specifies that the site was started in June, and a page titled "Journal"—which proclaims, "I am going to be completely honest about my life, although I won't go too deeply into personal thoughts, though"—features entries only from October. One entry begins: "It's so HOT outside and I can't count the times acorns have fallen on my head, maybe from exhaustion." Later on, I write, rather prophetically: "I'm going insane! I literally am addicted to the web!"

In 1999, it felt different to spend all day on the internet. This was true for everyone, not just for ten-year-olds: this was

the *You've Got Mail* era, when it seemed that the very worst thing that could happen online was that you might fall in love with your business rival. Throughout the eighties and nineties, people had been gathering on the internet in open forums, drawn, like butterflies, to the puddles and blossoms of other people's curiosity and expertise. Self-regulated newsgroups like Usenet cultivated lively and relatively civil discussion about space exploration, meteorology, recipes, rare albums. Users gave advice, answered questions, made friendships, and wondered what this new internet would become.

Because there were so few search engines and no centralized social platforms, discovery on the early internet took place mainly in private, and pleasure existed as its own solitary reward. A 1995 book called *You Can Surf the Net!* listed sites where you could read movie reviews or learn about martial arts. It urged readers to follow basic etiquette (don't use all caps; don't waste other people's expensive bandwidth with overly long posts) and encouraged them to feel comfortable in this new world ("Don't worry," the author advised. "You have to *really* mess up to get flamed."). Around this time, GeoCities began offering personal website hosting for dads who wanted to put up their own golfing sites or kids who built glittery, blinking shrines to Tolkien or Ricky Martin or unicorns, most capped off with a primitive guest book and a green-and-black visitor counter. GeoCities, like the internet itself, was clumsy, ugly, only half functional, and organized into neighborhoods: /area51/ was for sci-fi, /

westhollywood/ for LGBTQ life, /enchantedforest/ for children, /petsburgh/ for pets. If you left GeoCities, you could walk around other streets in this ever-expanding village of curiosities. You could stroll through Expage or Angelfire, as I did, and pause on the thoroughfare where the tiny cartoon hamsters danced. There was an emergent aesthetic—blinking text, crude animation. If you found something you liked, if you wanted to spend more time in any of these neighborhoods, you could build your own house from HTML frames and start decorating.

This period of the internet has been labeled Web 1.0—a name that works backward from the term Web 2.0, which was coined by the writer and user-experience designer Darcy DiNucci in an article called "Fragmented Future," published in 1999. "The Web we know now," she wrote, "which loads into a browser window in essentially static screenfuls, is only an embryo of the Web to come. The first glimmerings of Web 2.0 are beginning to appear … The Web will be understood not as screenfuls of texts and graphics but as a transport mechanism, the ether through which interactivity happens." On Web 2.0, the structures would be dynamic, she predicted: instead of houses, websites would be portals, through which an ever-changing stream of activity —status updates, photos—could be displayed. What you did on the internet would become intertwined with what everyone else did, and the things other people liked would become the things that you would see. Web 2.0 platforms like Blogger and Myspace made it possible for people who had merely been

taking in the sights to start generating their own personalized and constantly changing scenery. As more people began to register their existence digitally, a pastime turned into an imperative: you had to register yourself digitally to exist.

In a *New Yorker* piece from November 2000, Rebecca Mead profiled Meg Hourihan, an early blogger who went by Megnut. In just the prior eighteen months, Mead observed, the number of "weblogs" had gone from fifty to several thousand, and blogs like Megnut were drawing thousands of visitors per day. This new internet was social ("a blog consists primarily of links to other Web sites and commentary about those links") in a way that centered on individual identity (Megnut's readers knew that she wished there were better fish tacos in San Francisco, and that she was a feminist, and that she was close with her mom). The blogosphere was also full of mutual transactions, which tended to echo and escalate. The "main audience for blogs is other bloggers," Mead wrote. Etiquette required that, "if someone blogs your blog, you blog his blog back."

Through the emergence of blogging, personal lives were becoming public domain, and social incentives—to be liked, to be seen—were becoming economic ones. The mechanisms of internet exposure began to seem like a viable foundation for a career. Hourihan cofounded Blogger with Evan Williams, who later cofounded Twitter. JenniCam, founded in 1996 when the college student Jennifer Ringley started broadcasting webcam photos from her dorm room, attracted at one point up to four

million daily visitors, some of whom paid a subscription fee for quicker-loading images. The internet, in promising a potentially unlimited audience, began to seem like the natural home of self-expression. In one blog post, Megnut's boyfriend, the blogger Jason Kottke, asked himself why he didn't just write his thoughts down in private. "Somehow, that seems strange to me though," he wrote. "The Web is the place for you to express your thoughts and feelings and such. To put those things elsewhere seems absurd."

Every day, more people agreed with him. The call of self-expression turned the village of the internet into a city, which expanded at time-lapse speed, social connections bristling like neurons in every direction. At ten, I was clicking around a web ring to check out other Angelfire sites full of animal GIFs and Smash Mouth trivia. At twelve, I was writing five hundred words a day on a public LiveJournal. At fifteen, I was uploading photos of myself in a miniskirt on Myspace. By twenty-five, my job was to write things that would attract, ideally, a hundred thousand strangers per post. Now I'm thirty, and most of my life is inextricable from the internet, and its mazes of incessant forced connection—this feverish, electric, unlivable hell.

As with the transition between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0, the curdling of the social internet happened slowly and then all at once. The tipping point, I'd guess, was around 2012. People were losing excitement about the internet, starting to articulate a set of new truisms. Facebook had become tedious, trivial, exhausting. Instagram seemed better, but would soon reveal

its underlying function as a three-ring circus of happiness and popularity and success. Twitter, for all its discursive promise, was where everyone tweeted complaints at airlines and bitched about articles that had been commissioned to make people bitch. The dream of a better, truer self on the internet was slipping away. Where we had once been free to be ourselves online, we were now *chained* to ourselves online, and this made us self-conscious. Platforms that promised connection began inducing mass alienation. The freedom promised by the internet started to seem like something whose greatest potential lay in the realm of misuse.

Even as we became increasingly sad and ugly on the internet, the mirage of the better online self continued to glimmer. As a medium, the internet is defined by a built-in performance incentive. In real life, you can walk around living life and be visible to other people. But you can't just walk around and be visible on the internet—for anyone to see you, you have to *act*. You have to communicate in order to maintain an internet presence. And, because the internet's central platforms are built around personal profiles, it can seem—first at a mechanical level, and later on as an encoded instinct—like the main purpose of this communication is to make yourself look good. Online reward mechanisms beg to substitute for offline ones, and then overtake them. This is why everyone tries to look so hot and well-traveled on Instagram; this is why everyone seems so smug and triumphant on Facebook; this is why, on Twitter, making a

righteous political statement has come to seem, for many people, like a political good in itself.

This practice is often called "virtue signaling," a term most often used by conservatives criticizing the left. But virtue signaling is a bipartisan, even apolitical action. Twitter is overrun with dramatic pledges of allegiance to the Second Amendment that function as intra-right virtue signaling, and it can be something like virtue signaling when people post the suicide hotline after a celebrity death. Few of us are totally immune to the practice, as it intersects with real desire for political integrity. Posting photos from a protest against border family separation, as I did while writing this, is a microscopically meaningful action, an expression of genuine principle, and also, inescapably, some sort of attempt to signal that I am good.

Taken to its extreme, virtue signaling has driven people on the left to some truly unhinged behavior. A legendary case occurred in June 2016, after a two-year-old was killed at a Disney resort —dragged off by an alligator while playing in a no-swimming-allowed lagoon. A woman, who had accumulated ten thousand Twitter followers with her posts about social justice, saw an opportunity and tweeted, magnificently, "I'm so finished with white men's entitlement lately that I'm really not sad about a 2yo being eaten by a gator because his daddy ignored signs." (She was then pilloried by people who chose to demonstrate their own moral superiority through mockery—as I am doing here, too.) A similar tweet made the rounds in early 2018 after a sweet story

went viral: a large white seabird named Nigel had died next to the concrete decoy bird to whom he had devoted himself for years. An outraged writer tweeted, "Even concrete birds do not owe you affection, Nigel," and wrote a long Facebook post arguing that Nigel's courtship of the fake bird exemplified … *rape culture*. "I'm available to write the feminist perspective on Nigel the gannet's non-tragic death should anyone wish to pay me," she added, underneath the original tweet, which received more than a thousand likes. These deranged takes, and their unnerving proximity to online monetization, are case studies in the way that our world—digitally mediated, utterly consumed by capitalism—makes communication about morality very easy but makes actual moral living very hard. You don't end up using a news story about a dead toddler as a peg for white entitlement without a society in which the discourse of righteousness occupies far more public attention than the conditions that necessitate righteousness in the first place.

On the right, the online performance of political identity has been even wilder. In 2017, the social-media-savvy youth conservative group Turning Point USA staged a protest at Kent State University featuring a student who put on a diaper to demonstrate that "safe spaces were for babies." (It went viral, as intended, but not in the way TPUSA wanted—the protest was uniformly roasted, with one Twitter user slapping the logo of the porn site Brazzers on a photo of the diaper boy, and the Kent State TPUSA campus coordinator resigned.) It has

also been infinitely more consequential, beginning in 2014, with a campaign that became a template for right-wing internet-political action, when a large group of young misogynists came together in the event now known as Gamergate.

The issue at hand was, ostensibly, a female game designer accused of sleeping with a journalist for favorable coverage. She, along with a set of feminist game critics and writers, received an onslaught of rape threats, death threats, and other forms of harassment, all concealed under the banner of free speech and "ethics in games journalism." The Gamergaters—estimated by *Deadspin* to number around ten thousand people—would mostly deny this harassment, either parroting in bad faith or fooling themselves into believing the argument that Gamergate was actually about noble ideals. Gawker Media, *Deadspin*'s parent company, itself became a target, in part because of its own aggressive disdain toward the Gamergaters: the company lost seven figures in revenue after its advertisers were brought into the maelstrom.

In 2016, a similar fiasco made national news in Pizzagate, after a few rabid internet denizens decided they'd found coded messages about child sex slavery in the advertising of a pizza shop associated with Hillary Clinton's campaign. This theory was disseminated all over the far-right internet, leading to an extended attack on DC's Comet Ping Pong pizzeria and everyone associated with the restaurant—all in the name of combating pedophilia—that culminated in a man walking into Comet Ping

Pong and firing a gun. (Later on, the same faction would jump to the defense of Roy Moore, the Republican nominee for the Senate who was accused of sexually assaulting teenagers.) The over-woke left could only dream of this ability to weaponize a sense of righteousness. Even the militant antifascist movement, known as antifa, is routinely disowned by liberal centrists, despite the fact that the antifa movement is rooted in a long European tradition of Nazi resistance rather than a nascent constellation of radically paranoid message boards and YouTube channels. The worldview of the Gamergaters and Pizzagaters was actualized and to a large extent vindicated in the 2016 election—an event that strongly suggested that the worst things about the internet were now *determining,* rather than reflecting, the worst things about offline life.

Mass media always determines the shape of politics and culture. The Bush era is inextricable from the failures of cable news; the executive overreaches of the Obama years were obscured by the internet's magnification of personality and performance; Trump's rise to power is inseparable from the existence of social networks that must continually aggravate their users in order to continue making money. But lately I've been wondering how everything got so *intimately* terrible, and why, exactly, we keep playing along. How did a huge number of people begin spending the bulk of our disappearing free time in an openly torturous environment? How did the internet get so bad, so confining, so inescapably personal, so politically

determinative—and why are all those questions asking the same thing?

I'll admit that I'm not sure that this inquiry is even productive. The internet reminds us on a daily basis that it is not at all rewarding to become aware of problems that you have no reasonable hope of solving. And, more important, the internet already is what it is. It has already become the central organ of contemporary life. It has already rewired the brains of its users, returning us to a state of primitive hyperawareness and distraction while overloading us with much more sensory input than was ever possible in primitive times. It has already built an ecosystem that runs on exploiting attention and monetizing the self. Even if you avoid the internet completely—my partner does: he thought #tbt meant "truth be told" for ages—you still live in the world that this internet has created, a world in which selfhood has become capitalism's last natural resource, a world whose terms are set by centralized platforms that have deliberately established themselves as near-impossible to regulate or control.

The internet is also in large part inextricable from life's pleasures: our friends, our families, our communities, our pursuits of happiness, and—sometimes, if we're lucky—our work. In part out of a desire to preserve what's worthwhile from the decay that surrounds it, I've been thinking about five intersecting problems: first, how the internet is built to distend our sense of identity; second, how it encourages us to overvalue our opinions; third, how it maximizes our sense of opposition;

fourth, how it cheapens our understanding of solidarity; and, finally, how it destroys our sense of scale.

In 1959, the sociologist Erving Goffman laid out a theory of identity that revolved around playacting. In every human interaction, he wrote in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* a person must put on a sort of performance, create an impression for an audience. The performance might be calculated, as with the man at a job interview who's practiced every answer; it might be unconscious, as with the man who's gone on so many interviews that he naturally performs as expected; it might be automatic, as with the man who creates the correct impression primarily because he is an upper-middle-class white man with an MBA. A performer might be fully taken in by his own performance—he might actually believe that his biggest flaw is "perfectionism"—or he might know that his act is a sham. But no matter what, he's performing. Even if he stops *trying* to perform, he still has an audience, his actions still create an effect. "All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify," Goffman wrote.

To communicate an identity requires some degree of self-delusion. A performer, in order to be convincing, must conceal "the discreditable facts that he has had to learn about the performance; in everyday terms, there will be things he knows, or has known, that he will not be able to tell himself." The interviewee, for example, avoids thinking about the fact that his biggest flaw actually involves drinking at the office. A friend

sitting across from you at dinner, called to play therapist for your trivial romantic hang-ups, has to pretend to herself that she wouldn't rather just go home and get in bed to read Barbara Pym. No audience has to be physically present for a performer to engage in this sort of selective concealment: a woman, home alone for the weekend, might scrub the baseboards and watch nature documentaries even though she'd rather trash the place, buy an eight ball, and have a Craigslist orgy. People often make faces, in private, in front of bathroom mirrors, to convince themselves of their own attractiveness. The "lively belief that an unseen audience is present," Goffman writes, can have a significant effect.

Offline, there are forms of relief built into this process. Audiences change over—the performance you stage at a job interview is different from the one you stage at a restaurant later for a friend's birthday, which is different from the one you stage for a partner at home. At home, you might feel as if you could stop performing altogether; within Goffman's dramaturgical framework, you might feel as if you had made it backstage. Goffman observed that we need both an audience to witness our performances as well as a backstage area where we can relax, often in the company of "teammates" who had been performing alongside us. Think of coworkers at the bar after they've delivered a big sales pitch, or a bride and groom in their hotel room after the wedding reception: everyone may still be performing, but they *feel* at ease, unguarded, alone. Ideally,

the outside audience has believed the prior performance. The wedding guests think they've actually just seen a pair of flawless, blissful newlyweds, and the potential backers think they've met a group of geniuses who are going to make everyone very rich. "But this imputation—this self—is a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a cause of it," Goffman writes. The self is not a fixed, organic thing, but a dramatic effect that emerges from a performance. This effect can be believed or disbelieved at will.

Online—assuming you buy this framework—the system metastasizes into a wreck. The presentation of self in everyday internet still corresponds to Goffman's playacting metaphor: there are stages, there is an audience. But the internet adds a host of other, nightmarish metaphorical structures: the mirror, the echo, the panopticon. As we move about the internet, our personal data is tracked, recorded, and resold by a series of corporations—a regime of involuntary technological surveillance, which subconsciously decreases our resistance to the practice of *voluntary* self-surveillance on social media. If we think about buying something, it follows us around everywhere. We can, and probably do, limit our online activity to websites that further reinforce our own sense of identity, each of us reading things written for people just like us. On social media platforms, everything we see corresponds to our conscious choices and algorithmically guided preferences, and all news and culture and interpersonal interaction are filtered through the home base of

the profile. The everyday madness perpetuated by the internet is the madness of this architecture, which positions personal identity as the center of the universe. It's as if we've been placed on a lookout that oversees the entire world and given a pair of binoculars that makes everything look like our own reflection. Through social media, many people have quickly come to view all new information as a sort of direct commentary on *who they are*.

This system persists because it is profitable. As Tim Wu writes in *The Attention Merchants,* commerce has been slowly permeating human existence—entering our city streets in the nineteenth century through billboards and posters, then our homes in the twentieth century through radio and TV. Now, in the twenty-first century, in what appears to be something of a final stage, commerce has filtered into our identities and relationships. We have generated billions of dollars for social media platforms through our desire—and then through a subsequent, escalating economic and cultural requirement—to replicate for the internet who we know, who we think we are, who we want to be.

Selfhood buckles under the weight of this commercial importance. In physical spaces, there's a limited audience and time span for every performance. Online, your audience can hypothetically keep expanding forever, and the performance never has to end. (You can essentially be on a job interview in perpetuity.) In real life, the success or failure of each

individual performance often plays out in the form of concrete, physical action—you get invited over for dinner, or you lose the friendship, or you get the job. Online, performance is mostly arrested in the nebulous realm of sentiment, through an unbroken stream of hearts and likes and eyeballs, aggregated in numbers attached to your name. Worst of all, there's essentially no backstage on the internet; where the offline audience necessarily empties out and changes over, the online audience never has to leave. The version of you that posts memes and selfies for your pre-cal classmates might end up sparring with the Trump administration after a school shooting, as happened to the Parkland kids—some of whom became so famous that they will never be allowed to drop the veneer of performance again. The self that traded jokes with white supremacists on Twitter is the self that might get hired, and then fired, by *The New York Times,* as happened to Quinn Norton in 2018. (Or, in the case of Sarah Jeong, the self that made jokes *about* white people might get Gamergated after being hired at the *Times* a few months thereafter.) People who maintain a public internet profile are building a self that can be viewed simultaneously by their mom, their boss, their potential future bosses, their eleven-year-old nephew, their past and future sex partners, their relatives who loathe their politics, as well as anyone who cares to look for any possible reason. Identity, according to Goffman, is a series of claims and promises. On the internet, a highly functional person is one who can promise everything to an indefinitely increasing

audience at all times.

Incidents like Gamergate are partly a response to these conditions of hyper-visibility. The rise of trolling, and its ethos of disrespect and anonymity, has been so forceful in part because the internet's insistence on consistent, approval-worthy identity is so strong. In particular, the misogyny embedded in trolling reflects the way women—who, as John Berger wrote, have always been required to maintain an external awareness of their own identity—often navigate these online conditions so profitably. It's the self-calibration that I learned as a girl, as a woman, that has helped me capitalize on "having" to be online. My only experience of the world has been one in which personal appeal is paramount and self-exposure is encouraged; this legitimately unfortunate paradigm, inhabited first by women and now generalized to the entire internet, is what trolls loathe and actively repudiate. They destabilize an internet built on transparency and likability. They pull us back toward the chaotic and the unknown.

Of course, there are many better ways of making the argument against hyper-visibility than trolling. As Werner Herzog told *GQ*, in 2011, speaking about psychoanalysis: "We have to have our dark corners and the unexplained. We will become uninhabitable in a way an apartment will become uninhabitable if you illuminate every single dark corner and under the table and wherever—you cannot live in a house like this anymore."

The first time I was ever paid to publish anything, it was 2013,

the end of the blog era. Trying to make a living as a writer with the internet as a standing precondition of my livelihood has given me some professional motivation to stay active on social media, making my work and personality and face and political leanings and dog photos into a continually updated record that anyone can see. In doing this, I have sometimes felt the same sort of unease that washed over me when I was a cheerleader and learned how to convincingly fake happiness at football games—the feeling of acting as if conditions are fun and normal and worthwhile in the hopes that they will just magically become so. To try to write online, more specifically, is to operate on a set of assumptions that are already dubious when limited to writers and even more questionable when turned into a categorical imperative for everyone on the internet: the assumption that speech has an impact, that it's something like action; the assumption that it's fine or helpful or even *ideal* to be constantly writing down what you think.

I have benefited, I mean, from the internet's unhealthy focus on opinion. This focus is rooted in the way the internet generally minimizes the need for physical action: you don't have to do much of anything but sit behind a screen to live an acceptable, possibly valorized, twenty-first-century life. The internet can feel like an astonishingly direct line to reality—click if you want something and it'll show up at your door two hours later; a series of tweets goes viral after a tragedy and soon there's a nationwide high school walkout—but it can also feel like a shunt diverting

our energy *away* from action, leaving the real-world sphere to the people who already control it, keeping us busy figuring out the precisely correct way of explaining our lives. In the run-up to the 2016 election and increasingly so afterward, I started to feel that there was almost nothing I could do about ninety-five percent of the things I cared about other than form an opinion—and that the conditions that allowed me to live in mild everyday hysterics about an unlimited supply of terrible information were related to the conditions that were, at the same time, consolidating power, sucking wealth upward, far outside my grasp.

I don't mean to be naïvely fatalistic, to act like *nothing* can be done about *anything*. People are making the world better through concrete footwork every day. (Not me—I'm too busy sitting in front of the internet!) But their time and labor, too, has been devalued and stolen by the voracious form of capitalism that drives the internet, and which the internet drives in turn. There is less time these days for anything other than economic survival. The internet has moved seamlessly into the interstices of this situation, redistributing our minimum free time into unsatisfying micro-installments, spread throughout the day. In the absence of time to physically and politically engage with our community the way many of us want to, the internet provides a cheap substitute: it gives us brief moments of pleasure and connection, tied up in the opportunity to constantly listen and speak. Under these circumstances, opinion stops being a first step toward something and starts seeming like an end in itself.

I started thinking about this when I was working as an editor at *Jezebel,* in 2014. I spent a lot of the day reading headlines on women's websites, most of which had by then adopted a feminist slant. In this realm, speech was constantly framed as a sort of intensely satisfying action: you'd get headlines like "Miley Cyrus Spoke Out About Gender Fluidity on Snapchat and It Was Everything" or "Amy Schumer's Speech About Body Confidence at the Women's Magazine Awards Ceremony Will Have You in Tears." Forming an opinion was also framed as a sort of action: blog posts offered people guidance on how to feel about online controversies or particular scenes on TV. Even identity itself seemed to take on these valences. Merely to exist as a feminist was to be doing some important work. These ideas have intensified and gotten more complicated in the Trump era, in which, on the one hand, people like me are busy expressing anguish online and mostly affecting nothing, and on the other, more actual and rapid change has come from the internet than ever before. In the turbulence that followed the Harvey Weinstein revelations, women's speech swayed public opinion and led directly to change. People with power were forced to reckon with their ethics; harassers and abusers were pushed out of their jobs. But even in this narrative, the importance of action was subtly elided. People wrote about women "speaking out" with prayerful reverence, as if speech itself could bring women freedom—as if better policies and economic redistribution and true investment from men weren't necessary, too.

Goffman observes the difference between doing something and *expressing* the doing of something, between feeling something and conveying a feeling. "The representation of an activity will vary in some degree from the activity itself and therefore inevitably misrepresent it," Goffman writes. (Take the experience of enjoying a sunset versus the experience of communicating to an audience that you're enjoying a sunset, for example.) The internet is engineered for this sort of misrepresentation; it's designed to encourage us to create certain impressions rather than allowing these impressions to arise "as an incidental by-product of [our] activity." This is why, with the internet, it's so easy to stop trying to be decent, or reasonable, or politically engaged—and start trying merely to *seem* so.

As the value of speech inflates even further in the online attention economy, this problem only gets worse. I don't know what to do with the fact that I myself continue to benefit from all this: that my career is possible in large part because of the way the internet collapses identity, opinion, and action—and that I, as a writer whose work is mostly critical and often written in first person, have some inherent stake in justifying the dubious practice of spending all day trying to figure out what you think. As a reader, of course, I'm grateful for people who help me understand things, and I'm glad that they—and I—can be paid to do so. I am glad, too, for the way the internet has given an audience to writers who previously might have been shut out of the industry, or kept on its sidelines: I'm one of them. But you

will never catch me arguing that professional opinion-havers in the age of the internet are, on the whole, a force for good.

In April 2017, the *New York Times* brought a millennial writer named Bari Weiss onto its opinion section as both a writer and an editor. Weiss had graduated from Columbia, and had worked as an editor at *Tablet* and then at *The Wall Street Journal*. She leaned conservative, with a Zionist streak. At Columbia, she had cofounded a group called Columbians for Academic Freedom, which, amongst other things, worked to pressure the university into punishing a pro-Palestinian professor who had made her feel "intimidated," she told NPR in 2005.

At the *Times,* Weiss immediately began launching columns from a rhetorical and political standpoint of high-strung defensiveness, disguised with a veneer of levelheaded nonchalance. "Victimhood, in the intersectional way of seeing the world, is akin to sainthood; power and privilege are profane," she wrote—a bit of elegant phrasing in a piece that warned the public of the rampant anti-Semitism evinced, apparently, by a minor activist clusterfuck, in which the organizers of the Chicago Dyke March banned Star of David flags. She wrote a column slamming the organizers of the Women's March over a few social media posts expressing support for Assata Shakur and Louis Farrakhan. This, she argued, was troubling evidence that progressives, just like conservatives, were unable to police their internal hate. (Both-sides arguments like this are always appealing to people who wish to seem both contrarian and

intellectually superior; this particular one required ignoring the fact that liberals remained obsessed with "civility" while the Republican president was actively endorsing violence at every turn. Later on, when *Tablet* published an investigation into the Women's March organizers who maintained disconcerting ties to the Nation of Islam, these organizers were criticized by liberals, who truly do not lack the self-policing instinct; in large part because the left does take hate seriously, the Women's March effectively splintered into two groups.) Often, Weiss's columns featured aggrieved predictions of how her bold, independent thinking would make her opponents go crazy and attack her. "I will inevitably get called a racist," she proclaimed in one column, titled "Three Cheers for Cultural Appropriation." "I'll be accused of siding with the alt-right or tarred as Islamophobic," she wrote in another column. Well, sure.

Though Weiss often argued that people should get more comfortable with those who offended or disagreed with them, she seemed mostly unable to take her own advice. During the Winter Olympics in 2018, she watched the figure skater Mirai Nagasu land a triple axel—the first American woman to do so in Olympic competition—and tweeted, in a very funny attempt at a compliment, "Immigrants: they get the job done." Because Nagasu was actually born in California, Weiss was immediately shouted down. This is what happens online when you do something offensive: when I worked at *Jezebel,* people shouted me down on Twitter about five times a year over

things I had written or edited, and sometimes outlets published pieces about our mistakes. This was often overwhelming and unpleasant, but it was always useful. Weiss, for her part, tweeted that the people calling her racist tweet racist were a "sign of civilization's end." A couple of weeks later, she wrote a column called "We're All Fascists Now," arguing that angry liberals were creating a "moral flattening of the earth." At times it seems that Weiss's main strategy is to make an argument that's bad enough to attract criticism, and then to cherry-pick the worst of that criticism into the foundation for another bad argument. Her worldview requires the specter of a vast, angry, inferior mob.

It's of course true that there are vast, angry mobs on the internet. Jon Ronson wrote the book *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* about this in 2015. "We became keenly watchful for transgressions," he writes, describing the state of Twitter around 2012. "After a while it wasn't just transgressions we were keenly watchful for. It was misspeakings. Fury at the terribleness of other people had started to consume us a lot … In fact, it felt weird and empty when there *wasn't* anyone to be furious about. The days between shamings felt like days picking at fingernails, treading water." Web 2.0 had curdled; its organizing principle was shifting. The early internet had been constructed around lines of affinity, and whatever good spaces remain on the internet are still the product of affinity and openness. But when the internet moved to an organizing principle of *opposition,* much of what had formerly been surprising and rewarding and curious

became tedious, noxious, and grim.

This shift partly reflects basic social physics. Having a mutual enemy is a quick way to make a friend—we learn this as early as elementary school—and politically, it's much easier to organize people against something than it is to unite them in an affirmative vision. And, within the economy of attention, conflict always gets more people to look. Gawker Media thrived on antagonism: its flagship site made enemies of everyone; *Deadspin* targeted ESPN, *Jezebel* the world of women's magazines. There was a brief wave of sunny, saccharine, profitable internet content—the OMG era of *BuzzFeed,* the rise of sites like *Upworthy*—but it ended in 2014 or so. Today, on Facebook, the most-viewed political pages succeed because of a commitment to constant, aggressive, often unhinged opposition. Beloved, oddly warmhearted websites like *The Awl, The Toast,* and *Grantland* have all been shuttered; each closing has been a reminder that an open-ended, affinity-based, generative online identity is hard to keep alive.

That opposition looms so large on the internet can be good and useful and even revolutionary. Because of the internet's tilt toward decontextualization and frictionlessness, a person on social media can seem to matter as much as whatever he's set himself against. Opponents can meet on suddenly (if temporarily) even ground. *Gawker* covered the accusations against Louis C.K. and Bill Cosby years before the mainstream media would take sexual misconduct seriously. The Arab

Spring, Black Lives Matter, and the movement against the Dakota Access Pipeline challenged and overturned long-standing hierarchies through the strategic deployment of social media. The Parkland teenagers were able to position themselves as opponents of the entire GOP.

But the appearance of a more level playing field is not the fact of it, and everything that happens on the internet bounces and refracts. At the same time that ideologies that lead toward equality and freedom have gained power through the internet's open discourse, existing power structures have solidified through a vicious (and very online) opposition to this encroachment. In her 2017 book, *Kill All Normies*—a project of accounting for the "online battles that may otherwise be forgotten but have nevertheless shaped culture and ideas in a profound way"—the writer Angela Nagle argues that the alt-right coalesced in response to increasing cultural power on the left. Gamergate, she writes, brought together a "strange vanguard of teenage gamers, pseudonymous swastika-posting anime lovers, ironic *South Park* conservatives, anti-feminist pranksters, nerdish harassers and meme-making trolls" to form a united front against the "earnestness and moral self-flattery of what felt like a tired liberal intellectual conformity." The obvious hole in the argument is the fact that what Nagle identifies as the center of this liberal conformity—college activist movements, obscure Tumblr accounts about mental health and arcane sexualities—are frequently derided by liberals, and have never been nearly

as powerful as those who detest them would like to think. The Gamergaters' worldview was not actually endangered; they just had to *believe* it was—or to pretend it was, and wait for a purportedly leftist writer to affirm them—in order to lash out and remind everyone what they could do.

Many Gamergaters cut their expressive teeth on 4chan, a message board that adopted as one of its mottos the phrase "There are no girls on the internet." "This rule does not mean what you think it means," wrote one 4chan poster, who went, as most of them did, by the username Anonymous. "In real life, people like you for being a girl. They want to fuck you, so they pay attention to you and they pretend what you have to say is interesting, or that you are smart or clever. On the Internet, we don't have the chance to fuck you. This means the advantage of being a 'girl' does not exist. You don't get a bonus to conversation just because I'd like to put my cock in you." He explained that women could get their unfair social advantage back by posting photos of their tits on the message board: "This is, and should be, degrading for you."

Here was the opposition principle in action. Through identifying the effects of women's systemic objectification as some sort of vagina-supremacist witchcraft, the men that congregated on 4chan gained an identity, and a useful common enemy. Many of these men *had,* likely, experienced consequences related to the "liberal intellectual conformity" that is popular feminism: as the sexual marketplace began to equalize,

they suddenly found themselves unable to obtain sex by default. Rather than work toward other forms of self-actualization—or attempt to make themselves genuinely desirable, in the same way that women have been socialized to do at great expense and with great sincerity for all time—they established a group identity that centered on anti-woman virulence, on telling women who happened to stumble across 4chan that "the only interesting thing about you is your naked body. tl;dr: tits or GET THE FUCK OUT."

In the same way that it behooved these trolls to credit women with a maximum of power that they did not actually possess, it sometimes behooved women, on the internet, to do the same when they spoke about trolls. At some points while I worked at *Jezebel,* it would have been easy to enter into one of these situations myself. Let's say a bunch of trolls sent me threatening emails—an experience that wasn't exactly common, as I have been "lucky," but wasn't rare enough to surprise me. The economy of online attention would suggest that I write a column about those trolls, quote their emails, talk about how the experience of being threatened constitutes a definitive situation of being a woman in the world. (It would be acceptable for me to do this *even though* I have never been hacked or swatted or Gamergated, never had to move out of my house to a secure location, as so many other women have.) My column about trolling would, of course, attract an influx of trolling. Then, having proved my point, maybe I'd go on TV and talk about the

situation, and then I would get trolled even more, and then I could go on defining myself in reference to trolls forever, positioning them as inexorable and monstrous, and they would return the favor in the interest of their own ideological advancement, and this whole situation could continue until we all died.

There is a version of this mutual escalation that applies to any belief system, which brings me back to Bari Weiss and all the other writers who have fashioned themselves as brave contrarians, building entire arguments on random protests and harsh tweets, making themselves deeply dependent on the people who hate them, the people they hate. It's ridiculous, and at the same time, here I am writing this essay, doing the same thing. It is nearly impossible, today, to separate engagement from magnification. (Even declining to engage can turn into magnification: when people targeted in Pizzagate as Satanist pedophiles took their social media accounts private, the Pizzagaters took this as proof that they had been right.) Trolls and bad writers and the president know better than anyone: when you call someone terrible, you just end up promoting their work.

The political philosopher Sally Scholz separates solidarity into three categories. There's social solidarity, which is based on common experience; civic solidarity, which is based on moral obligation to a community; and political solidarity, which is based on a shared commitment to a cause. These forms of solidarity overlap, but they're distinct from one another. What's political, in other words, doesn't also have to be personal, at least

not in the sense of firsthand experience. You don't need to step in shit to understand what stepping in shit feels like. You don't need to have directly suffered at the hands of some injustice in order to be invested in bringing that injustice to an end.

But the internet brings the "I" into everything. The internet can make it seem that supporting someone means literally sharing in their experience—that solidarity is a matter of *identity* rather than politics or morality, and that it's best established at a point of maximum mutual vulnerability in everyday life. Under these terms, instead of expressing morally obvious solidarity with the struggle of black Americans under the police state or the plight of fat women who must roam the earth to purchase stylish and thoughtful clothing, the internet would encourage me to express solidarity through inserting my own identity. *Of course* I support the black struggle because *I,* myself, as a woman of Asian heritage, have *personally* been injured by white supremacy. (In fact, as an Asian woman, part of a minority group often deemed white-adjacent, I have benefited from American anti-blackness on just as many occasions.) *Of course* I understand the difficulty of shopping as a woman who is overlooked by the fashion industry because *I,* myself, have *also* somehow been marginalized by this industry. This framework, which centers the self in an expression of support for others, is not ideal.

The phenomenon in which people take more comfort in a sense of injury than a sense of freedom governs many situations where people are objectively *not* being victimized on a systematic

basis. For example, men's rights activists have developed a sense of solidarity around the absurd claim that men are second-class citizens. White nationalists have brought white people together through the idea that white people are endangered, specifically white men—this at a time when 91 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs are white men, when white people make up 90 percent of elected American officials and an overwhelming majority of top decision-makers in music, publishing, television, movies, and sports.

Conversely, and crucially, the dynamic also applies in situations where claims of vulnerability are legitimate and historically entrenched. The greatest moments of feminist solidarity in recent years have stemmed not from an affirmative vision but from articulating extreme versions of the low common denominator of male slight. These moments have been world-altering: #YesAllWomen, in 2014, was the response to Elliot Rodger's Isla Vista massacre, in which he killed six people and wounded fourteen in an attempt to exact revenge on women for rejecting him. Women responded to this story with a sense of nauseating recognition: mass violence is nearly always linked to violence toward women, and for women it is something approaching a universal experience to have placated a man out of the real fear that he will hurt you. In turn, some men responded with the entirely unnecessary reminder that "not all men" are like that. (I was once hit with "not all men" right after a stranger yelled something obscene at me; the guy I was with noted my

displeasure and helpfully reminded me that not all men are jerks.) Women began posting stories on Twitter and Facebook with #YesAllWomen to make an obvious but important point: not all men have made women fearful, but yes, all women have experienced fear because of men. #MeToo, in 2017, came in the weeks following the Harvey Weinstein revelations, as the floodgates opened and story after story after story rolled out about the subjugation women had experienced at the hands of powerful men. Against the normal forms of disbelief and rejection these stories meet with—it can't possibly be *that* bad; something about *her* telling *that* story seems suspicious—women anchored one another, establishing the breadth and inescapability of male abuse of power through speaking simultaneously and adding #MeToo.

In these cases, multiple types of solidarity seemed to naturally meld together. It was women's individual experiences of victimization that produced our widespread moral and political opposition to it. And at the same time, there was something about the hashtag itself—its design, and the ways of thinking that it affirms and solidifies—that both erased the variety of women's experiences and made it seem as if the crux of feminism was this articulation of vulnerability itself. A hashtag is specifically designed to remove a statement from context and to position it as part of an enormous singular thought, and a woman participating in one of these hashtags becomes visible at an inherently predictable moment of male aggression: the time her

boss jumped her, or the night a stranger followed her home. The rest of her life, which is usually far less predictable, remains unseen. Even as women have attempted to use #YesAllWomen and #MeToo to regain control of a narrative, these hashtags have at least partially reified the thing they're trying to eradicate: the way that womanhood can feel like a story of loss of control. They have made feminist solidarity and shared vulnerability seem inextricable, as if we were incapable of building solidarity around anything else. What we have in common is obviously essential, but it's the differences between women's stories—the factors that allow some to survive, and force others under—that illuminate the vectors that lead to a better world. And, because there is no room or requirement in a tweet to add a disclaimer about individual experience, and because hashtags subtly equate disconnected statements in a way that can't be controlled by those speaking, it has been even easier for #MeToo critics to claim that women must themselves think that going on a bad date is the same as being violently raped.

What's amazing is that things like hashtag design—these essentially ad hoc experiments in digital architecture—have shaped so much of our political discourse. Our world would be different if Anonymous hadn't been the default username on 4chan, or if every social media platform didn't center on the personal profile, or if YouTube algorithms didn't show viewers increasingly extreme content to retain their attention, or if hashtags and retweets simply didn't exist. It's because of

the hashtag, the retweet, and the profile that solidarity on the internet gets inextricably tangled up with visibility, identity, and self-promotion. It's telling that the most mainstream gestures of solidarity are pure representation, like viral reposts or avatar photos with cause-related filters, and meanwhile the *actual* mechanisms through which political solidarity is enacted, like strikes and boycotts, still exist on the fringe. The extremes of performative solidarity are all transparently embarrassing: a Christian internet personality urging other conservatives to tell Starbucks baristas that their name is "Merry Christmas," or Nev Schulman from the TV show *Catfish* taking a selfie with a hand over his heart in an elevator and captioning it "A real man shows his strength through patience and honor. This elevator is abuse free." (Schulman allegedly punched a girl in college.) The demonstrative celebration of black women on social media—white people tweeting "black women will save America" after elections, or Mark Ruffalo tweeting that he said a prayer and God answered as a black woman—often hints at a bizarre need on the part of white people to personally participate in an ideology of equality that ostensibly requires them to chill out. At one point in *The Presentation of Self,* Goffman writes that the audience's way of shaping a role for the performer can become more elaborate than the performance itself. This is what the online expression of solidarity sometimes feels like—a manner of listening so extreme and performative that it often turns into the show.

The final, and possibly most psychologically destructive,

distortion of the social internet is its distortion of scale. This is not an accident but an essential design feature: social media was constructed around the idea that a thing is important insofar as it is important to you. In an early internal memo about the creation of Facebook's News Feed, Mark Zuckerberg observed, already beyond parody, "A squirrel dying in front of your house may be more relevant to your interests right now than people dying in Africa." The idea was that social media would give us a fine-tuned sort of control over what we looked at. What resulted was a situation where we—first as individuals, and then inevitably as a collective—are essentially unable to exercise control at all. Facebook's goal of showing people only what they were interested in seeing resulted, within a decade, in the effective end of shared civic reality. And this choice, combined with the company's financial incentive to continually trigger heightened emotional responses in its users, ultimately solidified the current norm in news media consumption: today we mostly consume news that corresponds with our ideological alignment, which has been fine-tuned to make us feel self-righteous and also mad.

In *The Attention Merchants,* Tim Wu observes that technologies designed to increase control over our attention often have the opposite effect. He uses the TV remote control as one example. It made flipping through channels "practically nonvolitional," he writes, and put viewers in a "mental state not unlike that of a newborn or a reptile." On the internet, this dynamic has been automated and generalized in the form of

endlessly varied but somehow monotonous social media feeds—these addictive, numbing fire hoses of information that we aim at our brains for much of the day. In front of the timeline, as many critics have noted, we exhibit classic reward-seeking lab-rat behavior, the sort that's observed when lab rats are put in front of an unpredictable food dispenser. Rats will eventually stop pressing the lever if their device dispenses food regularly or not at all. But if the lever's rewards are rare and irregular, the rats will never stop pressing it. In other words, it is *essential* that social media is mostly unsatisfying. That is what keeps us scrolling, scrolling, pressing our lever over and over in the hopes of getting some fleeting sensation—some momentary rush of recognition, flattery, or rage.

Like many among us, I have become acutely conscious of the way my brain degrades when I strap it in to receive the full barrage of the internet—these unlimited channels, all constantly reloading with new information: births, deaths, boasts, bombings, jokes, job announcements, ads, warnings, complaints, confessions, and political disasters blitzing our frayed neurons in huge waves of information that pummel us and then are instantly replaced. This is an awful way to live, and it is wearing us down quickly. At the end of 2016, I wrote a blog post for *The New Yorker* about the cries of "worst year ever" that were then flooding the internet. There had been terrorist attacks all over the world, and the Pulse shooting in Orlando. David Bowie, Prince, and Muhammad Ali had died. More black men had been

executed by police who could not control their racist fear and hatred: Alton Sterling was killed in the Baton Rouge parking lot where he was selling CDs; Philando Castile was murdered as he reached for his legal-carry permit during a routine traffic stop. Five police officers were killed in Dallas at a protest against this police violence. Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. The North Pole was thirty-six degrees hotter than normal. Venezuela was collapsing; families starved in Yemen. In Aleppo, a seven-year-old girl named Bana Alabed was tweeting her fears of imminent death. And in front of this backdrop, there were all of *us*—our stupid selves, with our stupid frustrations, our lost baggage and delayed trains. It seemed to me that this sense of punishing oversaturation would persist no matter what was in the news. There was no limit to the amount of misfortune a person could take in via the internet, I wrote, and there was no way to calibrate this information correctly—no guidebook for how to expand our hearts to accommodate these simultaneous scales of human experience, no way to teach ourselves to separate the banal from the profound. The internet was dramatically increasing our ability to know about things, while our ability to *change* things stayed the same, or possibly shrank right in front of us. I had started to feel that the internet would only ever induce this cycle of heartbreak and hardening—a hyper-engagement that would make less sense every day.

But the worse the internet gets, the more we appear to crave it—the more it gains the power to shape our instincts and desires.

To guard against this, I give myself arbitrary boundaries—no Instagram stories, no app notifications—and rely on apps that shut down my Twitter and Instagram accounts after forty-five minutes of daily use. And still, on occasion, I'll disable my social media blockers, and I'll sit there like a rat pressing the lever, like a woman repeatedly hitting myself on the forehead with a hammer, masturbating through the nightmare until I finally catch the gasoline whiff of a good meme. The internet is still so young that it's easy to retain some subconscious hope that it all might still add up to something. We remember that at one point this all felt like butterflies and puddles and blossoms, and we sit patiently in our festering inferno, waiting for the internet to turn around and surprise us and get good again. But it won't. The internet is governed by incentives that make it impossible to be a full person while interacting with it. In the future, we will inevitably be cheapened. Less and less of us will be left, not just as individuals but also as community members, as a collective of people facing various catastrophes. Distraction is a "life-and-death matter," Jenny Odell writes in *How to Do Nothing*. "A social body that can't concentrate or communicate with itself is like a person who can't think and act."

Of course, people have been carping in this way for many centuries. Socrates feared that the act of writing would "create forgetfulness in the learners' souls." The sixteenth-century scientist Conrad Gessner worried that the printing press would facilitate an "always on" environment. In the eighteenth century,

men complained that newspapers would be intellectually and morally isolating, and that the rise of the novel would make it difficult for people—specifically women—to differentiate between fiction and fact. We worried that radio would drive children to distraction, and later that TV would erode the careful attention required by radio. In 1985, Neil Postman observed that the American desire for constant entertainment had become toxic, that television had ushered in a "vast descent into triviality." The difference is that, today, there is nowhere further to go. Capitalism has no land left to cultivate but the self. Everything is being cannibalized—not just goods and labor, but personality and relationships and attention. The next step is complete identification with the online marketplace, physical and spiritual inseparability from the internet: a nightmare that is already banging down the door.

What could put an end to the worst of the internet? Social and economic collapse would do it, or perhaps a series of antitrust cases followed by a package of hard regulatory legislation that would somehow also dismantle the internet's fundamental profit model. At this point it's clear that collapse will almost definitely come first. Barring that, we've got nothing except our small attempts to retain our humanity, to act on a model of actual selfhood, one that embraces culpability, inconsistency, and insignificance. We would have to think very carefully about what we're getting from the internet, and how much we're giving it in return. We'd have to care less about our identities, to be deeply

skeptical of our own unbearable opinions, to be careful about when opposition serves us, to be properly ashamed when we can't express solidarity without putting ourselves first. The alternative is unspeakable. But you know that—it's already here.

# Reality TV Me

Until recently, one of the best-kept secrets in my life, even to myself, was that I once spent three weeks when I was sixteen filming a reality TV show in Puerto Rico. The show was called *Girls v. Boys: Puerto Rico,* and the concept was exactly what it sounds like. There were eight cast members total—four boys, four girls. We filmed on Vieques, a four-mile-wide island, rough and green and hilly, with wild horses running along the white edges of the beach. The show was built around periodic challenges, each team racking up points toward a $50,000 jackpot. Between competitions, we retreated to a pale-blue house strung with twinkly lights and generated whatever drama we could.

My school let me miss three weeks of high school to do this, which still surprises me. It was a strict place—the handbook prohibited sleeveless shirts and homosexuality—and though I was a good student, my conduct record was iffy, and I was disliked, rightfully enough, by a lot of adults. But then again, the administrators had kept me at the school even when my parents couldn't afford the tuition. And I was a senior already, because I'd skipped grades after my family moved from Toronto to Houston. Also, according to rumor, the tiny Christian institution had already sent an alumnus to compete on *The Bachelorette*. There was something, maybe, about that teenage religious

environment, the way everyone was always flirting and posturing and attempting to deceive one another, that set us up remarkably well for reality TV.

In any case, I told the administrators I hoped to "be a light for Jesus, but on television," and got their permission. In December 2004, I packed a bag full of graphic tees and handkerchief-size denim miniskirts and went to Puerto Rico, and in January I came back blazing with self-enthrallment—salt in my hair, as tan as if I'd been wood-stained. The ten episodes of *Girls v. Boys* started airing the summer after I graduated from high school on a channel called Noggin, which was best known for *Daria* reruns and the Canadian teen drama *Degrassi*. I invited friends over to watch the first episode, and felt gratified but also deeply pained by the sight of my face on a big screen. When I went off to college, I didn't buy a TV for my dorm room, and I felt that this was a good opportunity to shed my televised self like a snakeskin. Occasionally, in my twenties, at bars or on road trips, I'd pull up my IMDb credit as a piece of bizarre trivia, but I was uninterested in investigating *Girls v. Boys* any further. It took me thirteen years, and an essay idea, to finally finish watching the show.

Audition tapes: **ACE**, a black skater bro in New Jersey, does kick-flips in a public square; **JIA**, a brown girl from Texas, says she's tired of being a cheerleader; **CORY**, a white boy from Kentucky, admits he's never been kissed; **KELLEY**, a blonde from Phoenix, does crunches on a yoga mat, looking like Britney

Spears; **DEMIAN**, a boy from Vegas with a slight Mexican accent, wrestles his little brother; **KRYSTAL**, a black girl with a feline face, says she knows she seems stuck-up; **RYDER**, a California boy with reddish hair and ear gauges, says he knows he looks like Johnny Depp; **PARIS**, a tiny blonde from Oregon, says that she's always been a freak and she likes it that way.

Six teens assemble on a blinding tarmac under blue sky. The first challenge is a race to the house, which the boys win. **JIA** and **CORY** arrive late, nervous and giggling. Everyone plays Truth or Dare (it's all dares, and every dare is to make out). In the morning the contestants assemble in front of a long table for an eating race: mayonnaise first, then cockroaches, then hot peppers, then cake. Girls win. That night, **KELLEY** gives **CORY** his first-ever kiss. Everyone is wary of **PARIS**, who has an angel's face and never stops talking. In the third competition, inner-tube basketball, girls lose.

My reality TV journey began on a Sunday afternoon in September 2004, when I was hanging around the mall with my parents, digesting a large portion of fettuccine Alfredo from California Pizza Kitchen and waiting for my brother to get out of hockey practice at the rink. Fifty feet away from us, next to a booth that advertised a casting call, a guy was approaching teenagers and asking them to make an audition tape for a show. "There was a cardboard cutout of a surfboard," my mom told me recently, remembering. "And you were wearing a white tank top and a Hawaiian-print skirt, so it was like you were dressed

for the theme." On a whim, she suggested that I go over to the booth. "You were like, '*No!* Ugh! *Mom!* No *way*!' You were so annoyed that we sort of started egging you on as a joke. Then Dad pulled out twenty bucks from his wallet and said, 'I'll give you this if you go do it,' and you basically slapped it out of his hand and went over and made a tape and then went shopping or whatever you wanted to do."

A few weeks later, I received a phone call from a producer, who explained the conceit of the show ("girls versus boys, in Puerto Rico") and asked me to make a second audition video. I showed off my personality with a heady cocktail of maximally stupid choreographed dances and a promise that "the girls will *not* win—I mean they *will* win—with me on the team." When I was cast, my mom was suddenly hesitant; she hadn't expected that anything would actually come of either tape. But that year she and my dad were often absent, distracted. At the time, rather than probe for the larger cause of their scattered attention, I preferred to take advantage of it to obliterate my curfew and see if I could wheedle twenty dollars here and there to buy going-out tops from Forever 21. I told my mom that she *had* to let me go, since it had been her idea for me to audition.

Eventually she acquiesced. Then suddenly it was December, and I was sitting in the Houston airport, eating carnitas tacos while listening to Brand New on my portable CD player and headphones, brimming with anticipation like an overfilled plastic cup. I lingered in this delectable pre-adventure limbo so long

that I missed my flight, which immediately ruined our tight filming schedule. I wouldn't make it for the arrival or for the first challenge, and another boy would be kept behind to even things out.

I spent the next twenty-four hours blacked out in pure shame. By the time I got to Vieques, I was desperate to make up for my own stupidity, so I volunteered to go first in our first full challenge. "I'll eat anything! I don't give a shit!" I yelled.

We lined up in front of four covered dishes. The horn went off, and I lifted my dish to find—a mound of hot mayonnaise.

All my life I have declined to eat mayonnaise-influenced dishes. I am not a consumer of chicken salad or egg salad or potato salad. I scrape even the tiniest traces of aioli off a sandwich. Mayonnaise, for me, was about as bad as it could possibly get. But of course I immediately plunged my face into this thick, yellowish mountain, gobbling it frantically, getting it everywhere—it's very hard to *speed-eat mayo*—and ending up looking like the Pillsbury Doughboy had just ejaculated all over my face. Because the girls won the competition, I didn't regret any of this until after the challenge, when the producers took us snorkeling, and I couldn't concentrate on the brilliant rainbow reef around us because I kept torching the inside of my snorkel with mayonnaise burps.

Or, at least: that's what I'd always said had happened. The mayo incident was the only thing I remembered clearly from the show, because it was the only thing I ever talked about—

the story of my teenage self lapping up hot mayonnaise for money was an enjoyable, reliable way to gross people out. But, I realized, watching the show, I'd been telling it wrong. Before the challenge, I *volunteer* to eat the mayo. My dish was never actually covered. The mayo was not a surprise. The truth was that I had deliberately chosen the mayo; the story that I had been telling was that the mayo had *happened to me*.

It seemed likely that I'd been making this error more generally. For most of my life I've believed, without really articulating it, that strange things just drop into my lap—that, especially because I can't really think unless I'm writing, I'm some sort of blank-brained innocent who has repeatedly stumbled into the absurd unknown. If I ever talk about *Girls v. Boys,* I say that I ended up on the show by accident, that it was completely random, that I auditioned because I was an idiot killing time at the mall.

I like this story better than the alternative, and equally accurate, one, which is that I've always felt that I was special and acted accordingly. It's true that I ended up on reality TV by chance. It's also true that I signed up enthusiastically, felt almost fated to do it. I needed my dad's twenty dollars not as motivation but as cover for my motivation. It wasn't my *egotism* that got me to the casting booth, I could tell myself: it was merely the promise of a new flammable halter top to pair with my prize Abercrombie miniskirt and knockoff Reefs. Later on, in my journal, I announce my casting with excitement but no surprise

whatsoever. It is now obvious to me, as it always should have been, that a sixteen-year-old doesn't end up running around in a bikini and pigtails on television unless she also desperately wants to be seen.

An electric sunrise, a white sand beach. The teens shoot T-shirt cannons at one another; girls lose. **PARIS** pours her heart out to **DEMIAN**, who wants to make out with **JIA**, who says she has a rule that she's not going to make out with anyone all season. **DEMIAN** thinks he can get **JIA** to give in. Drama swirls around **RYDER**, who is a strong athlete but prone to histrionics. The teens do an obstacle course; girls lose.

**KELLEY** is trying to distract a smitten **CORY** from the competition. **PARIS** falls off a balance beam. **ACE** wants to make out with **KELLEY**. "I've got this little triangle going on between me, **CORY**, and **ACE**," says **KELLEY**, smiling into the camera. "And things are getting pretty hot."

*Girls v. Boys: Puerto Rico* was the fourth season of this reality show, which started airing in 2003. The first season was filmed in Florida, the second in Hawaii, and the third in Montana. A decaying fan site lists the cast members from all four seasons, linking to Myspace pages that have long ago 404ed. Group shots from each season look like PacSun ads after a diversity directive. The names form a constellation of mid-aughts suburban adolescence: Justin, Mikey, Jessica, Lauren, Christina, Jake.

This was the heyday of reality television—a relatively

innocent time, before the bleak long trail of the industry had revealed itself. Reality TV had not yet created a whole new type of person, the camera-animated assemblage of silicone and pharmaceuticals; we hadn't yet seen the way organic personalities could decay on unscripted television, their half-lives measured through sponsored laxative-tea Instagrams and paid appearances at third-tier regional clubs. In the early 2000s, the genre was still a novelty, as was the underlying idea that would drive twenty-first-century technology and culture—the idea that ordinary personhood would seamlessly readjust itself around whatever within it would sell. There was no YouTube when I signed my contract. There were no photos on phones, or video clips on social media. *The Real World* was on the Paris and San Diego seasons. *Real World/Road Rules Challenge* was airing, with its first "Battle of the Sexes" season—which *Girls v. Boys* approximates—in 2003. *Survivor* was still a novelty, and *Laguna Beach* was about to take over MTV.

*Girls v. Boys* was a low-budget production. There were four cameras total, and our two executive producers were on site at all times. Last year, I emailed one of these producers, Jessica Morgan Richter, and met up with her for a glass of wine in a dim Italian happy-hour spot in Midtown Manhattan. Jess looked just as I remembered: a wry smile, a strong nose, and slightly mournful blue eyes, a woman who could play Sarah Jessica Parker's beleaguered younger sister in a movie. We had all loved Jess, who was much more generous to us than she needed to

be. During filming, when Paris was crying, Jess would lend her her iPod to cheer her up. In the spring of 2005, she invited me, Kelley, and Krystal to come stay with her in New York City, and took us out anywhere fun that would allow sixteen-year-olds—a live *Rocky Horror Picture Show,* Chinatown karaoke.

In 2006, Jess left the production company behind *Girls v. Boys* and went to A&E, where she stayed for seven years, executive-producing *Hoarders* and *Flipping Boston*. Now she's the VP of development at Departure Films, still focusing on reality. ("We do a *lot* of houses," she said, telling me about *All Star Flip,* a recent special she'd produced with Gabrielle Union and Dwyane Wade.) *Girls v. Boys* was the first show Jess ever worked on; she was hired for the season before us, in Montana. As she and I stacked our coats on a barstool, she reminded me that she had been the same age then that I was now.

Jess had cast the whole show herself, starting the search in August. "We had people *everywhere,*" she said. "I was faxing casting calls to every high school in a major city that had a good sports program. I went to all the swim teams in the tri-state area." It was relatively hard to cast a show like this, she explained. They needed geographic diversity, ethnic diversity, and a mix of strong and recognizable personalities distributed along a four–four gender split. They also needed everyone to have some baseline athletic ability, as well as parents who would sign off on the textbook-length release forms—parents like this being, Jess noted, rarer than you'd think. She and our other producer,

Stephen, had owned our full likenesses, and could have used the footage for any purpose. "I wouldn't let my kid do it!" she said. "You wouldn't either!" (Later on, I found my mom's neat signature on the liability waiver, which required her to release the producers, Noggin, MTV Networks, and Viacom International for "any claim or liability whatsoever," and to "forever release, waive, and covenant not to sue the Released Parties for any injury or death caused by negligence or other acts.")

Jess checked her watch—at six, she needed to go relieve her babysitter in Harlem—and then ordered us a margherita pizza. She explained that reality TV casting is mainly about identifying people with a basic telegenic quality—"people who really cut through TV, who can keep their eyes at a certain level, who can look right past the camera." She had gotten on the phone with all of us, asking: How would we react if we had a problem with someone? Did we have a boyfriend or girlfriend at home? "You can tell a lot about a sixteen-year-old by their answer to that question—how open they are, how insecure," she said. "There's insecurity inherent in being a teenager, but it doesn't read well on camera if you're uncomfortable. On reality TV, you need people with zero insecurity. Or else you need someone so insecure that it drives them totally nuts."

The formula for group shows was pretty basic, Jess told me. Even adult shows often ran on high school archetypes. You usually had the jock, the prom queen, the weird guy, the nerd, the "spastic girl who's a little babyish." I asked her if I could guess

how we'd all been cast. "Kelley was the cool girl," I guessed. "Paris was the spaz. Cory was the sweet country boy. Demian was the goofball. Ryder was supposed to be the jock. Krystal was the bitch, the prissy girl."

"Yeah, the sort of supermodel type," Jess said.

"What about Ace?" I asked. "Krystal guessed that you guys cast him so that you guys could have a black couple." (Krystal—who had a dry sense of humor, and was not at all a bitch—had described her role to me as "standard reality TV black girl.")

"We definitely needed diversity," Jess said. "And you?"

"Was I the nerd?" I asked. (I was also cast for diversity reasons, I'm sure.)

"No," she said. "Although I do remember this one night where you started doing *homework*. Stephen and I were like, this is awful television, we have to get her to stop."

"Was I … the reasonable one?"

"No!" Jess said. "We were hoping you *wouldn't* be reasonable! When we pitched you to the network it was as this know-it-all, a type-A valedictorian." She added that she'd also cast me because I seemed athletic—I had done a tumbling pass on the football field in my audition tape, neatly concealing the fact that I have so little hand-eye coordination that I can barely catch a ball.

On the porch, **KELLEY**, **KRYSTAL**, and **JIA** talk about how **KELLEY** is going to play **ACE** and **CORY** off each other to drive a wedge between the boys. The boys try to use **PARIS**, whose crush on **RYDER** makes her easy to manipulate,

to undermine the girls. **PARIS** is ramping up the drama, crying, talking nonstop. **RYDER** keeps losing his cool mid-competition. "I don't deserve, like, any sort of negativity feelings," **RYDER** yells, shirtless and skipping stones in the ocean. "That's bullshit!"

The teens prepare to go out dancing. **DEMIAN** is still trying to make out with **JIA**. Wearing a shirt on his head, **ACE** does a pitch-perfect impression of **JIA** blowing **DEMIAN** off. After a montage of everyone politely grinding at an outdoor beach bar, the teens come back to the house, where the hosts are waiting. Everyone's going to vote to kick someone off the island. One person from each team will be sent home.

It took me months to work up the courage to actually watch *Girls v. Boys,* which was an unusual feeling: the show itself is proof that I don't hesitate to do much. But I found that I physically could not bring myself to restart the show. In the winter of 2018, after drinks on a snowy weeknight at a bar in Brooklyn, I dragged my friend Puja home with me to watch the first half of the season. A few days later, I made my friend Kate come over to watch the rest.

It was strange to see so much video footage of myself as a teenager. It was stranger to see how natural we all acted—as if giving confessionals and being chased around by cameramen was the most normal possible thing. And it was strangest, maybe, to see how little I had changed. When I started phoning up the rest of the cast, that time-warp sense intensified. Everyone was around thirty, an age where most people feel *some* distance

between their adolescence and the present. But we had all been, as Jess mentioned, abnormally confident as teenagers—our respective senses of self had been so concrete. I asked everyone if they felt they'd changed a lot since the TV show. Everyone told me they had grown up, obviously, but otherwise felt pretty much the same.

Kelley, now married, lived in Newport Beach and worked in business development for a real estate company. Krystal lived in Los Angeles and was acting and modeling while working a day job and raising her twenty-month-old daughter, with whom she had appeared on another reality show, TLC's *Rattled*. Cory, the sweet country boy who'd gotten his first kiss on camera with Kelley, lived in Orlando with his boyfriend and worked for Disney. Demian, the goofball who had grown up in Vegas, still lived there, working as a club promoter. Ace was in DC. Ryder didn't answer my messages, and I held off on reaching out to Paris after checking her Facebook, where she was documenting, gracefully, a month in outpatient therapy for bipolar II.

I asked everyone what roles they thought we'd all played in the show. Half of the casting was obvious to everyone. Cory, Kelley, Paris, and Krystal had all played fixed archetypes: the sweet guy, the all-American girl, the wacko, the bitch. The rest of us—Demian, Ryder, Ace, and me—weren't as clear. Demian thought he'd been cast as the asshole; Kelley guessed that Demian was the prankster; Krystal guessed the "stoner lothario, sort of *Jersey Shore*." Ryder was all over the map for everyone—the pretentious

artistic boy, the slutty jock, the flamboyant punk rocker—and I was, too. Though I'm sure they would've answered differently if someone else had been asking, my castmates guessed I was the smart one, or the sweet one, or the "fun Southern one," or the prude.

To even ask these questions is to validate a sort of classic adolescent fantasy. Reality TV enacts the various self-delusions of the emotionally immature: the dream that you are being closely watched, assessed, and categorized; the dream that your life itself is movie material, and that you deserve your own carefully soundtracked montage when you're walking down the street. On the show, this was the actual world that the adults constructed around us. We were categorized as characters. Our social dramas were set to generic acoustic ballads and pop punk. Our identities were given a clear narrative importance. All of this is a narcissist's fantasy come true. "There's a saying we have in reality," Jess, the producer, told me, while we were sitting in Midtown. "Everyone signs. Most people want to be famous. Everyone thinks they could be a better Kardashian than the Kardashians. You see it now, with these apps, everyone likes to have an audience. Everyone thinks they deserve one."

In high school, I craved the sort of rapt attention that the *Girls v. Boys* cameras would provide me. In my journal, I constantly overestimate the impressions that I'm making on other people. I monitor myself, wondering how my friends and classmates see me, and then trying to control whatever they see. This is,

I write, an attempt to be more honest: I want to act in a way that reflects how I feel; I want to live the way that I "really am." But I also worry that I'm more interested in narrative consistency than anything. I worry that all this self-monitoring has made me, as I wrote in 2004, too conscious of what "Jia" would do in this situation—that I'm in danger of becoming a "character to myself."

This anxiety is something that would stick with me, clearly. But *Girls v. Boys* dissolved part of it in a peculiar way. On the show, where I was under constant surveillance, I was unable to get far enough away from myself to think about the impression I was leaving. When everything was framed as a performance, it seemed impossible to consciously perform. In 2005, when I got back to Texas, all the conjecturing disappeared from my journal. I stopped wondering how anyone at my high school saw me; I had no thoughts about how I'd appear on the show. Knowing that I was seen got rid of my desire to see myself, to analyze myself as a character. When I watched the first episode, I thought: *How boring, how embarrassing, it's me.*

Within a few years, I would begin to think that the impression I left on people was, like the weather, essentially beyond my ability to control. In retrospect, I just started to control it subconsciously rather than consciously. The process of calibrating my external self became so instinctive, so automatic, that I stopped being able to perceive it. Reality TV simultaneously freed me from and tethered me to self-

consciousness by making self-consciousness inextricable from everything else.

This was useful, if dubious, preparation for a life wrapped up with the internet. I felt the same thing watching the show that I do when I'm on the train in New York, scrolling through Twitter, thinking, on the one hand: *Where are we underneath all of this arbitrary self-importance?* And on the other: *Aren't we all exactly as we seem?*

A bright morning, sleepy teens. At the breakfast table, **JIA** awkwardly tries to tell **PARIS** she's sorry about what's coming. On the beach, **PARIS** and **RYDER** get voted off. "I don't take it personally, but that doesn't mean it doesn't suck like a bitch," **PARIS** says.

The six remaining contestants spin on a wheel and throw balls at one another; the girls lose. **ACE** and **JIA** enter an abandoned military barracks with night-vision cameras and padlocks. Girls lose again. The next morning, the hosts are downstairs—another twist.

Every episode of *Girls v. Boys* is structured the same way. We do a challenge, then we go home to talk about who we hate and who we have a crush on, then we repeat. The predictability of reality TV accrues into hypnosis. The sun rises in streaky golden time-lapse; the camera pokes into the white mosquito nets over our bunk beds, and we yawn and say today we're going to win. We line up on the beach wearing board shorts and bikinis; a bell goes off; we run around on the sand assembling giant

puzzle pieces; the hosts rack up points on the board. The sun sets in time-lapse again, fluorescent pink into deep twilight, and at night, with our tans darkening and hair curling more with every episode, we complain about one another and start fights and occasionally kiss.

I was amazed, watching the show, to see how much I had forgotten. There were entire challenges I had no memory of. We had sold homemade souvenirs at the Wyndham (?), raced each other in kayaks with holes in the bottom (?), gotten on our knees with our hands tied behind our backs and eaten wet dog food out of bowls (?). In one episode I pick up a guitar and improvise a long ballad about the ongoing romantic drama at the house. It worried me that I could remember almost nothing that occurred off-camera. I had no idea, for example, what we ate every day.

"I think we ate a lot of frozen pizzas," Demian told me. "And we went out for lunch a lot at that one place." On the phone, Krystal told me she still bought the same brand of frozen pizzas. I heard her walk over to her freezer. "Yep, it's Celeste. Microwave in minutes." Kelley remembered the lunch place: "It was called Bananas. The place we went out dancing at night was called Chez Shack—there were all these little rotisserie chickens on a spit." Krystal remembered Chez Shack, too, with its live band and low lighting. "Ugh!" she said. "We thought we were in *Havana Nights*." After these conversations I had keyhole glimmers—a melamine plate, me ordering the same sandwich over and over, sand on an outdoor patio under a big black sky. But that was

it. I forget everything that I don't need to turn into a story, and in Puerto Rico, making sense of what happened every day was someone else's job.

Reality TV is notorious for constructing stories out of nothing. The *Bachelor* franchise famously engages in "Frankenbiting," manipulating audio and inserting false context to show contestants saying things they never said. (In 2014, a *Bachelor in Paradise* contestant received an edit that made her look like she was pouring her heart out to a raccoon.) On our show, Jess told me, over three months of editing, they moved a lot of footage around to make the stories work. Occasionally I could see the stitches, and the other cast members reminded me of a few things that had changed. (The show skips over the fact that, in the twist where each team had to vote off one of its members, Paris, who didn't want to be spiteful, and Cory, who felt overly pressured by the other boys, both voted for themselves.) But the show nonetheless seemed like a uniquely and bizarrely complete document. There we are, forever, with our teenage voices and our impossibly resilient bodies, confiding to the camera and diving into the ocean at the sound of a bell. In Vieques, without knowing it, I was learning that in the twenty-first century it would sometimes be impossible to differentiate between the pretext for an experience, the record of that experience, and the experience itself.

On a windy soccer field, the teens meet their new teammates: **RYDER** on the girls' team, **PARIS** with the boys. The

competition is "human foosball." With **RYDER** on their side, the girls win. Afterward, **PARIS** sits on the soccer field crying. **ACE** and **DEMIAN** hate her. "We'll have to carry her like a sack of potatoes," **DEMIAN** says. That night, **PARIS** tells **CORY** that **KELLEY** was only using him to mess with the boys' team. **KELLEY** confronts **PARIS**, and **DEMIAN** plays protector. A screaming fight ensues.

**KELLEY** tries to make up with **CORY**. **DEMIAN** tells **CORY** that **KELLEY** has cheated on all her boyfriends. The girls try to make nice with **PARIS**. "Everyone's trying to play like they're better than each other," says **PARIS**, alone in the driveway, sniffling. "But maybe we all just suck a lot." The teams kayak through a mangrove swamp; girls win. **JIA** and **KRYSTAL** give a confessional: the boys are pissed, they explain, because **KELLEY** wouldn't hook up with **ACE** and **JIA** wouldn't hook up with **DEMIAN**.

It is a major plot point, throughout the whole season, that I refuse to make out with anyone. I'm vehement about this, starting on the first night, when everyone plays Truth or Dare and kisses everyone else. On the Vegas reunion episode—there is a Vegas reunion episode, with all of us sitting on a bright stage set and watching clips—Demian tells me that my rule was stupid. I get on an unbearable high horse, saying I'm so *sorry* I have *morals,* mentioning a note card I'd written out with rules I wouldn't break.

Was I bullshitting? I have no memory of rules on a note card. Or maybe I'm bullshitting now, having deemed that note card

to be incongruous with the current operating narrative of my life. As a sixteen-year-old, I was, in fact, hung up on arbitrary sexual boundaries; I was a virgin, and wanted to stay a virgin till marriage, a goal that would go out the window within about a year. But I can't tell if, on the show, I was more concerned with looking virtuous or actually being virtuous—or if, having gone from a religious panopticon to a literal one, I was even capable of distinguishing between the two ideas. I can't tell if I had strong feelings about making out with strangers—something I had genuinely not done at that point—or just strong feelings about making out with strangers *on TV*. The month before I left for Puerto Rico, I watched an episode of *Girls v. Boys: Montana* and wrote in my journal, "I'm a little weirded out. Everyone's hooking up and the girls wear next to nothing the whole time—tube tops, for a contest where they go herd cattle. No way. I'm packing T-shirts, a lot of them. It's weird to think I might be the modest one, the one that refrains from hooking up, because that's not the role I play at home. I just don't want to watch it six months later and realize I looked like a skank."

Underneath this veneer of a conservative moral conscience is a clear sense of fearful superiority. I thought I was better than the version of teen girlhood that seemed ubiquitous in the early aughts: the avatars of campy sex and oppressive sentimentality in blockbuster comedies and rom-coms, and the humiliating neediness, in high school, of girls wanting to talk about guys all the time. I had a temperamental desire to not look desperate,

which bled into a religious desire to not be slutty—or to not look slutty, because in the case of reality television, they're almost the same thing. It's possible, too, that Demian, with his easy dirtbag demeanor, just didn't fit my narrow and snobby idea of who I could be attracted to: at the time I was into preppy guys who were rude to me, and felt, I think, that being openly pursued was gauche. But all throughout the show, I liked Demian, was drawn to his elaborate and absurd sense of humor. On our last night in the house, after the final competition was over, we finally hooked up—off-camera, although Jess caught a goodbye kiss the next day. A tension that had previously seemed beyond resolution dissolved in an instant, never to be felt in the same way again. When I called Demian, while I was writing this, I was in San Francisco reporting a story, and at one point in our conversation neither of us could speak for laughing for several minutes. Later that day, during interviews, I realized that my face was sore.

The issue of sexual virtue cropped up in a much bigger way for Cory, who introduced himself in his audition tape as a guy who loved Britney Spears and had never been kissed, and then, on the first episode, got his first kiss from Kelley, the Britney of our show. Cory and Kelley had the romantic story line of the season partly by mutual decision; they wanted the guaranteed airtime. But Cory—as he told me when I called him—knew he was gay long before filming. Kelley was only his first kiss with a girl.

In retrospect, it's clear enough. He doesn't seem physically interested in Kelley, who is very hot, and in one challenge, when

we have to match up random objects with their owners, I identify a bunch of movie ticket stubs as Cory's after spotting *Josie and the Pussycats* in the stack. But Cory never dropped the façade. He was from a small town in Kentucky, and needed to stay in the closet. He'd already tried to come out to his parents, but they'd refused to hear it, his dad telling him not to make his worst nightmare come true. (Jess told me that she wasn't sure if, in 2005, Noggin would even have let them broach the subject of homosexuality on the show.) Before he left for Puerto Rico, his dad warned him not to "act like Shaggy"—Shaggy from *Scooby-Doo* being the gayest person his dad could think of. Cory has lived with his boyfriend for eight years now, he told me, sounding, as ever, kind and optimistic and practical. His parents are cordial but distant, polite to his partner without acknowledging what the relationship is.

The teens make souvenirs and try to sell them at the Wyndham resort, wearing Hawaiian-print hotel uniforms. **DEMIAN** uses his Spanish; the boys win. Back at the house, the teens get their ice maker to produce snow-cone balls and throw them at one another. The power goes out, and they all swim in the pool in the dark. Over footage of **PARIS** climbing on top of **ACE** and **DEMIAN**, **JIA** tells the camera that **PARIS** is trying to fit in on the boys' team by using her boobs. The next day, the teens joust on kayaks; girls lose.

The girls call a bonus competition. **RYDER** and **PARIS** speed-eat enormous blood sausages and puke. **KELLEY** is

frustrated that **CORY** hasn't made a real move on her. "He's nothing like anybody from home," **KELLEY** says.

Part of the reason I never watched the show past the first episode was that I never had to. The show aired just before things started to stick around on the internet, and it was much too minor for clips to resurface on YouTube. The N shut down in 2009, taking its website, with its *Girls v. Boys* bonus clips and fan forums, down, too. I had gotten on Facebook in 2005, between filming and airing, and it was clear enough—we'd already had LiveJournal and Xanga and Myspace—where this was all going. Reality TV conditions were bleeding into everything; everyone was documenting their lives to be viewed. I had the sense that, with *Girls v. Boys,* I could allow myself a rare and asymmetrical sort of freedom. With this show, I could have done something that was intended for public consumption without actually having to consume it. I could have created an image of myself that I would never have to see.

After the season concluded, the producers sent us the show on VHS tapes. In college, I gave the tapes to my best friend, at her request, and she binge-watched the whole season. While I was in the Peace Corps, my boyfriend watched the whole show, too. (He found reality TV me to be "exactly the same as you are now—just bitchier.") He hid the tapes in his parents' house so that I couldn't find them and dispose of them, as I often threatened to. When his mom accidentally donated them to Goodwill, I was overjoyed.

And then, in the spring of 2017, I found myself in a rented guesthouse in upstate New York for the weekend. I had packed weed and sweatpants and taken the train up alone. It was dark, and late, and I was sitting at a small table near the window, writing down some ideas about—or so I scribbled, with typical stoner passion—the requirement and the impossibility of knowing yourself under the artificial conditions of contemporary life. I'd made a fire in the woodstove, and I stared at it, thinking. "Oh," I said, out loud, abruptly remembering that I had been on a reality show. "Oh, no."

I got on Facebook and messaged Kelley and Krystal. By some strange coincidence, Krystal was going to Costco that week to turn the VHS tapes into DVDs, and could make me a copy. She'd seen the show when it aired, as had Kelley and Cory. Later on, I was relieved, when I talked to Demian and Ace, to hear that both of them had stopped watching after the first couple of episodes.

"Why didn't you keep going?" I asked Ace.

"I don't know," he said. "I mean—we already lived it, you know what I mean?"

The teens do a scavenger hunt, running around a public square and taking pictures of people kissing their dogs and doing handstands. Girls win. Back at the house, **DEMIAN** gets a bucket of water to flush a giant poop. The boys call a bonus competition: everyone eats bowls of wet dog food with their hands tied behind their backs, and the girls win again.

At night, the teens blindfold one another and take turns

kissing. They set up a makeshift Slip 'N Slide on a slope of the lawn with plastic sheeting and vegetable oil. They make muscles for the camera like wrestlers and then start play-fighting, chasing one another around with whipped cream.

On the south shore of Vieques, there's a bay, almost completely enclosed by land, where the mangroves are dense and tangled and the air is perfectly still. It's named Mosquito Bay, not for the insects but for *El Mosquito,* the ship owned by Roberto Cofresí, one of the last actual pirates of the Caribbean —a heartless legend who claimed to have buried thousands of pieces of treasure before he died. After a letter in a newspaper misidentified a dead pirate as Cofresí, rumors began to proliferate about his mythological powers: he could make his boat disappear; he was born with the *capilares de Maria,* a magic arrangement of blood vessels that made him immortal. A folk rumor persists that he appears every seven years, for seven days, engulfed in flames.

There are only five bioluminescent bays in the world, and of these, Mosquito Bay is the brightest. Each liter of its water contains hundreds of thousands of *Pyrodinium bahamense,* the microscopic dinoflagellates that produce an otherworldly blue-green light when agitated. On a night without moonlight, a boat going through these waters burns a trail of iridescence. Here the dinoflagellates have the safe and private harbor they need: the decomposing mangroves provide a bounty of food for the delicate organisms, and the passage to the ocean is shallow

and narrow, keeping the disturbance of waves away. And so the dinoflagellates glitter—not for themselves, not in isolation, but when outside intrusions come through. The trouble is that intrusions disturb the bay's delicate balance. Mosquito Bay went dark for a year in 2014, probably because of tourist activity, an excess of chemicals from sunscreen and shampoo. Today, tourists can still take a boat out as long as they forgo bug repellent. But swimming has been prohibited since 2007—two years after we swam there while taping the show.

We took the boat out on a black night, in an anvil-heavy quiet. Behind the moving masses of clouds, the milky stars emerged and disappeared. We were all nervous, hushed, agitated: we had all come from families who, I think, wanted to give us adventures like this, but who probably wouldn't have been able to afford it—thus, maybe, the permission to come on the show. When the boat stopped in the middle of the bay, we trembled with joy. We slipped into the water and started sparkling, as if the stars had fallen into the water and were clinging to us. In the middle of the absolute darkness we were wreathed in magic, glowing like jellyfish, glittering like the "Toxic" video—swimming in circles, gasping and laughing in the middle of a spreading pale-blue glow. We touched one another's shoulders and watched our fingers crackle with light. After a long time, we got back in the boat, still dripping in bioluminescence. I squeezed glittering water out of my hair. My body felt so stuffed with good luck that I was choking on it. I felt caught in a whirlpool of

metaphysical accident. There were no cameras, and they couldn't have captured it, anyway. I told myself, Don't forget, don't forget.

The teens have to dive for items in the ocean, swim to shore, and guess who owns them. **JIA** flips through a wallet with movie stubs in it: "*Josie and the Pussycats*? This is **CORY**," she says. Girls win. **KELLEY** finally gets **CORY** to go off in a dark corner and make out with her. Over footage of **DEMIAN** tickling her in a bunk bed, **JIA** tells the camera that **DEMIAN** is still trying to shoot his shot.

The next challenge is set at a high school. The teens decorate bathing suits and get onstage nearly naked to put on a show for a thousand Puerto Rican teenagers, who will vote on the winning team. This footage is unspeakable; boys win. Girls call a bonus competition. **KELLEY** wins a game of oversize Jenga against **DEMIAN**. The girls have been behind for the entire competition, but now they're almost even. The boys are turning on one another. **PARIS** and **ACE** scream at each other to chill the fuck out.

Aside from the episode where I have to speed-eat mayonnaise, and the episode where we all put on swimsuits and dance onstage at a high school assembly, the part of the show I found most painful was the recurring theme of everyone ganging up on Paris—ignoring her, talking trash about her on camera, lying to her face. It was a definitive reminder that I had not been especially nice in high school. I had been cliquish, cozying up to my girlfriends the way I cozied up to Kelley and Krystal. I'd

sometimes been horribly mean because I thought it was funny, or rude for the sake of "honesty," or just generally insensitive—as I was, regarding Paris, for the whole show. In one episode, I cut off one of her monologues by yelling, "Paris, that's crap." When she was kicked off, I became half-consciously afraid that I would then be revealed as a weak link. To distract everyone (including myself) from this possibility, I staged a meticulous reconstruction of Paris's most grating moments: straddling Demian's chest and howling at him to tell me I was pretty, as she had done with Cory—on the show, the producers showed the scenes in split screen—and wailing about how I just wanted everyone to be nice, and on and on.

Both high school and reality TV are fueled by social ruthlessness. While writing this, I found a song about all the cast members that Demian and I had written in the back of the van on our way to a competition. "Fucking Demian is from Mexico, and the only English word he ever learned was fuck," I wrote, "so fuck Demian." He wrote back, "Fucking Jia, the prude book-reading bitch; she has an attitude and gives guys an itch." We weren't exactly gentle with each other. But we were terrible to Paris. "Fucking Paris," Demian wrote, "with her unstable mind, always horny and wants it from behind." I remember stifling my giggles. How embarrassing, I thought, to openly crave attention. Why couldn't she figure out that you were supposed to pretend you didn't care?

When I finally wrote to Paris, who grew up in Salem, Oregon,

and lives in Portland now, I apologized, and she wrote back right away. "I'm so boring now," she said, when we talked on the phone a few days later. "I work for Whole Foods. I'm approaching my two-year anniversary." But within minutes I was reminded of why she had been reality TV catnip. She was still unabashed, a chatterbox, ready to tell you anything. "In high school, I *obviously* had trouble fitting in, and so I ended up self-medicating, doing the whole 'Let's be alcoholics, let's do lots of drugs' thing," she told me. "Salem is like that. Even the rich kids. Even if you weren't white trash, like I was, everyone's just a little bit white trash. I moved to Portland partly because I was so sick of running into people who thought they knew me—people I didn't know, saying, 'Oh, you're Paris, I've heard so much about you,' when they didn't know me at all."

Paris told me that she understood that she would be ostracized on the show after the very first challenge, the one that I had to skip when I missed my flight. "We had to dig through the trash, and there was a poopy diaper, and I have a major fecal phobia," she said. "So I just choked, I freaked out, and Kelley and Krystal were upset with me, and I knew I wasn't starting out on a good foot. But I'm also a weird person. I've gotten picked on for most of my life. I know that people say I talk too much, and that I talk too loud, and that I say the wrong things. And I'm actually an introvert, so one of my coping strategies is just to be my weirdest self as soon as I meet you—that way, you can decide right away whether or not you like me. I was a theater kid,

and my parents really encouraged me to feel my feelings. I think, in a way, that people in high school were jealous that I felt so free to be myself. Because you're not supposed to do that. You're supposed to worry about people looking at you and judging you."

Paris had watched the show a few times, she told me, at the behest of curious friends. "A lot of it is pretty triggering," she said. "A lot of it wasn't fun. But there were good times, too. I remember that one night that we emptied the ice machine and had a snowball fight—it felt like everyone was really fitting in together. And I also think that there were probably some weird kids who watched me on TV and thought, *Wow, I'm not the only one who feels this way,* and I think that's great."

A month later, Paris came to New York to visit her brother, and we met up in Long Island City for lunch on a cloudy day. She wore purple cat-eyeliner and a green leopard-print cardigan, and spoke naturally in catchphrases: "I'm no good in a fisticuff situation," she told me, explaining that she'd gotten tougher in her twenties, "but I can destroy you emotionally in thirty seconds flat." She had rewatched the show with her roommates after our phone conversation, playing a drinking game to pass the time.

"The first rule was, drink every time Paris cries," she told me, sipping a mango margarita. "Also drink every time someone talks shit about Paris. And drink anytime the girls lose. We got pretty drunk by the end." She told me that she felt better about the show on this viewing—she could see that her good humor, her tenacity, had been visible all along.

I asked her if she thought she seemed like herself. "Yes," she said. "But magnified. It turned all of us into cartoons of ourselves. Like, if someone was playing you on television, these are the pieces they would use."

It's the finale. "I came here to have fun and win money—mostly to win money," says **DEMIAN**. **KELLEY** says, "I can't let a boy beat me. It just wouldn't be normal for me." The girls' team holds hands and prays.

The last competition is a relay race: first person swims out to a buoy; second person swims back to shore; third person maneuvers through a nest of ropes without touching them; third and fourth person have to trade places on a balance beam; fourth person retrieves part of a flag from the ocean; teammates assemble the flag. **RYDER** zips through the water to **JIA**, who swims back to **KRYSTAL**—girls enter the rope nest way ahead. But **KRYSTAL** can't get through the ropes, and then she and **KELLEY** can't figure out the beam. **ACE** and **CORY** complete the race; boys win. The girls fling themselves on the beach, heartbroken.

That night, the cast starts fighting. **RYDER** blames **KRYSTAL** for losing. **ACE** calls **PARIS** a "f**king blonde idiot." **JIA** tells the camera that **ACE** doesn't deserve good things happening to him. **KELLEY** says she might punch someone in the face. The next morning, the light is clean and golden, and the teens are docile, lugging their suitcases down the stairs of the house. **JIA** tells the camera that she'll leave knowing

she and **DEMIAN** were "a little more than friends." **DEMIAN** springs a long kiss on her as she's getting into the cab. The final shot is of **PARIS**, saying goodbye to an empty house.

Toward the end of filming, we were all at one another's throats constantly. We all urgently wanted the money, and we also all assumed that we would win it—a certain amount of family instability and a certain amount of wild overconfidence being factors that self-selected us onto the show. When the girls lost the final challenge, it felt brutal, gut-dissolving, like the universe had abruptly forked in the wrong direction. I wasn't going to leave empty-handed, because we were getting paid for our time, unlike a lot of reality TV contestants—$750 a week, which is good money when you're sixteen. Still, on the beach, dizzy as the imaginary jackpot vanished from the place in my bank account where I hadn't realized I'd been keeping it, I felt wrecked.

I had left for Puerto Rico during a period in which my parents were embroiled in a mess of financial and personal trouble, the full extent of which was revealed to me shortly before I left. I think that was ultimately why they let me go to Puerto Rico: they must have understood, as I argued, that I could use a break. We had always moved up and down through the middle class, but my parents had protected and prioritized me. They kept me in private school, often on scholarship, and they paid for gymnastics, and they took me to the used bookstore whenever I asked. This was different—house-being-repossessed different. I knew that I would need to be financially independent as soon as

I graduated from high school, and that from that point forward, it would be up to me to find with my own resources the middle-class stability they had worked so hard for and then lost.

This was of course part of my motivation to win *Girls v. Boys*. I had gotten into Yale early, and figured that my portion of the prize money would help me figure out how to deal with things like student loans and health insurance, help me move to New Haven, give me some guardrails as I slid into the world. Back in Texas, I felt unmoored from the plan, and took my guidance counselor's last-minute recommendation to apply for a full merit scholarship to the University of Virginia. I did the interview while still on a high from Puerto Rico: under-clothed, blisteringly self-interested, blabbering on about kayaks and mayonnaise. After another round, I got the scholarship and accepted it.

When I talked to Jess, the producer, she told me that my mom had called her up, in the months after the show aired, and asked her to persuade me to go to Yale. *How,* my mom had said, *could she turn down that kind of prestige?* Our family situation hovered in the background, as did, I think, my parents' upbringings. They had both attended elite private schools in Manila, and they retained a faith in the transformative power of institutions, a faith I shared until I abruptly did not. Losing the reality show marked some sort of transition: I started to feel that the future was intractably unpredictable, and that my need for money cut deeper than I'd imagined, and that there were worse things than making decisions based on whatever seemed like the most fun.

The cast assembles on a colorful stage set in Las Vegas to watch clips. Everyone looks a little different: **ACE** has pink hair, **PARIS** has a sharp bob, **KRYSTAL** got her braces off. **DEMIAN** tells **JIA** her no-making-out rule was stupid. "I'm sorry I have *morals*," **JIA** replies. **CORY** is indignant, finding out how long **KELLEY** played him. "I'm an honest person!" he says. "And I'm a really good liar," **KELLEY** says, breaking into her wide Britney smile.

**KRYSTAL** watches **DEMIAN** saying he'd like to hook up with her but not talk to her. Is she mad? "I think it's hilarious," **KRYSTAL** says. **PARIS** watches **JIA** saying she's using her boobs for attention. "I *was* using my boobs for attention," **PARIS** says brightly. **JIA**, who has gotten chubby, watches a clip of herself on the first night, saying she'd never make out with **DEMIAN**, and then a clip of them making out on the last day.

The cast is asked if they'd do it again. "In a heartbeat," **KRYSTAL** says. "Puerto Rico was the best experience of my life—I think it'll be pretty hard to top," **KELLEY** says. Credits roll over footage of the cast on the Strip, waving goodbye.

Of the eight of us, Ace and I were the only ones who didn't show up in Puerto Rico hoping to jump-start a career on camera. We had come into contact with the show haphazardly—Ace was flagged down after doing a focus group for Bayer. Everyone else had seen a casting call and sent in a tape. Paris had actually been cast on *Girls v. Boys: Hawaii,* but she was deemed too young by the network. "I one hundred percent wanted to be an actress back

then," she said. "I wanted to be famous. I thought that would show the people who were mean to me—like, *I'm* Paris, and *I'm* important now."

While we were taping the show, Kelley had the most momentum. She was a BMX champion, she had starred in her own "Got Milk?" ad, and she had filmed a couple of promos for another Noggin venture. "To be honest," Kelley said, on the phone, "I grew up so poor with my single mom and two brothers that when this all started happening, I thought—okay, this is my way out." She did a little modeling after the show, but her managers didn't want her to put *Girls v. Boys* on her résumé, and it was hard to convince people that she could act, coming out of reality TV. When she moved to Los Angeles after college, she found out that the secret to creative success in your twenties was, often, already being rich. She pivoted to real estate. "It's a confidence game, a lot of bullshitting," she told me. "I did really well at it. It's the exact same thing."

Krystal, who's had bit parts on *Parks and Recreation* and *2 Broke Girls,* ended up being the person who stuck to it. She told me that she's known she wanted to be in front of the camera since she was two years old. After our show aired, one weekend she and Ryder went to a mall in San Francisco wearing their *Girls v. Boys* sweatshirts. There was a *Degrassi* meet and greet scheduled, and our show aired right before *Degrassi*—they were hoping to get mobbed by Noggin fans, and they were. (The only time I was ever recognized was also at a mall—I worked at a Hollister in Houston

over the holiday break in 2005, and was spotted by a couple of preteen girls.) Kelley told me she got recognized from the show when she was going through sorority rush at Arizona State. Paris was recognized, years later, at a frozen yogurt shop in Portland. Cory remembered taking photos with a crowd of teenage fans at an H&M. "I loved it," he said. "You know, I always wanted that fifteen minutes of fame."

"I wanted to be famous," said Demian, "because to me, fame equaled money. But now I'm like, fuck that. You see these guys who are famous for some bullshit personality stuff—who's the one who went to the Japanese suicide forest? Logan Paul. If we were younger, one of us would have definitely tried to be YouTube famous." He sighed. "I would hate to be a Logan Paul." He had filmed a reality show before *Girls v. Boys,* he reminded me—a show called *Endurance,* on Discovery Kids. There, too, all the other contestants had wanted to be actors. "That's our culture," he said. "I watched TV all the time when I was a kid. I thought, you barely need to do anything. I could do that shit."

"So you really came to Puerto Rico wanting to be famous?" I asked, pacing around my hotel room. Twitter was open on my laptop. In the end—and maybe not watching the show for so long was my attempt to keep from having to admit this—it had been very, very easy to get used to looking at my face on a screen.

"We all wanted to be famous," Demian said. "Except you."

"I actually said that?" I asked.

"I remember we were all sitting around one day talking about

it," he said. "And you were the only one who was really not interested. You said you would only ever want to be famous for a reason. You were like, 'I don't want to get famous for this bullshit. I want to get famous for writing a book.'"

# Always Be Optimizing

The ideal woman has always been generic. I bet you can picture the version of her that runs the show today. She's of indeterminate age but resolutely youthful presentation. She's got glossy hair and the clean, shameless expression of a person who believes she was made to be looked at. She is often luxuriating when you see her—on remote beaches, under stars in the desert, across a carefully styled table, surrounded by beautiful possessions or photogenic friends. Showcasing herself at leisure is either the bulk of her work or an essential part of it; in this, she is not so unusual—for many people today, especially for women, packaging and broadcasting your image is a readily monetizable skill. She has a personal brand, and probably a boyfriend or husband: he is the physical realization of her constant, unseen audience, reaffirming her status as an interesting subject, a worthy object, a self-generating spectacle with a viewership attached.

Can you see this woman yet? She looks like an Instagram—which is to say, an ordinary woman reproducing the lessons of the marketplace, which is how an ordinary woman evolves into an ideal. The process requires maximal obedience on the part of the woman in question, and—ideally—her genuine enthusiasm, too. This woman is sincerely interested in whatever the market demands of her (good looks, the impression of

indefinitely extended youth, advanced skills in self-presentation and self-surveillance). She is equally interested in whatever the market offers her—in the tools that will allow her to look more appealing, to be even more endlessly presentable, to wring as much value out of her particular position as she can.

The ideal woman, in other words, is always optimizing. She takes advantage of technology, both in the way she broadcasts her image and in the meticulous improvement of that image itself. Her hair looks expensive. She spends lots of money taking care of her skin, a process that has taken on the holy aspect of a spiritual ritual and the mundane regularity of setting a morning alarm. The work formerly carried out by makeup has been embedded directly into her face: her cheekbones or lips have been plumped up, or some lines have been filled in, and her eyelashes are lengthened every four weeks by a professional wielding individual lashes and glue. The same is true of her body, which no longer requires the traditional enhancements of clothing or strategic underwear; it has been pre-shaped by exercise that ensures there is little to conceal or rearrange. Everything about this woman has been preemptively controlled to the point that she can afford the impression of spontaneity and, more important, the sensation of it—having worked to rid her life of artificial obstacles, she often feels legitimately carefree.

The ideal woman has always been conceptually overworked, an inorganic thing engineered to look natural. Historically, the ideal woman seeks all the things that women are trained to find

fun and interesting—domesticity, physical self-improvement, male approval, the maintenance of congeniality, various forms of unpaid work. The concept of the ideal woman is *just* flexible enough to allow for a modicum of individuality; the ideal woman always believes she came up with herself on her own. In the Victorian era, she was the "angel in the house," the demure, appealing wife and mother. In the fifties, she was, likewise, a demure and appealing wife and mother, but with household purchasing power attached. More recently, the ideal woman has been whatever she wants to be as long as she manages to act upon the belief that perfecting herself and streamlining her relationship to the world can be a matter of both work and pleasure—of "lifestyle." The ideal woman steps into a stratum of expensive juices, boutique exercise classes, skin-care routines, and vacations, and thereby happily remains.

Most women believe themselves to be independent thinkers. (There is a Balzac short story in which a slave girl named Paquita yelps, memorably, "I love life! Life is fair to me! If I am a slave, I am a queen too.") Even glossy women's magazines now model skepticism toward top-down narratives about how we should look, who and when we should marry, how we should live. But the psychological parasite of the ideal woman has evolved to survive in an ecosystem that pretends to resist her. If women start to resist an aesthetic, like the overapplication of Photoshop, the aesthetic just changes to suit us; the power of the ideal image never actually wanes. It is now easy enough to engage women's

skepticism toward ads and magazine covers, images produced by professionals. It is harder for us to suspect images produced by our peers, and nearly impossible to get us to suspect the images we produce of ourselves, for our own pleasure and benefit—even though, in a time when social media use has become broadly framed as a career asset, many of us are effectively professionals now, too.

Today's ideal woman is of a type that coexists easily with feminism in its current market-friendly and mainstream form. This sort of feminism has organized itself around being as visible and appealing to as many people as possible; it has greatly over-valorized women's individual success. Feminism has not eradicated the tyranny of the ideal woman but, rather, has entrenched it and made it trickier. These days, it is perhaps even more psychologically seamless than ever for an ordinary woman to spend her life walking toward the idealized mirage of her own self-image. She can believe—reasonably enough, and with the full encouragement of feminism—that she herself is the architect of the exquisite, constant, and often pleasurable type of power that this image holds over her time, her money, her decisions, her selfhood, and her soul.

Figuring out how to "get better" at being a woman is a ridiculous and often amoral project—a subset of the larger, equally ridiculous, equally amoral project of learning to get better at life under accelerated capitalism. In these pursuits, most pleasures end up being traps, and every public-facing demand

escalates in perpetuity. Satisfaction remains, under the terms of the system, necessarily out of reach.

But the worse things get, the more a person is compelled to optimize. I think about this every time I do something that feels particularly efficient and self-interested, like going to a barre class or eating lunch at a fast-casual chopped-salad chain, like Sweetgreen, which feels less like a place to eat and more like a refueling station. I'm a repulsively fast eater in most situations —my boyfriend once told me that I chew like someone's about to take my food away—and at Sweetgreen, I eat even faster because (as can be true of many things in life) slowing down for even a second can make the machinery give you the creeps. Sweetgreen is a marvel of optimization: a line of forty people —a texting, shuffling, eyes-down snake—can be processed in ten minutes, as customer after customer orders a kale Caesar with chicken without even looking at the other, darker-skinned, hairnet-wearing line of people who are busy adding chicken to kale Caesars as if it were *their* purpose in life to do so and their *customers*' purpose in life to send emails for sixteen hours a day with a brief break to snort down a bowl of nutrients that ward off the unhealthfulness of urban professional living.

The ritualization and neatness of this process (and the fact that Sweetgreen is pretty good) obscure the intense, circular artifice that defines the type of life it's meant to fit into. The ideal chopped-salad customer is himself efficient: he needs to eat his twelve-dollar salad in ten minutes because he needs the extra

time to keep functioning within the job that allows him to afford a regular twelve-dollar salad in the first place. He feels a physical need for this twelve-dollar salad, as it's the most reliable and convenient way to build up a vitamin barrier against the general malfunction that comes with his salad-requiring-and-enabling job. The first, best chronicler of the chopped-salad economy's accelerationist nightmare was Matt Buchanan, who wrote at *The Awl* in 2015:

The chopped salad is engineered … to free one's hand and eyes from the task of consuming nutrients, so that precious attention can be directed toward a small screen, where it is more urgently needed, so it can consume *data:* work email or Amazon's nearly infinite catalog or Facebook's actually infinite News Feed, where, as one shops for diapers or engages with the native advertising sprinkled between the not-hoaxes and baby photos, one is being productive by generating revenue for a large internet company, which is obviously good for the economy, or at least it is certainly better than spending lunch reading a book from the library, because who is making money from that?

In a later *Awl* piece, Buchanan described the chopped salad as "the perfect mid-day nutritional replenishment for the mid-level modern knowledge worker" with "neither the time nor the inclination to eat a lunch … which would require more attention than the little needed for the automatic elliptical motion of the arm from bowl to face, jaw swinging open and then clamping shut over and over until the fork comes up empty and the vessel

can be deposited in the garbage can under the desk."

On today's terms, what he's describing—a mechanically efficient salad-feeding session, conducted in such a way that one need not take a break from emails—is the good life. It means progress, individuation. It's what you do when you've gotten ahead a little bit, when you want to get ahead some more. The hamster-wheel aspect has been self-evident for a long time now. (In 1958, the economist John Kenneth Galbraith wrote, "It can no longer be assumed that welfare is greater at an all-around higher level of production than a lower one … The higher level of production has, merely, a higher level of want creation necessitating a higher level of want satisfaction.") But today, in an economy defined by precarity, more of what was merely stupid and adaptive has turned stupid and compulsory. Vulnerability, which is ever present, must be warded off at all costs. And so I go to Sweetgreen on days when I need to eat vegetables very quickly because I've been working till one A.M. all week and don't have time to make dinner because I have to work till one A.M. again, and like a chump, I try to make eye contact across the sneeze guard, as if this alleviated anything about the skyrocketing productivity requirements that have forced these two lines of people to scarf and create kale Caesars all day, and then I "grab" my salad and eat it in under ten minutes while looking at email and on the train home remind myself that next time, for points purposes, I should probably buy the salad through the salad's designated app.

It's very easy, under conditions of artificial but continually escalating obligation, to find yourself organizing your life around practices you find ridiculous and possibly indefensible. Women have known this intimately for a long time.

I was a late bloomer in terms of functional physical practices, like eating vegetables and exercising. I didn't start doing either thing with any conviction—or without the baggage of ambiently disordered female adolescence—until I joined the Peace Corps, when I was twenty-one. I was a gymnast as a kid and then a cheerleader later, but one thing was fun and the second was effectively a requirement: at my school, you had to play a sport, and I lacked the athletic ability or competitive instinct to do anything else. As a teenager, I subsisted on pizza and queso and cinnamon rolls, trying to immunize myself with apathy and pleasure-seeking throughout the long stretch of time when girls, overwhelmed by sudden expectations of beauty, transmit anorexia and bulimia to one another like a virus. In high school, as I recount in my journal, other girls on the cheerleading squad would chastise me for eating carbs after sundown; a guy who had an obvious crush on me often expressed it by telling me I was gaining weight. ("Who cares, I'm going to go downstairs and eat a huge breakfast, bitch," I wrote to him on AIM one morning.) I had avoided the hang-ups that seemed to be endemic, but anytime my friends talked about diets or exercise, I could still feel a compulsive strain prickling to life within me, a sudden desire to skip a meal and do sit-ups. To avoid it, I avoided the gym,

and kept eating like a stoner: I had come to understand health as discipline, discipline as punitive, and punitive as a concept that would send me down a rabbit hole of calorie math and vomit. For the better part of a decade, I figured I was better off being slightly unhealthy and leaving the active pursuit of body-related matters alone.

This all changed once I joined the Peace Corps, where it was impossible to think too much about my appearance, and where health was of such immediate importance that it was always on my mind. I developed active tuberculosis while volunteering and, for some stress- or nutrition-related reason, started to shed my thick black hair. I realized how much I had taken my functional body for granted. I lived in a mile-long village in the middle of a western province in Kyrgyzstan: there were larch trees on the snowy mountains, flocks of sheep crossing dusty roads, but there was no running water, no grocery store. The resourceful villagers preserved peppers and tomatoes, stockpiled apples and onions, but it was so difficult to get fresh produce otherwise that I regularly fantasized about spinach and oranges, and would spend entire weekends trying to obtain them. As a prophylactic measure against mental breakdown, I started doing yoga in my room every day. *Exercise,* I thought. *What a miracle!* After Peace Corps, I kept at it. I was back in Houston, I had a lot of spare time, and I spent it at midday yoga classes at expensive studios to which I would buy discounted first-time packages and never return.

This period, around 2011, reintroduced me to the world of

American abundance. The first time I went into a grocery store and saw how many different fruits there were, I cried. At these yoga classes, I marveled at the fanatic high functionality of the women around me. They carried red totes covered with terrifying slogans ("The perfect tombstone would read 'All used up'"; "Children are the orgasm of life") and they talked about "luncheons" and microdermabrasion and four-hundred-person wedding guest lists. They purchased $90 leggings in the waiting room after class. I was not, at the time, on their level: I had been taking giardia shits in a backyard outhouse for a year straight, and I was flooded with dread and spiritual uselessness, the sense that I had failed myself and others, the fear that I would never again be useful to another human being. In this context, it felt both bad and wonderfully anesthetizing to do yoga around these women. In the hundred-degree heat I would lie back for corpse pose, sweat soaking my cheap mat from Target, and sometimes, as I fluttered my eyes shut, I would catch the twinkle of enormous diamond rings caught in shafts of sunbeam, blinking at me in the temporary darkness like a fleet of indoor stars.

In 2012, I moved to Ann Arbor for an MFA program. Classes started in the fall, but we packed up in early summer. My boyfriend, who'd just finished grad school, needed to look for a job. In our little blue house in Michigan, I tinkered with some of my somber and ponderous short stories, unsure if this would feel different once I had formal guidance. I met up with my soon-to-be classmates and drank big sour beers and talked about

*Train Dreams* and Lorrie Moore. Mostly I drifted around the lovely college town in what I accurately sensed would be my last stretch of true aimlessness for a long time. I walked my dog, looked at fireflies, went to yoga. One day, I was at a studio on the west side of town when a woman next to me queefed a thick, wet queef while sinking deep into Warrior II. I held back my laughter. She kept queefing, and kept queefing, and queefed and queefed and queefed. Over the course of the hour, as she continued queefing, my emotions went fractal—hysterical amusement and unplaceable panic combining and recombining in a kaleidoscopic blur. By the time we hit final resting pose, my heart was racing. I heard the queefing woman get up and leave the room. When she returned, I peeked an eye open to look at her. Clothed, disturbingly, in a different pair of pants, she lay down next to me and sighed, satisfied. Then, with a serene smile on her face, she queefed one more time.

At that moment, my soul having been flayed by secondhand vaginal exhalation, I wanted nothing more than to jump out of my skin. I wanted to land in a new life where everything —bodies, ambitions—would work seamlessly and efficiently. Trapped in corpse pose, in a motionlessness that was supposed to be relaxing, I felt the specter of stagnation hovering over my existence. I missed, suddenly, the part of me that thrilled to sharpness, harshness, discipline. I had directed these instincts at my mind, kept them away from my body, but why? I needed a break from yoga, which had reminded me, just then, of how I'd

felt all throughout Peace Corps—as if I didn't know what I was doing, and never would.

So, later that week, after exploring the limitless bounty of Groupon, I printed out a trial offer at a studio called Pure Barre. I was greeted there by an instructor who looked like Jessica Rabbit: ice-green eyes, a physically impossible hourglass figure, honey-colored hair rippling down past her waist. She ushered me into a cave-dark room full of sinewy women gathering mysterious red rubber props. The front wall was mirrored. The women stared at their reflections, stone-faced, preparing.

Then class started, and it was an immediate state of emergency. Barre is a manic and ritualized activity, often set to deafening music and lighting changes; that day, I felt like a police car was doing donuts in my frontal cortex for fifty-five minutes straight. The rapid-fire series of positions and movements, dictated and enforced by the instructor, resembled what a ballerina might do if you concussed her and then made her snort caffeine pills—a fanatical, repetitive routine of arm gestures, leg lifts, and pelvic tilts. Jessica Rabbit strode through the middle of the room, commanding us coyly to "put on our highest heels," meaning get on our tiptoes, and "tuck," meaning hump the air. I fumbled with my props: the rubber ball, the latex strap.

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.