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THE RED SWIMSUIT: ESSAYS

by
Jacqueline Knirnschild

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
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Approved by

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ABSTRACT

JACQUELINE KNIRNSCHILD: This thesis is a collection of creative non-fiction essays that offers a collage of ethnography, reportage and memoir. *The Red Swimsuit* blurs the lines between what is considered social science, journalism and art. These essays will become part of a book-length work of creative non-fiction that will explore what it's like to grow up as a woman in a globalized world wrought with social media, hookup culture and cross-cultural interactions. *The Red Swimsuit* provides first-hand experience, reflexive narration, and reflection on life as a member of Generation Z, also known as iGen. (Under the direction of Beth Ann Fennelly)

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INTRODUCTION

When I was six, I named my first diary Clementine and wrote to her like she was my best friend. I collected fragments of my life—kids’ menus, candy wrappers, toy ads—to make collages on Clementine’s pages. I never understood why my parents would throw away the colorful cardboard packaging around my new dolls, when they could be used in a collage. I wanted to save every piece, every bit, every scrap that had left even the faintest trace on my life. I didn’t think it was enough to write daily to Clementine, detailing the drama at recess and fights with my little brother, I also needed to gather together all the shards, assemble the layers into meaning and make something beautiful. In order to do justice to the rich texture in my life, I thought I had to capture and absorb *everything* onto the pages of my diary. Subconsciously, I think I wanted to understand how all these loose ends and layers of meaning influenced me. And my journaling practice hasn’t changed much since I was six. My thoughts still overflow onto my journal for at least three pages a day, and I save business cards, festival pamphlets and bookmarks in the pockets at the back of my journal.

With this essay collection, I made a collage of all the academic disciplines I’ve come to love over the past four years—anthropology, journalism, sociology and creative writing. At the start of college, people suggested it’d be best if I focused my attention on one area of study, but my instincts told me that if I mixed methods and styles from each area, I would arrive to that full, rich expression I’ve been striving for since I was a kid. I wanted to write essays that blurred the lines between what is considered social science, journalism and art. I wanted my writing to incorporate the best of each area—ethnographic observation, sociological research, journalistic accessibility and literary flair.

“Anthropology has turned the ‘normal’ into the ‘fascinating,’” I wrote in a reflection for Anth 101 my freshman year. “I used to think moments were only significant if they occurred in another country, outside of my daily life, but now, everything is significant—the way the stir-fry guy at the cafeteria rolls his eyes at customers, the portrayal of volunteers in Peace Corps pamphlets, the change in atmosphere after a xenophobic joke.” Anthropology, which was one of my initial majors, taught me how to deconstruct social practices, unravel all forces of influence and understand the structures and systems that give rise to phenomena and subcultures. The flexibility of cultural anthropology also thrilled me. My professor told us to write about whatever we wanted, and I realized anything and everything could be deconstructed and critically analyzed. An Instagram post was no longer simply a photo, it was a representation of how one desires to be portrayed. I wrote about how Instagram is used differently around the world. I wrote ethnographically about a group of weed smokers and hookup culture. I also wrote autoethnography about my experiences writing news articles for *The Daily Mississippian*. The double practice of writing news articles and then reflecting ethnographically taught me to tease out my emotional reactions from the objectivity sought after in journalism.

I learned to tie experiences and subcultures to their wider cultural context and significance. I read Sherry Ortner’s *Life and Death on Mount Everest* and understood how the phenomenon of mountaineering is a product of modernity—from analyzing years of qualitative data, Ortner used inductive reasoning to conclude that climbers are “countercultural romantics” seeking to transcend the vulgarity and materialism of modernity through rigor and beauty. And more recently, I read about the newer field of autoethnography in Carolyn Ellis’s book, *The Ethnographic I*. Ellis defines autoethnography as a form of qualitative research in which an author uses self-reflection and writing to explore personal experience and connect this

autobiographical story to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings. Ellis made me realize that my own personal experiences, full of layers of emotions, are relevant in understanding broader contexts. “There’s something to be gained by saturating your observations with your own subjectivity,” Ellis writes. “Social life is messy, uncertain, and emotional. If it is our desire to research social life, then we must embrace a research method that, to the best of its ability, acknowledges and accommodates mess and chaos, uncertainty and emotion.”

As a student journalist, I remember being exhilarated by all the opportunities to engage with the local community through interviews and reporting. I interviewed members of the Oxford Muslim Society, local poets, artists and musicians, and protestors at the March on Mississippi at Nissan. I wrote about the University Dance Company’s performance, the LGBTQ Pride Camp and a Holocaust survivor’s lecture on campus. I covered important issues, such as House Bill 1523, the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum and the arrival of a controversial political student organization on campus. From these experiences, I became more enmeshed in the community and learned to find sources, conduct interviews and write accessibly and succinctly to a wide audience, which are all skills that carried over into this thesis.

After about a year of writing these objective, third-person articles for the DM, I craved to write more creatively in first-person about the issues that mattered to me, so I switched to writing opinion. With opinion, I aimed to write pieces that might be considered “public sociology,” meaning I took many of the sources and insights I gained from my honors Sociology of Gender, Sexuality and Religion course and applied them to local issues for a general audience. I wanted my parents and friends to read all the books I read in that honors seminar, such as Lisa Wade’s *American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus*, but I knew many of these texts were complex, full of sociological jargon, and thus, often unappealing to a wider audience. Each

week, I excitedly picked out my topic and accumulated research, quotes and ideas, then the night before the editor's deadline, I would sit down at my desk with a thermos of coffee and fervidly write for hours, motivated by the adrenaline rush of knowing that my voice mattered in the community. I remember beaming when I saw my first opinion piece in the paper, titled "Deconstructing the 'Boys Will be Boys' Myth." I also wrote articles about how institutionalized distrust of women protects rapists, how sorority rules contribute to sexual assault, and how the key to avoiding 'gray areas' in sexual consent is for men to be more empathetic and women more assertive. When Tarana Burke, the founder of the #MeToo movement, came to speak on campus, I wrote a follow-up piece emphasizing how the words we use contribute to sexual violence.

My junior year, I took advanced creative non-fiction with Beth Ann Fennelly, which is where I discovered essayist Leslie Jamison. We read Jamison's essay *The Empathy Exams* in class and I was instantly infatuated with her vulnerability, complexity and ability to connect different experiences and explore every avenue of thought: "When bad things happened to other people, I imagined them happening to me. I didn't know if this was empathy or theft." Over the years, I've read all of Jamison's creative non-fiction— *The Empathy Exams*, *Recovering* and *Make It Scream, Make It Burn* and am always astonished by how she seamlessly weaves together memoir, reportage, research and literary criticism. Her unique style allows her writing to meander and probe from many angles in order to ultimately offer insight into how metaphor, empathy, storytelling and pain affect her life and the lives of others. Jamison writes about wrought topics, such as abortion, pain and hypochondria, which I used to shy away from because as Jamison herself points out, "Confessional writing gets a bad rap. People call it self-absorbed, solipsistic, self-indulgent." But by writing and publishing "confessional" essays, Jamison

realized that confession elicited responses and “coaxed chorus like a bushfire.” As Carolyn Ellis also points out in *Ethnographic I*, hearing the stories of others helps us understand our own stories better. I was blown away with Jamison’s ability to confront and grapple with such personal issues, which inspired me to write an early draft of “The Red Swimsuit” essay in Beth Ann Fennelly’s course. “The essay doesn’t offer seamless narrative or watertight argument,” Leslie Jamison writes. “It investigates its own seams. It traces what leaks.”

With “The Red Swimsuit,” I wanted to excavate my earliest interactions with social media in order to understand how they snowballed into an unhealthy obsession and understand what made it possible for me to let go of that obsession. I juxtaposed my experiences with the current social media trends. And I also wanted to look at how the formative experience of living in Perth, Australia affected my psychosocial development. My hope is that this essay will console and inspire young girls and parents who may be struggling to soar beyond the harmful effects of social media. This piece was inspired by Jessica Valenti’s book, *The Purity Myth: How America’s Obsession with Virginity is Hurting Young Women*, and Leslie Jamison’s essay “Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain,” both of which incorporate personal experience, research and reportage in order to evocatively examine how our culture harms young women. Yet, I didn’t want “The Red Swimsuit” to be as heavy as Valenti and Jamison’s pieces. I wanted “The Red Swimsuit” to be humorous and light-hearted, in the same way Gretchen Rubin’s book *The Happiness Project* or Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird* offered personal experience and advice while also making one laugh. I worked on balancing comical self-mockery with serious conclusions in “The Red Swimsuit.” Like Sarah Vowell’s hilarious and informative *Assassination Vacation*, which follows Vowell’s comical obsession with presidential

assassinations, I want my readers to come away from “The Red Swimsuit” having learned something new while also having a laugh.

With “The New YouTube: Suburbia & Sleek Sabotage,” I used my personal experiences to help me understand why young people are so infatuated with watching such banal vlogs of rich kids in LA, then I extrapolated this subculture to a wider context and speculated on what it might mean for the future. This piece was inspired by many different feature magazine articles, including Seyward Darby’s piece about the women of the alt-right, “The Rise of the Valkyries,” in *Harper’s*; Caitlin Flanigan’s yearlong investigation of Greek houses, “The Dark Power of Fraternities,” in *The Atlantic*; Vauhini Vara’s look inside the competitive Indian-American spelling community, “Bee-Brained,” in *Harper’s*; Leslie Jamison’s essay about virtual reality, “Sim Life,” in *The Atlantic*, and Michael Pollan’s book *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression and Transcendence*. These texts all involve the writer immersing herself in a subculture, writing in the first-person and exploring the greater implications on society. Vauhini Vara also used her personal experience as an Indian American spelling-bee competitor to inform her exploration of the subculture, which in anthropological terms, would be called a reflexive or narrative ethnography. Vara alternated between flashbacks and reportage on current spelling bee families, champions and competitions to create a layered piece, which is what I aimed to do with “The New YouTube: Suburbia & Sleek Sabotage.” I traced my interactions with YouTube back to my roots in my hometown area of Cleveland, Ohio, which helped me better understand the ways in which suburbia shapes the new Youtuber. Yet, compared to “The Red Swimsuit,” my essay about YouTube dwells less in my own experiences and focuses more on the ascent of the average kid in suburbia to LA stardom. Like Michael Pollan, who went on psilocybin trips in order to

better understand his topic, I wanted to participate in my research, so I engaged with the new YouTube and reported on my reactions. Pollan also doesn't like writing as an expert, admitting that he's a "naïve fish out of water" on page one, because he uses his own learning process as a stylistic tool, which is a technique I used in the essay on YouTube. "The narrative that we always have as writers is our own education on the topic," Pollan said. "We can recreate the process of learning that's behind the book."

The essay about photographer Maude Schuyler Clay, "A Record of the World as She Sees It" was inspired by Leslie Jamison's essays on photography, "Maximum Exposure" and "The Photographs That Make Me Feel Less Alone," and Joan Didion's *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* essay about Joan Baez, "Where the Kissing Never Stops," in which Didion deftly characterizes Baez with an authoritative stance. "Joan Baez was a personality before she was entirely a person," Didion writes. "And like anyone to whom that happens, she is in a sense the hapless victim of what others have seen in her, written about her, wanted her to be and not to be." However, unlike Didion, I used the first-person in "A Record of the World as She Sees It" because I thought Maude Schuyler Clay's life story and artistic vision made me reflect on my own artistic vision. And, I used the first-person because I was inspired by Jamison's essays on photographers Annie Appel and Gary Winogrand. Jamison didn't write the basic profile piece, she wrote an essay that used the artistic profile as a springboard to ask questions about representation, witness, storytelling, authenticity, morality and loneliness. In my essay, I found that grappling with Maude Schuyler Clay's artistic story and mission made me aware of my goals moving forward as a young writer.

The essay I struggled with most was "Reckoning with Your Barbie Savior" because I had trouble focusing on one theme. I wanted to explore the gendered and racial aspects of volunteer-

tourism, the morals, ethics and altruism. And I wanted to ask, can we help ourselves and others at the same time? But by writing many, many drafts, I realized I most wanted to investigate the tangible effects of orphanage volunteerism on the population we're meant to be serving.

"Reckoning Your Barbie Savior" was inspired by Katherine Boo's book, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, Mary Gaitskill's essay "Lost Cat," Lacy M. Johnson's essay collection *The Reckonings*, Bassey Ikpi's essay "Yaka" and Kiese Laymon's essay "You Are The Second Person." Like Katherine Boo, who spent years reporting on a makeshift community of Mumbai, I took copious pages of notes while I was in Ghana and aimed to write evocative scenes full of tension. Critics applaud Boo for writing non-fiction that reads like a novel, which is exactly what I love to read and write. Boo's attention to detail and real-life narrative arcs are remarkable. Like Mary Gaitskill did in "Lost Cat," I wanted to shift back and forth in time and place without confusion and I wanted to braid these different experiences in order to produce a resonating message. And, like Lacy Johnson, I wanted to reckon. Many of Johnson's essays reckon with crisis and injustice. In "What We Pay," Johnson reflects on her privileged position in the world while analyzing the fallout from the BP Oil Spill and narrating her participation in a protest against BP, in order to reckon with injustice. With "Reckoning with Your Barbie Savior," I wanted to reckon with my involvement in volunteerism—what does this experience mean to me, how should I move forward and how can my experience illuminate issues within the industry.

I had trouble condensing "Reckoning with Your Barbie Savior," until I decided to experiment with the second person present tense, which helped me to naturally cut out extraneous information. I was inspired by Bassey Ikpi's "Yaka," which alternates between second and first person to unravel Ikpi's relationship with her mother and reflect on how her bipolar disorder affects that relationship. "In your eyes, you, have never been completely whole,"

Ikpi writes, which stung me when I read it because I was directly experiencing Ikpi's thoughts as if they were my own. I wanted to do the same with my thoughts about volunteerism. Many people criticize Western women, like me, who sponsor orphans in Africa, so I wanted the reader to understand how she could also get tangled up in something so corrupt. I wanted readers to feel what I felt as I was experiencing it in the present tense so they would no longer villainize Barbie Savors and understand the nuances of the entire situation. And, like Kiese Laymon did with his essay "You Are The Second Person," I wanted to use second-person to implicate myself and blur the lines between oppressor and victim. Laymon writes, "You're not a monster. You're not innocent." My hope is that "Reckoning with Your Barbie Savior" will encourage others to come forward and confront unethical mistakes they've made in the past.

With "Wanted: Someone with Whom to Simply Pass the Days," I was eager to deconstruct the concept of love, and through this process come to a revelation about my own confusing love life. For an early draft, I went to the library and checked out a stack of books on love, written by psychologists, psychiatrists, cultural critics, sociologists and biological anthropologists, and aimed to synthesize all this research with my personal experiences in order to create a friendly and informative piece. "Wanted: Someone with Whom to Simply Pass the Days" was inspired by *The New York Times* Modern Love column, Beth Ann Fennelly's *Great with Child: Letters to a Young Mother*, Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* and Gretchen Rubin's *The Happiness Project*. Like writers of Modern Love columns, I wanted to narrate my revelations about relationships, dating and love in a fun, accessible style that would draw the reader's attention. Like Fennelly's *Great with Child: Letters to a Young Mother*, I wanted to write in a conversational tone, as if I was chatting with a friend. Like Rubin, I also wanted to incorporate the research, articles and other pieces of information that helped me come to my final

realization, which was that love isn't a fairytale, it's a matter of simply finding someone with whom to pass the days. Like Rubin, I hope that readers will gain insight from my essay on how to be happier and nurture healthy relationships. Lastly, like Gilbert, I wanted to include the insight I gained from my experiences engaging with other cultures in order to provide a holistic view on love and romance that might challenge the conventional Western perspective.

Ultimately, I hope to expand this thesis into a full collection of 16 essays, organized into four subsections of four essays—Attention, Manic, Crash and Forward—that'll tell the story of my life, with all its messy emotions, in tandem with telling a greater story about what it's like to grow up in a globalized world wrought with social media. Many writers and researchers, such as Jean Twenge, Lisa Wade, Nancy Jo Sales and Kate Julian have analyzed Generation Z, with Twenge and Sales focusing on social media's effects on mental health, and Wade and Julian focuses on the implications of hookup culture and the so-called sex recession, but those writers are from an earlier generation. There are few Gen Z writers who are able to write auto ethnographically about their first-hand experiences with the trends and statistics mentioned in magazines like *The Atlantic*. Unlike other reportage, I will be able to reflexively narrate and reflect upon the tangible effects of growing up online in a time of hookup culture and in a highly mobilized world.

The final book-length collection will explore themes of femininity, popularity, celebrity, vulnerability, love and exploitation. "The Red Swimsuit" and "The New YouTube" will be in the first subsection, "Attention," which will focus on my generation's obsession with attention and celebrity. "Wanted: Simply Someone with Whom to Pass the Time" will be in the second subsection, "Manic," which will explore the phenomena of hookup culture and polyamory, and my personal issues with partying and substance abuse. The third section of the book, "Crash,"

will focus on mental health, my experience with burn-out in college and the resultant process of healing. “A Record of the World as She Sees It” and “Reckoning Your Barbie Savior” will be included in the fourth and final section, “Forward,” which will look at all I’ve learned and how we can move forward from the mistakes and turmoil of our pasts.

Before writing creative non-fiction, I honestly had very little experience with revision. When I wrote yearbook articles and pieces for the school paper, I seldom revised and never rewrote anything, but working on this thesis has given me a whole new appreciation for the art of revision. I guess I always assumed that authors just had natural talent, but William Zinsser writes, “A clear sentence is no accident, very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time.” And John McPhee wrote a *New Yorker* piece titled “Writing by Omission,” in which he points out writing is selection: “Just to start a piece of writing you have to choose one word and only one from more than a million in the language. Now keep going.” Beth Ann Fennelly, the Poet Laureate of Mississippi and my thesis advisor, has taught me, through her edits and cuts, how trimming a piece can make it stronger and snappier. With my instinctual desire to document everything, like I did with my diary as a kid, my first drafts can be tens of thousands of words and read like a folder full of thick description field notes. But by adopting a diligent daily practice—I write for about two hours almost every morning—I’ve learned that it’s possible and necessary for me to slowly and methodically chip away at my endless first drafts. “An essay is not an attempt captured in its first iteration, but in its ninth, or tenth, or fifteenth—honed, interrogated, reimaged,” Jamison writes. “Another word for this is ‘revision.’”

I revised with a cookie cutter and kept the parts most relevant to theme and then saved the rest of the dough to be recycled in later essays. At first, I hated this process. I thought it was monotonous and I was impatient to move onto something new, like I was used to doing with the

weekly opinion columns. But now I've seen the benefits of rewriting, rereading and revision, and learned to cherish the little triumphs and improvements. My revision process was also inspired by my professor Kiese Laymon, who writes in his award-winning book *Heavy: An American Memoir*, "For the first time in my life, I realized telling the truth was way different from finding the truth, and finding the truth had everything to do with revisiting and rearranging words. Revisiting and rearranging words didn't only require vocabulary; it required will, and maybe courage. Revised word patterns were revised thought patterns. Revised thought patterns shaped memory. I knew, looking at all those words, that memories were there, I just had to rearrange, add, subtract, sit, and sift until I found a way to free the memory."

Writing is a form of inquiry and with each revision of the essays in this thesis, I got closer to the truth. I wrote the first draft of "Wanted: Simply Someone with Whom to Pass the Days" nearly three years ago, in the summer of 2017, and am astounded by how much it has changed and grown with revision. I wrote the first draft of "The Red Swimsuit" in the fall of 2018, which focused on the social media aspects of the piece, then, in the fall of 2019, I took Nature Writing with Ann Fisher-Wirth and wrote a memoir about the experience of moving to Australia, being a misfit, making new friends and learning to scuba dive. I ultimately realized that these two drafts were connected, so I took bits and pieces from each, and added some new material, to create the final product in this thesis. I am proud of how far this essay has come in two years, after seven drafts and feedback from many professors and friends. Similarly, "The New YouTube" and "Reckoning Your Barbie Savior" began in spring of 2019 with the earliest drafts written in Vanessa Gregory's special topics in journalism course, Writing with a Voice. After multiple rewrites and rounds of feedback, the final pieces are almost unrecognizable from the first drafts. I also took Advanced Creative Nonfiction with Kiese Laymon in the fall of 2019,

where I worked on rewrites of “Reckoning Your Barbie Savior” and wrote the earliest draft of “A Record of the World as She Sees It.” Working on this thesis has made me realize that writing is a group effort, not an individual pursuit, and exchanging feedback is a crucial part of the process of writing as inquiry.

When I used to write for the school paper, I cared more about seeing my name in print, but writing this thesis has allowed me to find so much joy in the creative process and for that, I am sincerely grateful. I hope the joy I gained from collecting and assembling all these pieces is expressed and transmuted to you as you read these essays.

* Some names and identifying information in these essays have been changed to protect the
privacy of people involved *

The Red Swimsuit

Jacqueline Knirnschild updated her Facebook status.

Come sledding at my house Wednesday after school at 4pm!!! Everyone's invited!!! Bring a sled (if you can) and a swimsuit to go in the hot tub!!!

Jan 05, 2010 11:47am

When I was thirteen years old, on a visit back home to northeast Ohio for the holidays, I had a hot tub party with a group of girlfriends and afterwards, I uploaded a photo of myself in a sexy red swimsuit that was too big on me. The suit was a one-piece, open in the middle with gold chains holding the left and right sides together over my flat chest and protruding ribcage. In the photo, I lay in my snowy backyard, propping myself up on my elbows. My brace-filled grimace does little to hide the discomfort of the icy grass pricking my body. My long wet dirty-blonde hair falls in dark strings on my shoulders. Of course, before I uploaded the photo to Facebook, I had fixed my red eye. My eyes became beady black dots, like empty holes in my head. I had learned how to edit photos by watching classmates at my all-girls private school in Perth, Western Australia—Presbyterian Ladies' College. PLC had an eight-acre campus that was tucked away in the swaying peppermint trees and sprawling stucco mansions of the most expensive suburb in Perth. PLC, which our rival schools claimed stood for “penis-licking cunts,” cost about \$20,000 per year and was the only school in the area that gave every student a MacBook from Year 6. At PLC, we mastered the art of millisecond switches between two desktops: one open to pool party pics on iPhoto and one to the current assignment. And now that my family and I were back in our suburban Ohio hometown to visit for Christmas and New Year's, I could apply my editing skills to a new winter wonderland backdrop.

Meticulously editing a collection of photos was like wrapping and decorating presents. The magic wand button was like glitter that enhanced everything in just a few seconds. The warm filter transformed my ghostly pale skin to a sun-kissed tan. The black & white filter

eradicating my red eye and made me look classier—almost like a character from my favorite show *Gossip Girl*. And don't get me started on the manual adjustments—with a calculated slide of a toggle, I could increase the lighting and exposure so that my skin was clear, and my nose almost disappeared, drawing more attention to my eyes. Tagging friends was like the *to and from* sticker on a gift, and the captions were the ribbons that tied everything together. I looked forward to polishing the moment more than I looked forward to the actual moment. And as soon as I clicked 'publish' on an album, I'd start refreshing the webpage over and over again, impatient for the little red badge to appear in the top right corner. I think I was so obsessed with taking and uploading photos because, as Susan Sontag wrote, photographs help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure.

Alison Thompson commented on your photo.

that bather is adorable!!! Xx

[Jan 06, 2010 6:31pm](#)

Michelle Mullah commented on your photo.

you look so sexy omg! <3

[Jan 06, 2010 7:13pm](#)

In March 2008, when I was in fifth grade in Ohio, my dad, who's a financial analyst, was offered a two-year contracted job in Perth to help implement a new software. My parents accepted and the next thing I knew, in late May, we left the cul-de-sac house my mom had renovated herself and were flying business class around the world. We were the first middle-management family that the company had sent to Australia, but they treated us like we were a CEO family. The company hired a relocation specialist to help us transition, set our rent limit so high that we were able to rent a 6-bedroom house with an inground pool near the Swan River,

and paid the tuition for my brother and me to attend two of the most expensive schools in the area. When I think back on this part of my life, I imagine it like an Edith Wharton novel: new money being catapulted into the old money neighborhoods of metropolitan Perth during the city's mining boom of the early 2000s.

On my first day of school at PLC, I was assigned a "buddy" named Samantha who introduced me to her friends at lunch. They all sat on the ground in a corridor overlooking the green campus courtyard. I thought these girls would be prim and proper snobs, like the girls from Lisi Harrison's *The Clique* series, but they were all so rambunctious. Most of them had known each other since preschool and leaned on one another, stole food from each other's lunches and braided one another's hair with our uniform white ribbon. *Maybe, I wondered, they're so wild because they're all probably descendants of convicts?* Samantha introduced me to Stephanie, who had just returned from a ski trip in the Alps, and to Morgan, who asked if my school in America was like *High School Musical*. "Ummm, not really," I said. Stephanie said that her family spent a few years living in Chicago when she was a toddler and she just loved the snow. "Oh, yeah, the snow is nice," I said. I felt like they expected me to be a bold, funny and trend-setting American girl, like Hannah Montana or Amanda Bynes.

For the first month in Perth, I cried almost every night, and e-mailed my friends back home about their new middle school boyfriends. The only boys I ever came in contact with were my little brother's annoying friends. And my voice just seemed to sink whenever I tried to talk to my PLC classmates. Once, my Humanities teacher asked me to read a passage aloud to the class, and my embarrassing Ohio voice scratched my throat. I spoke hoarsely and tears threatened to overflow. "It's okay, Jacqueline," Mrs. Campbell said. "You can stop now." All the girls in my class looked around at each other, surely wondering what was wrong with this puny American.

These girls were all so posh and colorful, so worldly and free, while I was so tiny and reserved, so buck-toothed and nerdy with my black cat-eye glasses. And I excelled in all my classes, which I imagined probably only made the girls dislike me even more. Once, I remember trying to make small talk with a loud netball player named Jennifer by asking her what she thought of the recent test. “Oh, Jackie, I looked at the first problem and was like, *fuck*, I don’t know any of this shit!” She laughed. That was another thing—all the girls constantly swore, which was something I had never done in my life. I nodded and agreed with Jen that the test was really hard. Then the teacher handed us back our grades. I had gotten an 8, which was equivalent to an A. I immediately shoved the test in my folder and looked away from Jen. At lunch, I sat alone by the playground escaping into the Bella and Edward’s romance in *Twilight*.

I only ever really came alive after school, when I was free to be myself and dive into the regimented personal schedule I had perfected over the first few months in Perth. I made highlighted timetables with blocks for each of my many activities, T.V. shows and homework assignments. The first thing I always did when I got home was practice the oboe for an hour because I thought that was the only way I would ever get a scholarship for college. My parents never pressured me to play the oboe, I just chose to play because the oboe had required special approval from the music teacher, and I wanted to be special. After my daily embouchure exercises, scales, trilling, band and solo pieces, my schedule dictated that I do all of my homework in two hours, but I almost always went overtime because I was so neurotic about studying for tests that were still weeks away. I often had to be corralled into gathering my textbooks, MacBook and binders off the table so we could set up for dinner. Sometimes, I even cried or hyperventilated that I wasn’t done yet and would never have enough time to finish all of my assignments, but then my parents would ask me what was actually due the next day and, of

course, I had already finished it. My mom would tell me to relax and I'd yell, "I don't want to fail, *Mom!*"

I took Japanese at PLC and was determined to become fluent. I made a special Japanese binder with supplemental resources I had printed offline and meticulously made vocab flashcards. And I joined the debate team—furiously researching topics. After a few debates, the faculty-advisor decided I was best at forming rebuttal on-the-spot, so, I became the permanent third speaker. I was thrilled. Rebuttal allowed me to let out the fiery voice I always smothered inside me at school. I still remember glowing when I got the last word against the Scotch College Boys team. We won that debate.

I briefly joined the rowing team and got up at 5am to scull brackish river water in a shell with nine other girls. I joined rock-climbing club and got my open water scuba-diving license. I joined concert band and won first place in a woodwind competition. I learned how to cook niche recipes, like wasabi-burgers. I got a pet bunny named Kerby. I swam laps in my pool and went for long weekend runs to the river with my dad. I read stacks of young adult fiction from the library down the street. My family and I spent a lot of time together—playing *Guitar Hero* and *Call of Duty*, watching movies and vacationing. We skydived in New Zealand, swam with dolphins in Monkey Mia, climbed Uluru.

I took an open-water scuba-diving course, even though I was only thirteen and the age requirement was fourteen. I just wrote 1995 instead of 1996 and didn't tell anyone. I remember squeezing into my wetsuit, wrapping the heavy weight belt around my waist in the ninety-degree sun, then jumping off the dock into the cool water. The salty relief seeped into the thin layer between my skin and the suit, then we descended into the unknown and all language floated away with our bubbly exhales. I focused on my breathing and the peaceful alien world glowing

in turquoise. I forgot all about the girls at school and my dorky Ohio accent. Then, after I got my junior license, I took a master class. In the deep-water dives near Rottnest Island, I saw reef sharks who seemed to patrol the corals, flimsy jellyfish, kelp and seaweed waving in the gentle pulse of the current. I saw translucent schools of fish with toothpick-thin bones. Once, I saw a green sea turtle glide through a ring of coral like an Olympian hurdler in slow-motion. I marveled at the expansive underwater galaxy and realized that although my social life at school was as desolate as the remote deserts of the Outback, my interior life was as abundant as the lush reefs of the Indian Ocean.

After a year in Perth, my class at PLC got a new student. Pakistani-Honduran Michelle had just moved from Dubai. I pounced on her. Michelle had lived in Texas most of her life, and we bonded over silly Australian assumptions about Americans. We made fun of how uncivilized and immature the other girls acted and imitated their accents and the way they stole cheese and crackers from each other's lunch boxes. We mocked how they begged for two-dollar gold coins to buy "lollies" from the cafeteria. We lamented about how much better our lives had been in the U.S. and Dubai. I could tell that in any other part of the world, Michelle was cool. I knew she was cool in Dubai and Texas, because she showed me pictures of her and her best friend shopping at the Dubai Mall. Michelle owned clothes and shoes from Kate Spade and Juicy Couture. All I had was an imitation Coach bag. Michelle's house in Perth had its own tennis court and her bedroom looked like something from a catalog—bright pink and orange pillows lined her queen-sized bedspread. I did have two bedrooms in my house (one to watch TV and one to sleep), but they were both a hodgepodge of furniture shipped from back home and

purchased from yard sales. Michelle had two chihuahua puppies and the flat screen in her bedroom was almost always tuned to *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* on Bravo. One night at my house, Michelle introduced me to *Gossip Girl*, which became a show I binge-watched and re-watched for years. *Gossip Girl* is about an anonymous online blogger who receives “tips” from the wealthy, affluent teens of the Upper East Side, and then sends these secrets out in the form of snarky text message “blasts.”

At first, Michelle and I continued to hang out with Tara—a freckled Belgian expat who had recently moved from Muscat, Oman, and the only friend I had really made in the first year—but Michelle quickly deemed her “too childish” and we fazed Tara out and integrated into a group of girls who threw extravagant birthday pool parties. With Michelle by my side, I felt like I could finally be the cool American that all the Australian girls wanted me to be so badly. My mom said the girls at my school “had a love affair with American culture.” One girl, named Allison, whom Michelle and I befriended, would ask my mom about American high school. “Do they really have football games on Friday nights and cheerleaders and a band and lockers and a bell in between classes and do kids sneak out back to smoke???” She clearly watched too much *Friday Night Lights*.

My mom said many Australians, like Alison, referred to Australia as a ‘mini-America’ that was in the infancy of becoming America. Everything in Perth was still closed on Sundays and superstores like Walmart and Target were only beginning to gain popularity. And despite how many times we told them, my mom said most Australians assumed we were super wealthy and lived in a sprawling 50-acre ranch in Texas that was filled with guns. At the deli, my mom said a woman once stopped and stared at her while she was ordering. “I just love your accent,” the woman said. “So posh, so Hollywood.” The accent that I had been so ashamed of turned out

to tickle my new friends, like Alison, who entreated me to say words like ‘damnit’ and ‘shit.’ With these new friends, we also pulled all-nighters to watch American teen movies like *It’s a Boy Girl Thing*, *John Tucker Must Die*, *She’s the Man*. Alison told me, “You’re so lucky that you get to return to this ...”

Facebook:

Jacqueline Knirnschild updated her status.

that was officially the funnest party ever!!! :) happy birthday Michelle Mullah!!!

[May 22, 2010 11:04am \(Age 13\)](#)

Hanging out with Michelle meant I spent less time scuba-diving, cooking and reading, and more time primping myself in front of the mirror. Michelle taught me how to rim my lids with eyeliner and she even threw a huge birthday bash at her house. Since we had to wear strict black and “poop” green uniforms during the week—white button-down polos with plaid ties, V-neck sweaters, black blazers, plaid skirts, black tights, laced shoes and berets—and weren’t allowed to wear make-up or have our hair down, the weekend parties were our runways. I put on water-proof mascara to prepare for Michelle’s party. We took photos underwater in the sardine-shaped pool, in the sauna with towels wrapped around our heads, in the guest house, on the back patio and standing on the elevated, fenced-in walls surrounding the tennis court. We listened to Akon’s song “Sexy Bitch” while imitating the pose of Allegra Anderson—a girl in our year who did some part-time modeling—and turned sideways, looking over our shoulders, lips closed in a smirk or open in a pout. We claimed we were mocking her, but I knew that we all wanted to be her.

I edited those party pics with a sense of urgency—everyone needed to see me like this. If the right person stumbled across just the right photo on Facebook, I was sure that they would

immediately recruit me to model. I mean look at me, I thought, if I just kept my mouth closed and hid my braces, and had the right make-up, smile, pose, lighting, angle and editing, I was just as beautiful as Allegra Anderson. One time, I even submitted some selfies to the agency she worked for. They never e-mailed me back.

Jacqueline Knirnschild updated her status.

okay really mad right now

Mar 30, 2010 7:00pm

A few months after I uploaded the photo of myself in the revealing red swimsuit, I discovered for the first time that the jewels I presented to Facebook could also receive backlash. Two of my aunt's religious, conservative friends had left comments on my home-schooled cousin Mackenzie's profile, praising her modest dress and condemning my swimsuit:

I just can't help but say this (although I'll probably be in big trouble for it.) You are an absolutely lovely young lady. After viewing the pics below of your cousin, I couldn't help but comment. I'm trying to choose my words very carefully here. She is a nice young lady herself, I'm sure, but that bathing suit? I'm not sure what's worse, the fact that she's wearing it or the fact that people are commenting on how great it is. I'll leave it at that.

Amen. We are innocent children for such a short time. I'm sure she will look back on that "bather" in horror as an adult and wonder why no one told her she couldn't wear it. At least I hope she will.

Like many young girls today, I wanted attention and fame. I wanted to be the beautiful and sultry woman on the billboards and in the fashion magazines—she looked so much happier than I felt. So, I wore a provocative red swimsuit. But now here I am, at age 22, wondering if those women were right. Part of me *is* looking back in horror and wishing I had enjoyed my innocence for longer. Were these women slut-shaming me or trying to remove me from something that was toxic?

“Hey, Mom, you remember that red swimsuit debacle?”

“Yeah,” she said.

“Why’d you let me wear such a provocative swimsuit when I was thirteen?”

“It was inappropriate, but I decided to pick my battles, and that wasn’t one of them—if I would’ve fought you on it, you would’ve just wanted to wear it even more, plus I figured you wouldn’t be wearing a swimsuit like that when you were in your twenties ...”

My mom said that she did worry the swimsuit showed off too much skin, and that I only wore it to try and impress boys, but at the time, I didn’t even know any boys. I went to an all-girls school. I was just trying to be sexy for myself and my friends. I thought that was just what girls did. Ultimately, my mom said she bought me the red swimsuit because she “trusted me to make my own decisions,” which was something I had been grateful for as a girl. In fifth grade, I was already reading *People* and *Marie Claire*. I was learning about boob-jobs, tanning, hot tips & tricks in bed, and how to get the perfect beach bod. When I was eleven, I visited my mom’s sister, my Aunt Sandy, and touted my magazines and *Mean Girls* DVD along with me for the sleepover. Aunt Sandy and I watched the movie together in her apartment living room. My eyes glazed over as I entered the world of the Plastics—wondering which table I would eventually sit at in the high school cafeteria.

“How can you let her read and watch stuff like that?” my aunt asked my mom in a hushed whisper when she picked me up the next day.

“She’s mature and smart enough to handle it,” my mom said, almost smugly.

Maybe, though, the question isn’t whether or not young girls *can* handle it, rather whether or not they *should* have to handle such pressures. Then again, my mom never dealt with social media as a girl, so she didn’t exactly understand what I was experiencing. She didn’t know

what it was like to have strangers commenting on a photo of you, disparaging your decision to wear a certain swimsuit. As Nancy Jo Sales concludes in her 2016 book, *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers*, in which she interviewed over 200 girls aged thirteen to nineteen, “There were no rules for how to behave in this new social media landscape, no guide for girls to know how to respond to the way others were behaving and treating them.”

After seeing those ladies’ disparaging comments, I immediately updated my status and messaged my other cousin, Rachel, who’s four years older than Mackenzie and me. At that time, compared to home-schooled Mackenzie, Rachel and I had more similar lifestyles.

Message to Rachel Battocletti:

I mean what the heck are wrong with these people?!?!? first of all, what are they doing looking at pictures of me??? i dont even know who the heck they are!!!!!!!!!! second of all, that swimsuit is CUTE!!! it's a lot better than wearing a bikini this one at least covers part of your stomach!!! third they don't even know me so how can they say that i shouldn't be wearing that swimsuit?!?!? i'm just really pissed off :(

lylas,

your inappropriate swimsuit wearing cousin

Jacqueline

Mar 30, 2010 7:17pm

Ironically, I felt like my privacy had been violated, even though I was the one who had made the photo public. Rachel assured me that these women were just jealous of me because I was young and pretty, and they were old and wrinkly. She also left a comment on their remarks that included Matthew 7:1-5, “Judge not, that ye be not judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged...” The whole thing turned into a huge fight and eventually,

Mackenzie deleted all the comments and I deleted the photo. But part of me wonders if this little scandal was exactly what I had in mind when I decided to upload the photo. As Edith Wharton wrote in *The House of Mirth* in 1905, “It is less mortifying to believe one’s self unpopular than insignificant.”

If I was truly embarrassed about the comments, I wouldn’t have wanted anyone to know about them. I wouldn’t have drawn more attention to the situation by messaging Rachel and posting about being really mad. I posted that I was mad because I knew my friends would then ask me what was wrong, giving me the perfect opportunity to share the juicy story and get more attention. And my decision to message Rachel before any of my other friends was also probably deliberate—I knew she loved drama and would take action right away to defend me, causing more commotion.

Stirring up commotion was the easiest way to get attention. That’s what *Gossip Girl* had taught me. On our flight from Perth to Cleveland for the holidays, we had a few days layover in London. Despite touring Windsor Castle, looking at Big Ben while on the London Eye, and seeing *Grease: The Musical* at Piccadilly Theatre, my most vivid memories from that trip were the *Gossip Girl* episode I was watching. Nice guy Dan Humphrey, who’s a student at St. Jude’s School for Boys, sleeps with an English teacher at the Constance Billard School for Girls. My parents had to tear me away from the web of tantalizing rumors to eat breakfast at our swanky hotel. I wanted to identify with the girls of Constance Billard. I thought it was remarkable how Serena and Blair, who were just sixteen-year-old private school girls, could attract so much online attention. I envied how strangers gasped in awe and shock when the two girls’ photos, scandals and triumphs were posted on the *Gossip Girl* blog. I mean, I *was* a thirteen-year-old private school girl who vacationed in London. Hypothetically, in a few years, I could be just like

Serena. The backlash at my red swimsuit was only minor compared to the buzz that S&B generated, but it was a start.

By the time I was a junior in high school in Ohio, I had become the girl who sent weekly nudes to a slew of over twenty guys. My friend and I even came up with our own “themes” for the nudes, like “Thong Thursday” and “Titty Tuesday.” We pushed our bodies together in front of my wall mirror, pouted and watched in glee as Snapchats from boys flooded my screen: *So hot, take it off, let’s hang*. I remember feeling a rush of pride when a guy once told me I reminded him of a “super chill” porn star. But I also remember sinking when I didn’t receive at least one like per minute on an Instagram selfie. I remember hating myself for not getting asked to homecoming when I saw photos of cheerleaders being asked with roses and chocolates. I remember being embarrassed when my friends took a video of me making out with a guy in my hot tub and showed everyone.

This is the new normal for American girls and it’s only getting worse as children gain access to social media at younger ages. My red swimsuit fiasco was minor compared to what many thirteen-year-old girls deal with today. Nancy Jo Sales writes of thirteen-year-olds who send boys nudes that wind up on online “slut pages” available for boys to rate and judge. “Being a teenager has never been easy,” Jo Sales writes. “Faces and bodies are changing, hormones raging, emotions all over the place. Imagine adding to that a constant pressure to take pictures of yourself and look ‘hot’ in those pictures and have people like them. Imagine getting a dick pic from a boy, maybe before you’ve ever held a boy’s hand. Or being asked for nudes at a time when you’re just trying to feel comfortable in your changing body, and not always succeeding.”

And psychologist and Gen Z expert Jean M. Twenge writes that smartphones are ruining a generation. Twenge points out that teens' feelings of loneliness spiked in 2013 and have remained high since, especially among girls. 48 percent more girls said they often felt left out in 2015 than in 2010, compared with 27 percent more boys. For teen girls, social media is psychologically taxing, Twenge writes, because girls wait anxiously for the affirmation of comments and likes.

I was only able to eventually quit this self-demeaning behavior in college because I finally rediscovered that rich interior world I had created in Australia. I was lucky to have been initially an outcast at PLC because I was able to experience that interior world of curiosity, wonder, learning, adventure and ambition. But as soon as I dove into the world of social media—the constant comparisons, anxiety and self-objectification—I lost that lush interiority. Everything became about getting that perfect picture to upload—I had to buy new clothes that no one had seen on my Instagram profiles, I had to go to new places to promote myself as interesting, I had to meet more people so I could gain followers, I had to come up with wittier captions. Everything I did revolved around my social media presence until I eventually realized I needed to let it go. I learned to pick up a book when I was bored, instead of picking up my phone. I learned that the real world is already full of so much texture and excitement, and that the hyper-sexualized virtual world I had occupied for years would never fulfill me. But every time I see my younger cousin, or my friend's little sister, or the girl I used to babysit, I wonder what they're up to on their phones. I wonder if they have a rich interior world, if they daydream, get lost in a book, play an instrument, enjoy cooking or even just bask in solitude for a moment. Or, are they stuffing their push-up bras with socks and using FaceTune apps to whiten their teeth?

The New YouTube: Suburbia & Sleek Sabotage

“Attention, please beware that by entering this area you consent to be photographed, filmed or recorded,” reads a sign outside the four-story “Clout House,” in Los Angeles where Alissa Violet, a model and YouTuber, lives with nine other YouTubers. The Clout House’s rent is \$34,900 per month and it is complete with ten bedrooms, fourteen bathrooms, a pool with a waterfall, sauna and steam room, theater, bar, nightclub, DJ table and gym. “It’s just CloutGang shit—I don’t even know how to explain it,” Alissa, who wears an oversized blue t-shirt, full face of makeup and layered chain necklaces, says to the camera as she gets in the elevator. Alissa then walks past the sleek granite countertops in the kitchen to the balcony patio. “I feel such, like, one of those weird bitches, like, ooh, look at how much richer I am than you,” Alissa laughs and tosses her hair over her shoulder. “But like we don’t even pay for this, it’s our

company that pays for it—investors and all that.” On the balcony, there’s a huge white plastic bear, named Rufus, enjoying the 280-degree jetliner view, extending from downtown to the Pacific Ocean. Alissa says it’s overwhelming living in the Clout House. “I grew up in Ohio in, like, a small town,” she says. “But this is my life now.”

Alissa’s life seems to consist of modeling, hanging out with friends, making comedic videos and vlogging everything. She posts Instagram photos of herself in wrap dresses and shades on the Clout House balcony. She flies out to Milan for runway shows and she poses amid a staircase full of Louis Vuitton purses. She shows off her sense of humor in one YouTube video and orders delivery food, wipes make-up off half her face and then, when the delivery guy shows up, asks him if she looks good. She also documents everyday things, like her makeup routine, daily workouts and shenanigans, such as going shopping while cuffed to her friend’s wrist. And she vacations with her friends in Vegas and Coachella. “Hello, party people,” Alissa says in the Coachella vlog. “So, I didn’t even tell you guys that we got here by helicopter, it was so fun, I was, like, taking shots on the helicopter.” She collaborates with brands. “I’d like to give a quick thank-you to our sponsor for this video, the Real Real—an online luxury consignment app that sells some of my favorite designers at 90% off!” Her videos include clickbait, like, “it gets sexual” with a thumbnail of Alissa leaning in to kiss a female friend. “I’m a skinny legend!” she yells and strikes a pose in the mirror. “Jk, I need to work out.” And in nearly all her videos, she shakes her butt and grabs her breasts.

At my school, the University of Mississippi, two blonde sorority girls also document their lives on YouTube, with videos full of Lilly Pulitzer agendas, Starbucks Iced Caramel Lattes and plush pink pillows. When I first discovered these videos, I was amazed that these girls’ daily lives—making coffee, getting ready for class and hanging out in the dining room of their sorority

house—could amass 20,000 views. Both of these girls also said they “collaborated” with brands, meaning they endorsed brands, and planned to pursue YouTube at least as a side-career. One girl even started her own brand of sunglasses, which she advertised on her Instagram, and was making a decent profit off it. While I was interviewing these girls, I wondered, how did YouTube, which was founded in 2005, go from the fever dream of absurd home-video comedy that I remember as a kid, to this glossy world of wealthy social media influencers in sleek condos and glittery houses?

In 2008, I was a bored fifth grader in suburban northeast Ohio who frequently crowded around a laptop with my brother and parents to watch two pink and purple unicorns, who sound like they’re on drugs, drag crabby Charlie the unicorn to “Candy Mountain,” where he eventually wakes up with without his kidney. We also watched fictional brace-faced Fred Figglehorn, who wore a witch’s hat on Halloween and spoke in a digitally altered helium voice, “My mom took me to our school counselor a few times, she said I have temper problems, but I DON’T!!!” And then, as I got a bit older, I’d watch “Overexposed,” in which a twenty-year-old guy who refers to himself as Kingsley, ranted about pop culture in front of his grainy webcam. “Bitch, where do I even begin with B.o.B’s new song,” he said. “Can we pretend that airplanes in the night sky are like shooting stars? NO, we can’t, cause that’s fuckin’ stupid!” I watched Jenna Marbles—a blonde twenty-four-year-old go-go dancer, who uploaded her first fuzzy video in 2010, called “How to trick people into thinking you’re good looking.” Marbles satirizes girls who wear thick mascara, shove socks in their bras and wear so much makeup that they’re unrecognizable. Another classic Marble’s video is “How to Avoid Talking to People You Don’t Want To Talk To.” When creepy guys come grinding all up on you at the club, Marbles advises viewers to do

“the face”—a double-chinned, repulsed, eyebrows-raised look—and don’t move. “I swear it’s the best thing I’ve ever come up with,” she said.

YouTube blew up instantly, becoming so popular that the Teen Choice Awards created a “Web Star” award in 2008, which has since expanded to a “Digital” category composed of ten types of web stars, such as Choice Comedy Web Star, Choice Fashion/Beauty Web Star and Choice Youtuber. A YouTuber is someone who creates and uploads videos for a living and can earn an accolade of awards, like the Gold Play Button, which signifies 10 million subscribers. Google predicts by 2025, half of viewers under the age of 32 will not subscribe to a pay TV service. The world of YouTubers is a place of opportunity because anyone can grab a camera and start uploading videos of themselves and their everyday lives. It’s a world where an average girl from my suburban northeast Ohio high school can become a model, accumulate 3.8 million subscribers and move into a West Hollywood mansion in only a few years. Or at least, that’s the way it seems.

In high school, Alissa Butler, who worked at Panera Bread, posted on her Twitter and Instagram about her dreams of becoming a Victoria’s Secret Angel. I didn’t know her very well and we never even spoke in person, but we still followed each other on social media. *Never give up on your dreams*, she posted with a photo of fruit salad. She didn’t get very many likes. I thought she seemed nice, but from what I could tell, most people at my school didn’t like her. “Bro, why’d you invite her?” an upperclassman guy said to his friend while we were smoking hookah in his basement. “Alissa is so obnoxious.” Then, in May 2014, the day before Alissa graduated high school, she went to SouthPark Mall in Strongsville with her friend to shop for a commencement dress. There was a throng of middle school girls in the mall parking lot. “What the frick is this?” Alissa wondered. “Is Justin Bieber here or something?” She rolled her car

window down and asked the girls what was going on. “The Viners Jake and Logan Paul are here,” the girls said. “They’re going to do a meet-and-greet!” Alissa was like, “who?”

Vine was a popular app that existed from 2013 to 2016 and allowed users to upload six-second-long, looping video clips. A lot of people did stupid pranks and uploaded them to Vine. I took of a video of my bikini-clad friend at the McDonald’s drive-thru ordering a vanilla ice cream cone and then rubbing it all over her body while blasting the Pussycat Dolls’ *don’t cha wish your girlfriend was hot like me?* Other videos were just pointlessly funny, like my friend Jimmy asking his friend, “Hey Nate, how are those chicken strips?” Nate turned around and yelled in this obnoxious scratchy voice, “FUCK your chicken strips!” Jimmy and Nate’s 2014 video now has over 4 million views on YouTube, and when I told my college friends that I knew Nate, they exclaimed “you know the chicken strips guy?” And in 11th grade, at the Brunswick Old Fashioned Days, which was the summer carnival on our school’s blacktop parking lot, girls from other towns came up to Nate and said, “Oh my gosh! You’re the chicken strips guy!”

Vine has since been replaced by TikTok, and to me, these apps show just how boring it is to be a teenager in suburban America, perhaps especially in northeast Ohio. Because interestingly enough, the “kings” of Vine, brothers Jake and Logan Paul, are also from the Cleveland, Ohio area, which makes me wonder if the place where I grew up was actually a gold mine of debauchery, stupidity and superficiality. Logan is older than Jake by a year, but I always mix them up because they both have that iconic “bro” look—shaggy hair, hoodies and expressions that say, *I do what I want, and I don’t care*. Actually, to be fair, Logan promotes himself more as the “goofball” while Jake supposedly excels in stunts, pranks and video-editing. Logan’s early Vines include screaming when his iPhone accidentally fell in a sink of water, “Still refusing to accept it’s winter” and cannonballing into an icy lake, and texting and walking into a

series of glass doors. “Girlfriends” also periodically appear in his Vines, like, “when she asks if you’re official” and Logan jumps out a second-story window, and “some guys just don’t get it on Valentine’s Day” when he looks past all the heart balloons, candies, teddy bears and grabs a box of condoms. Jake also appears in many of the Vines, like, “do what you want with my body” when Logan starts twisting Jake’s nipples, and “brothers stick together, literally” when they rub glue between their chests and walk through a grocery store. An online blogger wrote that Logan and Jake Paul “made dumb and dumber into reality.”

Yet, I couldn’t help but to laugh at these Vines because they represent the humor, albeit white, heteronormative, and often sexist humor, of my high school years. My friend once dropped her phone in a toilet, we sledded down snowy hills in our bikinis, and plenty of guys tried having sex with us without ever making our relationship “official.” The Pauls’ Vines make me nostalgic because Logan and Jake easily could’ve been guys at my school. I was born in ’96, the same year as Logan, and Jake was born in ’97. Logan and Jake grew up playing football and wrestling for Westlake High School. I grew up running cross country and playing lacrosse at Brunswick High School. While in high school, the Paul brothers downloaded Vine and competed to see who could make a better video. Within a week, one of Logan’s videos went viral and allegedly, they were already making more money than their parents. Logan then pursued a degree in Industrial Engineering at Ohio University, which is where many of my peers went to college, before quitting and moving to Los Angeles in 2014. Jake was training to be a Navy Seal before moving to LA in June 2014 to be with Logan and landing a role on Disney Channel in 2015.

To give you an idea of how reckless the Paul brothers were, Jake didn’t keep his LA address a secret, so, fans, mostly young girls and their moms, would crowd outside, snapping

photos with their iPhones. Jake's wild stunts and antics, including tossing furniture into an empty pool and setting it on fire, caught the attention of the local news. "Flames eventually grew higher than the house," a neighbor said in an interview with KTLA5. Neighbors said Jake turned the street into a circus, to which Jake responded smugly, "Yeah, but people like going to circuses, right?" When pressed, Jake continued, "Yeah, I feel bad for them, but there's nothing we can do, the Jake Paulers are the strongest army out there." And in 2017, Logan Paul did a series of videos covering his vacation to Japan in which he and his friends wore Pokémon costumes and shoved raw fish and squid in the faces of people walking by. Logan then ventured into the Aokigahara Forest of Japan, sometimes referred to as the "suicide forest," to find the body of a young man who appeared to have recently hanged himself. Logan didn't turn the camera off and continued his antics, zooming in on the body and then showing his awestruck reaction. Before it was taken down, the video received 6.3 million views, the majority of which were probably children.

Before moving to LA, Jake and Logan did the meet-and-greet at SouthPark Mall in Strongsville, Ohio, which is where Alissa met them. Jake then "somehow" got his number into her phone and they became really good friends. "I guess he thought I was cute, I don't know," Alissa said in a YouTube video. The two talked and hung out for about six months, even after he moved to LA. Whenever he went back to Ohio to visit family, he and Alissa would hangout "non-stop" and then he was like, "Yo, why don't you come out to LA?" So, Alissa flew out to LA for two weeks, Jake introduced her to modeling agencies, four out of five of which offered her contracts. Jake told her that if she moved to LA, he'd feature her in his Vines and help her get a following, make money. She briefly returned to Ohio before packing up her stuff, buying a

car and moving out to LA in the summer of 2015. “I was head over heels for this kid,” Alissa said. “I would do anything for him, that’s why I signed a contract for five years.”

Alissa Butler started going by Alissa Violet and eventually moved in with Jake when he founded *Team 10*, a “unique incubator for aspiring social influencers.” *Team 10* was meant to create “a home for talent to be developed, nurtured to perfection,” but teen magazine *J-14* described it as a “social media fraternity.” Basically, Jake used \$1 million to finance ten influencers to all live in an upscale house in an affluent West Hollywood neighborhood. They “collaborated to create content,” meaning they made Vine and YouTube videos together. Alissa wanted to be “official” with Jake, but he always brushed her aside, except when they were in front of the cameras. Jake discovered that fans loved him and Alissa together, so they pretended to date and sold *#Jalissa* t-shirts with cartoon versions of themselves kissing. And they made “couple” Vines together, like the “girl translator” in which Alissa yells, “I hate you, get away from me!” and Jake’s phone translates, “I love you, come hold me.” And “It was an awkward Easter,” in which Alissa gives birth to a stuffed bunny and Jake chases the Easter bunny away. Alissa also made her own Vines often involving public spectacle, like holding a pineapple up in a grocery store and yelling “Who lived in a pineapple under the sea?” And in another, she holds the camera up to the face of a cashier worker at a sex shop and asks, “does this dildo come in a bigger size?”

Then, Alissa Violet and Jake Pauls’ relationship got ugly, and in February 2017, Jake kicked Alissa out. Apparently, Jake would frequently ask Alissa to leave their shared bedroom for a few hours so he could hook up with other girls. He would tell Instagram models that *Team 10* was “scouting for new talent” so they should come over and “see how it goes.” The models would come over, have sex with Jake, leave and never join *Team 10*. Alissa said that once, Jake

even flew a girl from Ohio out to LA to have sex. It came out later that Alissa had gotten so “fed up” with Jake, that she hooked up with his brother, Logan. Fans, mostly young girls, responded cruelly toward Alissa, posting videos in which they disparage her. “Your face is so ugly,” one girl says. “You’re just trying to make Jake look bad.” After the whole fiasco, Alissa gained thirty pounds and said she felt used by Jake and Logan, like they never treated her as more than just the “hot girl” in their videos. “They’re always trying to one-up each other,” she said. “I was just a pawn in their game.”

Jake made many rules and restrictions in his *Team 10* house. “If you’re not up by 10am you have to pay \$50, and no alcohol at the house or you get fined \$500,” Alissa said. “Every guest you had over had to be approved by Jake.” And apparently, all the checks for videos went through *Team 10* first, so, Alissa was only given a sliver of the profits. When she asked why they didn’t split the money more fairly, she was told that she “couldn’t manage her own money.” Despite this mistreatment, Alissa said there was nothing she could do because it was Jake’s house, she had signed a contract and she couldn’t afford to leave. “I’m at where I am because of him,” she said. After Jake kicked Alissa out, *Team 10* made a diss track rapping that Alissa was always “beggin’ for attention.” And they mocked her former workplace, saying, “Panera is your home.” In response, Logan Paul made a diss track called “The Fall of Jake Paul” in which Alissa appears. Logan raps, “Used to be your chick, now she in the Logang and you know she on my team.” Logan and Alissa kiss at the end of the video. Eventually, Alissa started dating another YouTuber, FaZe Banks, and joined FaZe’s *CloutGang* which was a rival group of *Team 10*. But recently, she discovered Banks naked in bed with another girl and the two broke up.

All of this repetitive petty drama is absolutely ridiculous, but that’s the point. The ridiculousness of YouTube, Vine and Instagram allowed Jake Paul and Alissa Violet to go from

obscurity in northeast Ohio to LA fame in just a few years, without the help of conventional Hollywood handlers. “The Fall of Jake Paul” video has 247 million views and Forbes estimates Jake Paul’s net worth to be \$20 million. Alissa Violet’s net worth is estimated at \$8 million. Yet, most people above the age of twenty probably have never heard of either of them.

I only discovered Alissa’s fame in the summer of 2016, before starting college, because a guy from my high school tweeted, *I don’t want to live in a world where Alissa Butler is famous*. I had unfollowed her on social media since graduation, so I quickly looked her up and discovered she had moved to LA, had tons more followers, begun modeling and was hanging out with a bunch of tan bleach-blonde guys. At the time, I had never heard of Jake or Logan Paul, so I guess I wasn’t all that impressed. I just remember being happy for Alissa that she seemed to have accomplished her modeling dream. I followed her and over the next few years, I honestly enjoyed seeing her pouty golden hour poses on the skyline, her chunky white sneakers and jean skirt in London, her purple wig on Halloween, because I knew she came from my hometown, which I thought was cool, and because let’s face it, her photos are gorgeous and edgy. And I’m not going to lie, I was a bit jealous of her newfound success, even though I knew she only got where she was by allowing Jake Paul to demean her for months.

When I watch Alissa Violet’s YouTube videos, I feel a weird mixture of jealousy and pity, wonder and disgust at how YouTubers like her are able to lead such mindlessly indulgent lives every *single* day. I wonder how they can wake up every day and have no purpose other than getting more likes and “collabs.” The feeling I get when I watched Alissa’s videos—she and her friends splashing around in a pool, staring at themselves in the mirror, taking tequila shots on a yacht—was the same feeling I got when a vacation or weekend lasted just a little bit too long. Vacations when I began to understand, like Joan Didion wrote, that it is “distinctly possible to

stay too long at the Fair.” When my cousin yawned on the last night of our camping trip and said, “If I’m going to stay awake, I really need to get serious about drinking.” When I was playing drinking games with my college roommates on a Monday night and the jokes became stale and forced. When I woke up severely hungover at 4pm on a Saturday, quickly scarfed down a Big Mac, watched a rom-com and then wiped off the previous night’s makeup and started blotting my beauty blender over my face for another night out. When I day-drank on the Fourth of July—dolling myself up with fake eyelashes and spending hours with the same friends I see all the time, taking Snapchats and shot after shot. In all these situations, everything seemed to be at my disposal, yet there still seemed to be nothing to do, and I was desperate for anything to do, so I pretended to have fun, took a selfie and checked my phone for notifications, which, I bet, is exactly what Alissa is feeling and doing in her videos.

Alissa’s aesthetic reminds me a bit of Sav Montano, a social media influencer from Miami, whom my friend introduced to me in the summer of 2013, when I was 17. “Look at her, isn’t she just so *cool*? And beautiful?” my friend, Natasha, shoved her iPhone screen in my face. Sav, who was also seventeen at the time, stood in front of a mirror, wearing jean shorts, a flannel tied around her waist and a white T-shirt that exposed her belly button. Her long brunette hair was swept over one shoulder, her skin perfectly tan, and her bored facial expression was partially obscured by her iPhone. I thought she looked so effortless, and that the way she stood, legs shoulder-length apart, seemed so accidental, like *oops, I didn’t even realize there’s a perfect gap between my thighs*. Sav tweeted, “Infamous mirror pic,” and got over 12,000 favorites. Another photo featured red solo cups, 2 liters of Mountain Dew and bottles of Smirnoff vodka spilling off marble countertops. “Last night in a pic,” Sav tweeted. Natasha said we should have a party like that. “But . . . how?” I asked. “Whose house is that anyway and where are her parents?”

Sav's photos were so natural, like she had just snapped a quick shot before returning to party with her friends, whereas in my and my friends' photos, it was clear we had posed dozens of times and cared about how many likes we got. Sav was able to maintain that certain nonchalance, that sprezzatura of Renaissance courtiers. That's the paradox, to carefully make it seem like you don't care at all. And Sav's profile was more than just sprezzatura selfies—her lifestyle, her BMW, her best friend kissing her cheek, her 4am trips to Denny's reminded me of the Sims virtual reality game I played as a kid. That's not to say her profile was perfect, but rather, it was perfectly imperfect. She was human. Her lifestyle was similar to mine, a 17-year-old girl who shops a lot, attends family barbeques and has a messy closet. Yet, Sav did this life so much better than I did. She made her "normal" life into something thousands of people wanted to follow, which to me, as a teenager, seemed like the pinnacle of success.

Sociologist Joshua Gamson writes that there are two types of celebrities: the "traditional" celeb becomes famous because of achievement, merit or talent, usually as a musician or actor, thus earning admiration and attention, while the "web star" becomes famous because they have been artificially produced for mass consumption by a team of investors, publicists, makeup artists and magazine publishers, usually through reality shows like *Keeping up with the Kardashians*. With the first, their elevated status is justified because they're extraordinary, and with the second, their status is arbitrary because they're just like us, only luckier, prettier and better marketed. "The celebrity industry certainly doesn't *need* its celebrities to be extraordinary. What the celebrity industry does require of its humans is that they live, whether glamorously or not, for the camera," Gamson writes. Film critic Neal Gabler also suggests that celebrities need narrative—what makes them successful is that each star in his or her own "life movie."

Successful YouTube “life movies,” like that of Alissa Violet, blend the arrogance of Jake Paul, the zany humor of early Jenna Marbles, the sprezzatura of Instagram-chic models and the constant documentation and drama of reality TV. This formula creates a web star who fans believe to be more intimate, relatable and authentic than “traditional” celebrities. Through weekly or even daily videos, subscribers gain “backstage” access to the most personal aspects of a YouTuber’s life and are able to interact by leaving comments. A study of 13-to-18-year-olds found that teens appreciate YouTubers “candid sense of humor, lack of filters and risk-taking spirit,” which are behaviors that more conventional celebrities lack because they’re often “curbed by Hollywood handlers.” The ascent of the so-called ordinary celebrity reflects the normality of being watched every day. The shift toward the ordinary shows the heightened consciousness of our daily lives as public performances, Gamson writes. We expect that we’re being watched through the camera-lens on our laptops and we expect that we’re being listened to through the microphones on our Smart devices, so naturally, we’ve become more willing to offer up private parts of ourselves on YouTube to watchers known and unknown. Gamson writes that this trend suggests that the unwatched life is invalid, insufficient and even not worth living.

When I was interviewing an Ole Miss college YouTuber in Starbucks, a girl sitting nearby drinking a Strawberry Acai Refresher leaned over and asked me for the girl’s YouTube handle. I ended up chatting with this girl, Claire Boden, and she turned out to be an avid YouTube fan. “I watch YouTube whenever I’m bored,” she said. “About thirty minutes to an hour every day.” Boden said even though it’s sometimes hard to know who’s authentic or not, she ultimately enjoys YouTube because it’s interesting to learn about how other people think. “I’m just really interested in it, to like see a YouTuber’s side of everything, cause, they still have an everyday life, it’s just, like, they vlog everything.” Claire’s comment falls in line with the idea

that YouTubers are just like us, but better at editing and packaging their lives, which suggests that we watch their videos to live vicariously. A recent episode of NPR's Hidden Brain podcast argues that more of us are living vicariously through the people on our screens and in our headphones. Even though we're not really living these other lives, watching feels close enough. "These other lives we've come to inhabit can seem more beautiful, more exciting, more satisfying than anything in our actual lives," host Shankar Vedantam says. "They come in multiple camera angles with all the boring parts spliced out."

When you grow up in a world inundated with people who splice out the boring parts of their lives, you learn to do the same. A recent survey found that today's kids are three times more likely to aspire toward a career as a YouTuber than as an astronaut. My friend's little sister, Sam, is one of these kids. When she was 9, she would strike poses and shake around to Icona Pop for her mom's iPhone, propped precariously on a chair in the living room. Sam looked up to me and watched my favorite TV shows, like *Gilmore Girls* and *Gossip Girl*, which made me worry I wasn't the best influence on her. When I went to college, Sam was disappointed I didn't join a sorority. I tried telling her education is fun too, but I'm not sure she really listened. And since then, she started going by Sammie instead of Sam and made a YouTube channel with her friends called GAM Girls. I interviewed Sammie, now age 12, to try and understand YouTube's impact on young girls, and she said when she grows up, she wants to be an actress. "But we also kinda wanna make our YouTube channel go viral," she said casually. "And start, like, using it to get money and maybe make a job out of it."

"Guys, we need more likes and subscribers . . ." Sammie's friend Hannah says in their "Slime Challenge" YouTube video on their GAM Girls channel. "Yeah . . . cause we're not getting anything," Sammie says. "We have eighty-five views but, like, two likes, from us."

Sammie says. Her thick brown hair is on her shoulders. She speaks loudly over Hannah, “When you view these videos,” she says to her audience, which in this case was me, a 22-year-old, college student, “You are forced to like it too, okay? So, give me a thumbs up.” Out of pity, I immediately clicked on the subscribe and thumbs up buttons. I hoped that no one would walk by my desk in the library, see my screen and think I was some weirdo preying on young girls. “If you don’t like us, don’t watch us,” Jessica, the final member of GAM Girls pipes in as she unscrews the lid off a jug of glue. “We don’t listen to haters—we don’t have time for the haters,” Annie says. “If you don’t like it, give it a thumbs down, like, at least – we need something...” she trails off. “So that we can boost our way up.”

Sociologist Joshua Gamson points out that this “turn toward the ordinary” in celebrity culture does *not* represent a democratizing shift, meaning that even though it *seems* like everyone can easily become rich and famous from YouTube, that’s not the reality. “The internet drastically widens the pool of potential celebrities by lowering the entry barriers—a computer and a bit of moxie, and you’ve got a shot,” Gamson writes. But despite these changes, Gamson argues that the control center of celebrity culture has hardly shifted. Those with the capital are still the ones who determine the value of a celebrity. And those with the capital seem to be men.

“Silicon Valley is a male-dominated culture, some say a ‘frat boy’ culture, populated by ‘brogammers’ and ‘tech bros,’” journalist Nancy Jo Sales writes. Sales asserts that some of the most popular social media apps used by girls reflect the tech industry’s frat house atmosphere, and I agree. YouTube seems to encourage young girls, like Sammie, to seek male approval. One of the GAM Girl videos depicts the three middle-school girls doing handstands, cartwheels and back-handsprings, while an older brother rates them. And in the case of Alissa Violet, she only became famous because Jack Paul, who had the \$1 million in capital to finance *Team 10*, wanted

to have sex with her, and because she was willing to essentially act as his puppet in exchange for fame. The Paul brothers undoubtedly shaped the new YouTuber industry to cater to an audience that either wants to be Jake Paul or wants to date Jake Paul.

“This generation of 2017—the Jake Paul, Logan Paul and this whole beef—showed the next generation of YouTubers how to act,” said Keemstar, a veteran YouTuber who’s been reporting on drama in the YouTube community since 2009. “Things have gotten so god damn ugly.” Keemstar said that it used to be shameful for YouTubers, who are making tons of money, to advertise their own merchandise in their videos and that such self-promotion would cause viewers to unsubscribe. But now, we have YouTubers like Alissa and Jake, who lie about being in a relationship in order to sell *#Jalissa* shirts. And with policies that require *Team 10* and *CloutGang* members to consent to being photographed, filmed and recorded in their own houses, YouTubers now collect secret footage of each other to use as blackmail, which reminds me how, in high school, my friends and I secretly took horrible photos of each other and posted them on Twitter, laugh-cackling at the responses. Keemstar said YouTubers often ask him to expose secret recordings on his channel, but he refuses to do their dirty work. “We’re in a completely different world now, where selling out, being obnoxious and being a shitty person is rewarded,” Keemstar said. “It’s foreign territory that I’ve never seen before.”

In the past few years I’ve been thinking a lot about what the media we consume and produce says about us. What does it say that the most popular YouTubers are those who are sabotaging each other? What does our future look like if young people believe “success” is achieved by uploading footage of a dead man in Aokigahara? What does it mean that millions of young people perceive these YouTubers’ performances and product placements to be “real” and “authentic”? Maybe this fake, frivolous and dramatic entertainment is a reflexive reaction to our

hyper-political world. Maybe kids and teens need a mindless break from worrying about all the challenges that the future holds for their generation. Maybe amid the chaos of the world—global pandemic, imminent environmental disaster and political divisiveness—we want to pause and take a moment to fawn over and escape into the luxurious and seemingly unaffected, apolitical worlds of Jake Paul and Alissa Violet. A world of pranks and fake-tanner, parties and recovery smoothies, diss tracks and hookups. A world like my 92% white suburban public high school, except, full of twenty-year-olds without college educations who are making millions of dollars and influencing millions of young lives.

After high school, I took a gap year to travel around the world, followed more Insta-celebs and tried harder and harder to capture that sprezzatura, that perfectly imperfect lifestyle in my posts. I uploaded photos of chopsticks placed gingerly on a bowl of ramen, a surfboard leaned against a palm tree, and mirror selfies in boutiques in Copenhagen. I dreamt of becoming a web star, digital nomad and wrote a blog about my travels, *One Blonde Around the World*. But the more research I did into travel blogging, I realized the most successful bloggers had no depth, just beautiful images and advertisements. I realized I didn't want to be another blonde woman on YouTube talking about the importance of hydrating your hair after a flight. Then I went to college and reflexively befriended a bunch of "misfits" who didn't use social media or only uploaded a few times a year and I gradually grew out of that aspirational world of mirror bikini selfies, sabotage and glamorized normality. Some of my high school friends though, like Natasha, who first introduced me to the beachy world of Sav Montano, haven't seemed to have moved on. *Who dares me & Cam to have a bikini mud fight?* my old friend, now 22 years old, posted on her Instagram story. *If we get enough likes, we'll do it.*

A Record of the World as She Sees It

I could see Maude Schuyler Clay in the narrow front hallway of the University of Mississippi Museum. She was embracing friends who had come to the opening reception of the joint photography exhibit with her husband. Maude wore a paisley wrap that flowed to where the hem of her speckled dress met with her tall coffee-colored boots. Dazzling was the first word that came to mind. But maybe I only thought of her as dazzling because I already knew who she was—an affluent artist, and fifth generation Mississippian, whose 1999 photography book *Delta Land* was praised by *The New York Times* for “finding poetry in this slow, languorous

countyscape.” Perhaps, though, if I didn’t know who she was and saw Maude out on the street, I might’ve thought she looked a bit like a sophisticated hippy.

“That’s Maude,” I whispered and nudged my roommate, Wesley, who was sipping on a plastic cup of free cabernet. He asked if I wanted to go say hi, and I said, maybe later, because she was already surrounded by an adoring group. I didn’t want Wesley and me to be those know-it-all college students who butt our way into places where we probably don’t belong. Besides, I already knew Maude. Well, sort of. About a year earlier, I had written a review of the book, titled *Mississippi*, that she made with poet and UM professor Ann Fisher-Wirth in 2018. I never formally met Maude, but we exchanged some emails about the locations of various photographs, and I sent her a link to the published article. Then, to my surprise, she added me on Facebook. She once commented on a photo of Wesley, another friend and me decked out in green sparkly bows, Irish socks and clove wreaths for the St. Patrick’s Day Parade in Memphis. *Oh, it must be St Paddy’s day. Hated that holiday, she wrote. The NYC gallery I worked in always had an elevator full of green vomit.* I thought she would be an interesting subject for a profile, so I emailed her.

Before going to the artist reception, I stood in Wesley’s doorway and asked him if he knew the proper way to pronounce ‘Maude.’ Wesley is from the small town of Raleigh, Mississippi, and I’m from a suburb in northeast Ohio, so I figured he’d be the authority. Wesley jokingly exaggerated his southern accent and drawled the name out, *Maaaauuude*, then said he actually didn’t know how to pronounce it, so we listened to a YouTube video, which informed us the ‘e’ at the end was silent. Great, I thought, now I won’t make a fool of myself when I greet her. But I never did end up greeting her at the reception.

Wesley and I strolled past a photograph of a black woman wearing a maid's uniform with a frilly lace collar. She crouches on the ground and one of her hands grips a small blonde toddler's arm. The toddler lies on the ground crying. The woman stares into the lens with her mouth turned down in an exasperated frown. An upholstered chair, a cabinet full of porcelain and a cream-colored wall surround the woman and the toddler in the center of the square photo. Light pours in, presumably from a window, over the woman's buttoned black blouse and white apron. *Emma and Schuyler, Christmas Morning, Sumner, Mississippi*, the placard next to the photo read.

"Surely, they didn't make her wear that . . .?" Wesley paused.

"I hope not . . ." I said. "What year is this from, anyway? It couldn't have been that long ago . . ."

I looked at the placard but there was no year.

Two weeks later, when I interviewed Maude Schuyler Clay, I discovered that the photo had been taken in the 90s. During the interview, I sat shoulder-to-shoulder with Maude on a bench in the Lawrence Gallery of the museum and discovered that Emma McShane had worked as a nanny looking after Maude's children. Maude said the photo shows the difficulty of balancing motherhood and photography. "This is a story I've probably told hundreds of times . . ." Instead of reaching out to help her son when he was crying, Maude's first instinct was to capture that late afternoon light. "I will always be grateful to have had someone help me care for my kids." I wanted to ask Maude about the uniform but just nodded along because our interview hadn't exactly gotten off to the best start . . .

The first question I had asked Maude was, "What was it like growing up in the Delta during the Civil Rights movement?" I guess I felt like I already knew her well enough through

online interactions to skip the whole ‘building rapport’ thing. “Talk about a loaded question . . .” Maude had replied. After our interview, she sent me an email with a hyperlink to an article titled “How to Be a Good Interviewer.” In the subject line of the email, she wrote, “Know you know this but good piece I thought.” I clicked on the link and found that the article was about how to interview someone for a job. “Maybe it’s your first time hiring people,” it read. Maude must’ve not even read it. Listening back to the interview recording also made me wonder, why should my question about the Civil Rights movement have been considered “loaded”? I just thought it was a relevant question because her work was described, by a photography magazine, as residing “in that place where personal reflection informs historical document in perfect combination.”

Maude was born in 1953, two years before the brutal murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till, in Greenwood, Mississippi, which is 45 miles from Sumner, where the trial and acquittal of Till’s murderers occurred. Till was an African American boy from Chicago visiting family in Mississippi when he was killed by two men for allegedly flirting with a white woman. “I try to explain it to people—not to get a free pass—but, okay, I was two,” Clay said. I laughed. I found it interesting how, by asking about her childhood in tandem with the historical period, Maude was acting like I was indicting her.

When she was growing up, Maude said there were two separate histories. Black history and white history. “Gosh, there was so much that we either didn’t know or weren’t aware of,” Maude said. “Or choose not to find out about.” Maude said her parents weren’t “pro anything,” but they just did not explain what was going on. She said she was “blissfully unaware” for a while and didn’t even find out about Emmett Till until junior high school. “Some teacher happened to drop that bomb.” The way Maude describes Civil Rights era segregation matches the image I’ve cultivated in my head based mainly on photographic records and books. “It was

still back in the day when black people had to jump up on the street and tip their caps to white women,” Maude said, which made me think of an anecdote my dad once told me about how when he was a student at Ole Miss in the late 1980s, the black janitors in his dorm called him ‘sir.’ Maude said, “It was just the creepiest thing . . . I grew up thinking that was just the way life was.”

Maude’s mother taught her that literature, specifically Eudora Welty and William Faulkner, was sacred. Her parents also took her and her siblings to the ballet and plays. “I think I was a fairly cultured Mississippian, thanks to my parents,” Maude said. Her voice was soft and gentle but with a southern twang. Her father was a Yankee lawyer turned “gentleman farmer” when he moved down south. Maude was the middle child and the family jester who always tried to keep the peace. She refers to her childhood as rather bucolic, a word I often found used to describe her photography and the Delta landscape. I honestly had never heard the word and had to look it up: Bucolic, “relating to the pleasant aspects of the countryside and country life.” During January and February, Maude’s family took off for their winter home in Sarasota, Florida, where she attended an alternative middle school called McClellan Park. I Googled the school and found that it’s a 3,000-square-foot wood-frame building constructed in 1916, surrounded by greenery and listed for sale at \$1.3 billion. “Growing up as a white person of means in the Delta at the time . . . you just couldn’t get any more fortunate than that,” Maude said, which made me think about something my professor Kiese Laymon, once said. Whenever white, normally older women, at his book readings ask how they can ‘help,’ meaning help black people in America, he says they can’t do anything until they confront the ways that white supremacy tears apart their insides as well.

The first “real” photo that Maude took was at the winter home in Sarasota. The photo was of a set of plastic horse toys in the grass. She said that when she got the roll of film back, she made a mental note, “that’s kind of a good picture—I might like to do this . . .” And she said, of course, she always thought artists were glamorous with their garrets in Paris. “I like to create stuff and get lost in a world of my own.”

Maude was nine years old when she got her first camera and said that she took pictures of all her animals and the people who worked for her family, Lucille and Jasper. “I bothered the hell out of them all the time,” she said and showed me a photo of elderly Lucille and Jasper holding her baby girl Anna. Anna wears a red and green plaid skirt, yellow sweater and ringlet hair. Lucille wears a brown plaid dress, glasses, houndstooth cap and leans on a cane. Lucille’s wallet protrudes from her dress pocket and Jasper wears a button-down white shirt, trousers and MPP CO baseball cap. They stand in front of a shiny red car, blue skies and tree branches. Between two of them, Maude said that Lucille and Jasper worked 59 years for her family. “They were almost like a second set of parents,” Maude said. “And I know that sounds like a total cliché.”

Maude was 15 years old and attending boarding school in Memphis in 1968 when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. Maude said that boarding school was where she learned “to do all the bad stuff, like smoke pot and cigarettes and drink.” Her parents sent Maude away for school because they couldn’t “face the idea of their daughter going to an integrated school.” Despite the close proximity to the Civil Rights movement, Maude said her all-girls school was still so “far removed” because they weren’t allowed to go downtown, “where all the good shopping was,” due to the unrest and people marching on the streets. Maude’s comment about shopping made me think about my own vantage point in

history. I grew up in a 96% white suburb near Cleveland, Ohio, and was far removed from the police brutality in the city. I was 18 years old and a senior at a 92% white public school in 2014, when 12-year-old Tamir Rice was shot in Cleveland. And, according to my curated life on Instagram, on that day, November 22, 2014, I was at a tree lighting ceremony in the Crocker Park shopping mall.

“I do remember being profoundly affected by the fact that they killed Martin Luther King,” Maude said. “It was an echo of what had happened five years earlier when they killed John F. Kennedy.” As I jotted down notes in pink ink, I wondered who Maude meant when she said ‘they.’ “It was just one of those unfathomable things,” she continued. “Like, oh my god, are things really that bad that they have to assassinate people?” She said ‘they’ again, like it was a force of evil that was other to us. “Anyway, that’s my Civil Rights story and it’s not very enlightened,” she finished. I thought her last remark was interesting because in the afterword of Maude’s book *Delta Land*, she wrote that she “places her work within both Mississippi’s history of exploitation—slavery, agricultural labor, segregation, and the murder of Emmett Till—and within Mississippi’s photographic history—New Deal-era documentarians, civil rights photographers and William Eggleston.” I wonder, what exactly does it mean to ‘place’ your work within a history of exploitation? To place means to put something in a particular position, so, she’s placing her photographs of the Delta, from the 1980s and 1990s, within, or inside, the timeline of exploitation? History means the past, but isn’t exploitation still occurring? One thing is for sure, though, ‘to place’ something does not mean ‘to grapple’ with something. One places a vase of roses on a table, looks at the beauty of the roses and then moves on with their day.

On the first day of the Ole Miss fall semester in 1971, Maude rolled up to campus and registered as a freshman. She hadn’t applied to any schools. “I wish I would’ve cared more about

my education,” she said. Much to her mother’s dismay, Maude decided not to join a sorority because she was “some sort of fake radical.” In college, she said she was running around with halter-tops, a shag haircut, smoking pot and lighting incense in her dorm as if she was at Berkeley, and not a university of 7,000 students. “I thought Ole Miss was pretty provincial,” she said. “But I guess I was pretty provincial myself—that’s what I mean by fake radical.” Maude said she doesn’t remember her time at Ole Miss very well because she always wanted to be in any other place. “I think it was a problem of mine, not anything to do with the university,” Maude said. “I don’t even remember what exactly I was rebelling against anymore.” Having her exhibit at the University Museum feels like a “full circle” because she was finally able to accomplish the vision she was trying to forge as a student. “If I could just leave a record of the world as I see it and as I think it is, that’s a start,” Maude said. After graduating with a degree in English, Maude went to the Instituto Allende in San Miguel, Mexico, for a few months. “Mommy and daddy agreed to pay for it,” she said.

After returning from Mexico, Maude’s parents were adamant about her continuing school, so she went to the Memphis Academy of Arts, where her cousin, William Eggleston, practiced color photography. Eggleston had an exhibit at the UM museum during my freshman year and had also been featured in artist Randy Hayes’s exhibit my sophomore year. I had written a profile about Hayes and was later invited to visit his home and studio in Holly Springs where we sat in his sunroom, sipping water and chatting about the career path of an art critic, with the implication that I could get on such a path. I like the art scene in Oxford because, obviously, I like art and the free wine and hors d’oeuvres, and because from an anthropological perspective, I’m infatuated with the crowd I perceive as the trendy and bohemian artistic elite. Going to art shows makes me feel fancy, mature and different from other students. And I

imagine my life after college might be similar to the lives of these local artists. I also find it interesting that the arts seem to be mostly supported by wealthy donors.

At Randy Hayes's reception, the museum director called out all the names of the donors and even had significant contributors raise their hands and step forward. My boyfriend and I exchanged glances and later mocked the recognition as gold stars for adults. This made me wonder though, without wealth, would the fine arts—in this hoity-toity, museum, stuffed-olive way—still exist? After all, the art museum, the art exhibitions and arguably even the art has been made *for* the wealthy because they're the ones who fund it. The UM Museum does not seem like it was made for the often poor and rural subjects of its art. When I asked Maude for the contact information of Emma McShane, the woman in the frilly maid's uniform who cared for Maude's children, Maude said she didn't have it, and when I looked online, I found that the two weren't friends on Facebook either, which made me wonder, had Emma ever seen her own photo hanging on the wall in the Lawrence Gallery?

While going to school in Memphis, Maude drove Eggleston around in the “beautiful late afternoon light” and observed him work to “learn by osmosis.” Then, she moved to New York City for thirteen years and met her husband Langdon, who was a photographer and house painter, and who had dropped out of Harvard. Maude worked other jobs to “stay afloat” in the city. “I thought if I don't end up homeless, I'll probably end up as a topless dancer,” she joked, but later she said she always knew, if she really needed money, she could “call up mommy and daddy,” which was something I had also always known during my post-high school gap year, but seldom admitted. Maude's fabricated anxieties about “staying afloat” fulfilled the well-loved archetype of the ‘starving artist’ and made me think about how well-off people, including myself, tend to downplay our privileges and exaggerate our ‘just scraping by’ narratives. I've

probably told the story of eating cheap bologna and stale bread in Helsinki during my gap year many more times than I've told the story of seeing the musical *Wicked* front-row in Chicago when I was in third grade. Telling the 'scraping by' in Helsinki story made me feel like I fit in more with my college friends who often complained of student loans, part-time jobs and debt.

Every vacation and Christmas, Maude came back to the Delta and took photographs. "I thought my real work was here," she said. In 1988, Maude and her husband came back to the Delta, and she's been trying to keep a record of the place ever since. Up until this point in the interview, nearly twenty minutes in, I had only asked that initial question about her childhood. I normally have to prod artists to say more, but Maude had no problem giving me her whole life story. While she spoke, I noticed that Maude's nails were groomed clean with a coat of clear polish. Meanwhile I tried to refrain from biting my mangled nails and bloody cuticles.

When she married Langdon, Maude hadn't realized that two freelance photographers getting together would be "hell on the finances." She said, "talk about a roller-coaster lifestyle." I asked Maude, if finances were so tough, how could they afford to hire Emma McShane to raise their children? "To be honest with you," she hesitated. "We lived off two, I guess you could say, 'fake' trust funds." Maude didn't elaborate on what she meant by a fake trust fund and I didn't ask because I worried that I'd be getting too personal, but I did notice it was the second time she had used that qualifier: Fake, not genuine.

Maude and I walked around the exhibit and thumbed through her 2015 book *Mississippi History*. She pointed out a photo of a woman with yellow-blond hair sitting at a mahogany table in 1979. Golden sunlight shines on the woman's wide blue eyes and drawn-on arched eyebrows. "They later told me that a couple of weeks before the photo, she had tried to commit suicide," Maude said. "But all I could see was this incredible light and this beatific-looking woman but

now that I think about it, she looks very troubled and scared.” Many of the other portraits in the collection were of Maude’s family. We turned the page to a photo of her husband, Langdon, young, shirtless and holding an empty beer glass while looking down in contemplation. “Isn’t he cute?” Maude asked. Other photographs included her daughter playing with kittens on their front porch, her daughter running through a cotton field, and her kids piling onto her husband for a piggy-back ride. When she’s dead for a hundred years, Maude said her photos will give people in the future an idea of what the world looked like and an idea of the people she encountered.

Maude was inspired by 19th century British portrait photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, who was “another one of those lucky white people who traveled around and had the leisure to be a photographer.” Maude’s bio on the Jackson Fine Art webpage reads that Cameron’s expressive and allegorical portraits inspired Maude’s “nostalgic recollection of carefree moments of family life and play in Mississippi in the 1980s,” which made me think of my mother. During my childhood, my mom, like Maude, took countless photos of my family, printed them and made probably at least twenty meticulous scrapbooks, full of ticket stubs, pamphlets and wristbands from our vacations in Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and London, which makes me wonder, in a day and age when everyone is an iPhone photographer, how does our society determine which ‘family memories’ are considered ‘fine art’? What makes a photo of Langdon Clay holding a beer glass sell for \$1,250? What makes someone hang up a photo of Maude’s husband, or Maude’s daughter, instead of hanging up a less professional photo of their own husband or daughter? Is it really only for the aesthetic—the perfect lighting, exposure, aperture—of Maude’s photography? Or is there something else more aspirational that catapults Maude’s “carefree moments of family life” into “fine art” worthy of being displayed?

What does it mean to make art from others' lives? Is contextualization necessary? What does it mean for Wesley and me to stroll past a photograph of Emma McShane without knowing the life behind the photo? I guess the idea is that we should be able to infer McShane's emotions from the portrait, but isn't one photo just a sliver what of what's really going on in someone's life and in the "history of exploitation"? I guess Maude's work makes me ask: is it enough to record the world around us, as we see it, or do we have a responsibility to critique it?

On Maude's Facebook profile, she posted an article from *The Paris Review* called "What's the Point?" by former Chairman of MacDowell Colony's Board of Directors, Michael Chabon. The MacDowell Colony is an artist's colony in New Hampshire founded by a philanthropic composer and pianist couple. Chabon essentially questions if art makes the world a better place and finishes with "maybe art just makes the whole depressing thing more bearable." Chabon writes that to experience the truth in art reminds us that there is such a thing as truth. "We're just going to keep on doing what we do: Making and consuming art." I brought the article up to Maude. She offered me a mint, and recommended I read Michael Chabon's novels. I accepted the mint and asked her how the article related to her work. She said that if she had to do it all over again, she'd want to become a teacher, or at least teach a bit. "I think if you can inspire or give a ray of hope to any person that's trying to make sense of the world, that's a noble cause," she said, which did not answer my question. I asked Maude if she thought photography could bring about change, and she said her particular photos may not bring change, but by leaving a record of the way she sees the world, she hopes that someone will be changed or be cognizant of what that place looked like back then. "You can see I'm still really hung up on the sense of place." Maude said she wasn't sure if she'd be able to do this same work anywhere else besides Mississippi. "It's like being compelled to explain this complicated place to the world."

Desiring to explain a complicated situation, phenomenon or issue to the world is something I understand and struggle to do in my writing. I feel like I can never possibly write or research enough to fully do justice to the complexity, the facets, the layers, the nuances, dynamic personalities, countless strands of influence and pieces of meaning and memory. I've spent over a year working on one essay about my experiences with volunteer-tourism at an orphanage in Ghana. When I judge Maude, I feel like I am judging myself because I wonder what it means to make art from the lives of vulnerable children.

“Representing people always involves reducing them,” my favorite essayist, Leslie Jamison, writes. “And calling a project ‘done’ involves making an uneasy truce with that reduction.” Like me, Jamison always writes ten thousand more words than assigned because a part of her keeps saying, “there’s more, there’s more, there’s more.” And, I wonder, is Maude reducing or trying to show more? Her exhibit shows more and more of the people and landscape in her life: how they play, mature and love over the years. But is simply keeping a photographic record of her own life enough to really explain the complicated place of Mississippi to the world? Or is her work just one of the pieces of the full collage of Mississippi? And what about the people who exist on the periphery of Maude’s life, like Emma McShane, Jasper and Lucille, and other nameless black men, women and children? Are they represented, explained fully in all their complexity or reduced to how they fit tangentially into Maude’s bucolic life?

Jamison often writes about ‘thorniness,’ which at first I thought was a cop-out abstraction that allowed her to avoid coming to any substantial conclusions, but then I realized thorniness is the precise reason I’m so infatuated with Jamison’s writing—instead of rushing to produce something easy and dishonest, she takes her time to unravel all the minuscule knots and admits that she doesn’t know the answer because things are always more complicated than they seem.

This type of writing, this type of art, is useful and conducive to change in the world because we can't solve a problem unless we completely understand it first. And this type of complex and sometimes, honestly, down-right chaotic art is also beautiful.

“Her photographs were an act of insistence: that this woman existed, that her life mattered,” Leslie Jamison wrote of photographer Annie Appel, who spent twenty-five years photographing the same family in Baja, Mexico—with a focus on the daughter named Carmelita, whom Appel watched grow from a sick baby into a mother. “Annie’s photos don’t remove her subjects from their circumstances, but they don’t reduce them to their circumstances, either. She doesn’t conscript them into serving easy moralizing arguments about inequality or guilt.” Appel grew up in El Paso during the 1960s and 70s, and from her house up on a mountain in one of the wealthiest parts of the city, she remembers, as a kid, looking at Mexico in the distance at night. As an adult, she spent twenty-three thousand frames exploring the life in the distance. Appel insisted on maximum exposure, on not looking away as soon as you got what you needed. After nine years of photographing the family, Appel journaled, *I understand nothing*. Jamison describes Appel’s relentless drive toward connection and full communication an act of love. Love is a form of focused attention that Jamison argues sharpens Appel’s sight: “an enduring emotional investment—even in all its mess and mistakes, *because* of its mess and mistakes—can help you see more acutely. It can sensitize your gaze to the competing vectors of emotion churning between ordinary moments.”

But are Appels’ attempts to show Carmelita and her family as they elect to be seen futile? “Making art about other people always means seeing them as *you* see them, rather than mirroring the way they would elect to be seen,” Jamison writes, which makes me wonder if it is more honest of Maude to admit that she can only record the people in her life as she saw them? Which

type of artistry is more honest: Leslie's, Annie's and my futile attempts to say *everything*, to be intricately involved, to represent people as they elect to be seen, and risk sounding messy and unfocused, or the more conventional approach of Maude to admit that she can only record people as she sees them, in clean and crisp frames? Is Maude a coward for not even attempting to do more? Or are our styles just different—thick description versus snapshot aesthetic?

About a month after the interview with Maude, I went back to the exhibit on a drizzly November afternoon. I looked through the entire “Mississippi Stories” book again. As I looked at the portraits—a shaggy blonde boy dressed in black standing in front of a lavender bush, a red-haired woman turned with her back against fall leaves, Emma McShane in a cherry apron, a black man on one knee with a plate of ribs on his left leg in the late afternoon gold—I imagined a world in which Maude had not become a photographer and these photos did not exist. How awful. The photos *were* beautiful and captured mostly bucolic moments of leisure that calmed me from the pelting rain on the rooftop. Maybe I had been too hard on Maude in the interview and not everything always has to be about “change,” because a world without these photos would lose a great record of a time before iPhones and Wifi, video games and virtual realities. A time when children in Mississippi still went outside to horseplay, dance in the doorway, and run through a cotton field.

“These were stunning scenes not because they were extraordinary, but because they weren't,” Leslie Jamison wrote of photographer Gary Winogrand's Color exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum in December 2019. Winogrand's ‘snapshot aesthetic’ portrayed strangers in public spaces—beaches, highways, boardwalks, carnivals—in the 1950s and 60s. “They were full of ordinary people seen so clearly that they became extraordinary in their beauty.” Jamison wrote that the way Winogrand excavated beauty “suggested that anyone could be art” and that beauty

lurked in “the strangest ruts and crevices,” which is what I also find appealing about Maude’s work. Her photographs record “ordinary” moments of the Mississippi Delta in the 1980s and 90s, which made me see the Mississippi in my own life as art. The fall leaves in the puddles outside the UM Museum; the stray black cat in my backyard; the peeling paint, dead moths and dust in the slits of my windowsills—all became art after visiting Maude’s exhibit a few times. But I also wondered what Jamison meant when she said “ordinary”? I wasn’t so sure Maude’s life was the ‘ordinary’ experience of the majority of Mississippians in the Delta. What was ordinary to Maude was probably not ordinary to Emma McShane.

As I was looking through the book, Maude appeared in the entrance of the gallery. Somehow, she seemed more petite than I remembered, and she wore a silk scarf and black get-up, which is what I’d always imagined an artist to look like. We chatted and I found out that Langdon’s sister and husband were in town from Wednesday to Sunday, so they were touring Oxford for the day. “It’s another excuse to visit the exhibit,” Maude said in her light, soft-spoken way. A camera was slung around Maude’s shoulder and I asked her if she took photos every day. “Oh, yeah,” she said. “I never go anywhere without a camera because I learned the hardest possible way that if you do that, you could be missing some stuff that you’ll still be thinking about and talking about years later.” I imagined the photos she would take that afternoon in a museum one day. Her brother-in-law thumbing through old records, her sister-in-law walking with an umbrella in the Square, and her husband sipping a mug of coffee between bookshelves.

A group of freshmen girls was gathered around the written biography section of the exhibit. “I’ve got to go eavesdrop on this,” Maude said and gave me a one-armed hug. “Hey, it was so nice to see you again!”

I rode my bike home to the three-bedroom house that I share with roommates. The next morning, I took a photo of the potted Cyclamen plant in my windowsill. The magenta petals were silhouetted by the sun-soaked kudzu in my backyard. *How beautiful*, I thought and really wanted to believe that was enough, that just by being beautiful and bucolic, something was art. Our culture has this perception that beauty is synonymous with simplicity, meaning beauty should be easy to understand and thus, restful. Flowers, blue skies, fall leaves, a child's laugh—these are the things we agree upon as beautiful, and conveniently none of these things challenge or unnerve us. It's easy to look at the blooming magenta and glowing green leaves in my windowsill and know immediately that it is beautiful. It's easy to look at Maude's bucolic photographs of her daughter in a cottonfield, Emma McShane holding Maude's son at Christmas, a black woman in a garden full of purple, and know that these images are full of beauty. They're beautiful because they're easy to understand. Or at least they're meant to be easy to understand—from Maude's vantage point.

During our interview, Maude had shown me a photo of two black boys wearing wool hats and riding horses at Sardis Lake in 1979. A white pony is unfocused in the foreground, partially obscuring one boy's face. The second boy holds the reins and looks at the camera. I asked Maude if she knew the boys in the photo and she said, "I basically rolled down my window and took the picture." This photo stood out to Maude as an early example of the type of portrait she aimed to do in her career. "With portraits, you forge a relationship with that person, sometimes in a really short period of time, they bare their souls to you," she said. "It's a communing of humans."

The photograph of the two black boys on horseback is considered beautiful precisely because we *don't* know the boys' names or their stories, because their daily lives are hidden

away, obscured by this bucolic snapshot. If we did know their full, complex and possibly difficult life stories, we would probably be unnerved. Beauty should not be difficult. Beauty should not challenge us and make us see a perspective vastly different from our own—this type of art is considered ‘innovative’ or ‘experimental,’ which I seldom hear used in the same sentence as ‘beautiful.’ And I’m not immune to this mutual exclusivity of beauty and complexity. I recently went to an artist reception at Southside Gallery on the Oxford Square with Wesley and we saw a gritty mixed media painting of a pyramid of dented beer cans—Busch Light, Coors, Miller Lite. A piece of paper had been stapled to the top half of the composition and then torn off leaving only small scraps. “Wow, this is really unique,” I said to Wesley. We kept walking and came across a Charlie Buckley painting of a field of sunflowers with a warm soft purple sky. “Now, this is something that I would actually want to hang up in my house—it’s just so beautiful,” I said. “The beer can one is cool,” Wesley said. “But yeah, it wouldn’t be so nice to have to see it every day.”

Maude probably didn’t feel the need to stop and talk to the boys on horseback at Sardis because she didn’t think the boys’ stories were important for her mission of recording the ‘bucolic’ state of the Mississippi Delta from her perspective. In fact, talking to the boys would’ve probably been counterproductive because she may’ve discovered that those boys’ lives were not bucolic at all. The boys are only bucolic, only pleasant aspects of the countryside, when they exist nameless in the backdrop of Maude’s privileged rustic life, or when they exist nameless on the walls of our museums and homes.

Reckoning Your Barbie Savior

You are a senior in college sitting at your Ikea desk in your room watching a documentary exposé on the corruption, neglect and abuse at a Ghanaian-run Children's Welfare Home in Bawjiase. You see naked African children standing in line to be bathed. A little boy eating dry instant noodles. Children sharing a bowl of thin brown broth for dinner. Children sprawling lethargically on the ground. You see a boy push another boy off his wheelchair. You see a teacher, a grown man, repeatedly slapping a young boy. A child spooning watery porridge

into the mouth of a toddler. “At what point is the street better than an orphanage?” the undercover reporter asks. “The Department of Social Welfare did not play its supervisory and monitoring role effectively.”

You watch the founder and CEO of the home, referred to as Auntie Emma, say to the camera, “Some orphanage homes misappropriate funds.” Auntie Emma holds a baby girl, who pulls on her dangly silver earring. “Over here whatever comes in, we deposit,” she says. “Management sits down, and we decide what to do.” Then you watch footage of Auntie Emma standing with a wad of cedi, the Ghanaian currency, in her hand as donated boxes of instant noodles, crates of evaporated milk and bags of clothing are bundled up. The undercover reporter says, “Most donated items found their way onto the open market soon after they had been donated.” You see children pose for a photo in front of a table of bananas, pineapples, toilet paper, detergent, Nestlé products. You pause the video on this frame. A blonde woman smiles in the back, holding a Ghanaian baby to her chest.

You could be this woman.

About nine months earlier, you are packing sunscreen, anti-malaria pills, loose tank tops, bubbles, streamers and frisbees into your suitcase when your iPhone pings. You’ve been added to a Facebook group with over fifty members, the majority of whom are young women in their twenties and thirties from the U.S., England, New Zealand, Australia and Canada.

“The minister of gender and children services visited potters and concluded it was unhygienic for children to live there (some of the kids weren’t clothed, there’s puddles

everywhere that mosquitos can breed in, etc) and decided to shut it down,” a woman who you’ve never met, named Nicole, messages.

You wonder if this means you won’t be spending the next month volunteering at the Potter’s Village children’s shelter in Dodowa. You planned to return to Potter’s for the first time in nearly four years because you didn’t want to become another one of those “Barbie Saviors” who abandons the children they decided to sponsor. During your gap year around the world as a naive nineteen-year-old, you decided to sponsor two preteens and one of them, thirteen-year-old Maxwell, had been Facetime calling you, asking you to come back, and you don’t want to exacerbate his abandonment issues, so you decide to go back and write about your experiences. You’re convinced you’ll do things “right” this time and focus all your energy on the children, but if you’re being honest with yourself, you also want to enjoy the sunshine, fresh fruit and slower pace of life in the sleepy village of Dodowa. You’re looking forward to being unplugged from the world and kicking back with a good book under the shade of a mango tree.

You read the rest of Nicole’s message. Nicole says our top priority is to buy mattresses and bed frames because the minister will want to make sure each child has an individual mattress, but Nicole is also confused. “Please if any of you have heard anything different let me know because everything has been all over the place the last couple of days,” she writes. You frantically scroll through hundreds of other messages. Maddie, Amber and Lilly say they will start fundraising and reaching out to people for help. Nicole sends a link to her GoFundMe page. A woman named Sarah emailed the Ministry and said volunteers are able to provide financial support, but we should not be a part of the long-term solution, which you don’t think makes much sense. You feel guilty that you aren’t as impassioned as these other volunteers. You feel guilty that you didn’t “fall in love” with the Potter’s kids, like the other volunteers, and postpone

college or change your life plan in order to spend more months in Dodowa. You feel guilty that you thought sponsoring two preteens would prove your altruism. You feel guilty for wishing you could remove yourself from this thorny mess, for wishing you could retract your sponsorship commitment just as easily as you could remove a splinter from your finger.

You learn that Potter's Village is in the process of moving from the old, cramped, bedbug-infested site to a new, more spacious site where many of the buildings are still under construction. You learn that the founder and CEO, a Ghanaian woman referred to as Mama Grace, has been identified as a "substandard individual." The management of Potter's Village, which consists almost entirely of Mama Grace's biological children, is being questioned. You learn that most children in Ghanaian orphanages actually have living parents. And there is a new government initiative to return children to their families or place them in foster care. But the majority of the volunteers in the Facebook group are working directly against this initiative.

Everyone seems to think that if we donate more money, the conditions of Potter's will improve, and Social Welfare will go away. "We can all agree that Potter's isn't up to standards but that's why we have all been putting in help with the new site," a woman named Molly messages. Everyone assumes that if Potter's is shut down, there would be no help or plan for the children afterwards, so they'll just be thrown on the streets or returned to families who can't feed or educate them.

Only a few people suggest that Potter's getting shut down might be inevitable, so we should look to support the children as they relocate. "We have to be careful that this whole thing is not getting emotional," a guy named Tony says. He reminds us that we're on the side of the children.

You wonder, what is the best option for the children? You remember Mama Grace's red lipstick cracking in the heat when she smiled and said "God Bless you" after you handed her a stack of cedi equivalent to \$1,000 in donation money. You remember when Mama Grace's daughter, Martha, asked some healthcare volunteers what they could do to "cure" baby Benjamin's Down syndrome. You remember children being forced to worship late into the night, singing "Jesus Loves Me" and getting hit when they dozed off. Children sleeping on the dusty stone floors of the courtyard. You remember a five-year-old girl help a toddler use a broom to sweep his poop into the stench of stagnant gutters. You remember being told to teach the first graders "whatever you want" because the school at Potter's Village had no curriculum, textbooks or classrooms. You remember the line of children outside the medicine cabinet at night asking you to clean and bandage their sores and wounds. You remember ten-year-old Maxwell's cracked, concaved spoon fingernails, a sign of iron deficiency. You remember Maxwell pointing to a homework question and asking you to read it.

You wonder if it is in the best interest of the children to stay at Potter's Village.

You are thinking about canceling your flight. You call your mom, cry into the phone, tell her everything's "so fucked up," and let her convince you that what you're doing is right, that the children you sponsor will be happy to see you again, that you're just a college student for goodness sake, that you need to cut yourself a break.

Three and a half years earlier, it is late April and you are eighteen years old, a senior in high school, eating a snack with the children you nanny when you receive a phone call informing you that you have not been selected as a finalist for the ten-month-long exchange program in

South Korea that you had planned to do as a gap year. You are shocked. You thought that as a 4.0 student with experience living in Australia and Italy, you would've been a shoe-in. You have no idea what you will do next year because you are not ready for college. You were so sure you'd be accepted to the exchange program that you already deferred your college acceptance. You go home and stay up all night messaging friends in Italy, Germany, Denmark, and family in Japan; Google-searching volunteer programs and making spreadsheets. You call your boss at the grocery store where you work on the weekends and ask to pick up extra shifts. When you factor in your anticipated graduation party money, you think that you'll be able to save enough to take an independent gap year around the world.

You find a website called "International Volunteer Headquarters," which advertises itself as offering the world's best range of affordable programs. You think it's a bit odd that you have to pay to volunteer, but you read that your fees go towards room, board, transportation and orientation, which seems to make sense. You click on the Ghana page and watch the promotional video. A man cuts open a fresh coconut, Ghanaian children run up to hug the legs of Western volunteers and music reminiscent of *The Lion King* plays in the background. "You come here and see how many things need to be fixed and you think you can't do that, you can't change anything," a blonde American woman says to the camera. "But just being here, being integrated, connecting to the kids and the culture makes all the difference to the people that live here." The video ends on a poster that reads, "bridging the gaps between rich and poor."

You want to get away from Western civilization and experience the "simple life" advertised in the video. You've fantasized Africa as being an agrarian utopia ever since you were a kid who dreamt of doing the Peace Corps. You imagine that living in a dirt-floored hut with no electricity or running water will force you to grow in ways that your cookie-cutter American

consumer life never would. You think missionary programs are problematic because the ulterior motive is conversion, but you think it's noble to spend your time teaching and caring for Ghanaian orphans. You are oblivious to how programs like the IVHQ could possibly be perceived as neocolonialist. You click on the "Apply Now" button and budget two months of your gap year to childcare in Ghana.

You are a freshman in college, about a year since your first trip to Dodowa, and you and your friends are munching on baked oysters and downing pitchers of bottomless mimosas at an "uptempo eatery" in your college town of Oxford, Mississippi. You are all trying to drink as much as you can before the bottomless special ends at noon. At around 11:45, your boyfriend asks the server to go ahead and bring out two more pitchers for the table.

You were the one who organized the whole shindig, and invited your new college boyfriend, Drew, his older brother, John, and your friend, Evelyn. You can tell Evelyn thinks John is cute, because she's playing with her hair. The conversation flows as you all drink more and accidentally slosh orange juice on the black tablecloth.

"So, what's your major again, Evelyn?" John asks and rocks his chair back.

"International studies and French," Evelyn takes a sip from your glass. Evelyn is only eighteen and doesn't have a fake ID yet. But she seemed much older because she is so cosmopolitan—her parents are South African, she was born in the UK, had lived in New York City and Sydney, and is a National Merit Scholar.

"Any idea what you wanna do with international studies after you graduate?" John runs his fingers through his brown mop, which he is growing out for a man-bun.

“I’d like to work in development,” Evelyn says in her posh British-Australian accent. “I think I want to get a master’s degree in economics and assist underprivileged countries in developing their own economic models and infrastructure.”

“Don’t you think that’s a bit paternalistic?” John leans back.

“No, not at all—it’s paternalistic to go to another country and implement programs and policies without consulting and collaborating with the residents,” Evelyn says. “But I think you’re right that many non-profits, like short-term volunteer-tourism, do run the risk of being paternalistic and neocolonialist.”

“Yeah, for sure,” John’s voice is nonchalant, like it is obvious.

“You guys know I volunteered at an orphanage in Ghana, right?” you pipe up. “And I feel like I actually made a difference.”

“Hmm, really, how so?” Evelyn uses her kindly politician tone.

“I taught a first-grade class how to read and do addition and subtraction.” You take a gulp of mimosa. “And now I sponsor two children.”

“How long were you there?” John asks. He reclines in his chair. You are surprised he hasn’t fallen over yet.

“Two months,” you say.

“Sounds like a vacation,” John says. He is from Alabama but talks like a Cali surfer.

“No, it wasn’t a vacation. It was a full-time job that didn’t pay,” you say. “There were definitely volunteers there who treated it like a vacation and just lazed around posting photos all day, but there were also volunteers with the right intentions who worked their asses off.”

“Mmm, I don’t know,” Evelyn says. “The whole concept of volunteer-tourism positions countries like Ghana as helpless. You know my parents are from South Africa and they can’t

stand when people assume that the whole continent of Africa is just a degraded wasteland of poverty.”

“Yeah, exactly,” John finally sits up straight. “It’s totally so neocolonialist to assume that African people can’t help themselves.”

Drew looks at you and shakes his head in disagreement.

“But, Evelyn,” you say. “Have you ever been to South Africa?”

“I visited once for a week or so when I was a child, but I don’t really remember much.”

“John, have you ever been to Ghana?” you ask.

“Uh, no.”

“Then how can you guys critique something when you have no personal experience with it? If you’ve never been to Ghana, how do you know that they don’t need help? When I arrived at the orphanage, the first-grade class had no teacher whatsoever—just an eighteen-year-old girl who played on her phone and beat the kids with a stick when they got up from their seats. And yeah, two months isn’t a long time to leave a lasting impact, but by the end, my students could read simple sentences and subtract triple digit numbers!” You drink the rest of your mimosa.

Your boyfriend holds your hand under the table.

“Hey,” Drew finally pipes up. “I bet Jacqueline made those kids really happy, and at least she did something—something is better than nothing.”

“Eh, I don’t know about that,” Evelyn chuckles.

“Well, what have you done to help the under privileged?” Drew asks.

“Well, not much yet . . .” Evelyn says.

~ ~ ~

It is a dry August morning in Dodowa and you wake, in the same volunteer house where you stayed when you were nineteen, to the crowing of the roosters. You stretch in your foam mattress and are glad that you listened your mom and decided to come back to Potter's Village for a month before your senior year of college.

Auntie Kay, a Ghanaian woman who's been working at Potter's since it was founded in 2004, has prepared the table with bread and jam, fruit, tea and coffee. You and the other volunteers—a 32-year-old filmmaker from Los Angeles named Skye and a friend group of six Spaniards from Barcelona—sit down to eat. After you finish eating, you all wash your dishes in two buckets outside, gather your things and walk the two kilometers through the market and forest to Potter's.

When you arrive at Potter's Village's large, new compound, six-year-old Benjamin, who has Down syndrome and doesn't speak, is running around completely naked under the hot sun, rubbing dirt on his crotch and throwing rocks at toddlers Isaac and Frank who are shoeless and crying. Frank is naked from the waist down and Isaac has an overflowing diaper that probably hasn't been changed since the evening before when you changed it. Meanwhile, the other 130 children at Potter's are either finishing up their breakfasts of watery porridge or dragging desks in rows under the pavilion for summer classes. Since there are no teachers, some teenagers are getting their lesson plans together while teen girls wash the dishes from breakfast. The last time you were here, it was much more cramped, but there had been caregivers—Ghanaian women referred to as 'mothers' who watched the little ones while the other children went to school and did chores. But recently, Mama Grace had stopped paying the mothers so most of them had quit.

You wonder if Mama Grace quit paying the mothers because she had a free source of volunteer caregivers.

Last time you were here, your main responsibility had been to teach first grade. Potter's Village had started their own school because the kids were being bullied at the local public school for being orphans. Your "classroom" had been in the front hallway, so your students were always running outside whenever they didn't want to listen. You made a rewards chart and bribed the kids with cookies. There also hadn't been any textbooks or workbooks, so you made worksheets, scribbling subtraction problems onto notebook pages.

You pick up diaper-less Frank and sling him around your waist. Skye holds Isaac's hand and you all walk to the boys' dorm in search of pants. A few guys kick a soccer ball around outside the dorm, which houses around eighty boys aged two to twenty-four. Technically, each older boy and girl had been assigned a younger child to "look after," meaning make sure she or he is clothed, fed and bathed, but the older boys are seriously slacking. Whenever you ask them for a diaper or pants for Jude and Joe, they say, "uh, I don't know" and walk away, or claim there are none left, but then you root around a cabinet, or ask a few more boys, and eventually find a stray clean diaper. Volunteers had complained to Mama Grace about this chaos and neglect and she responded, "If you see a child crying, or without shoes or clothes, don't point your finger at me, go and do something about it! That's what you're here for, isn't it?" You listen to Mama Grace and eventually buy wipes and diapers and keep them in your backpack. Once, while you're changing Isaac's diaper outside on the concrete ledge around the boys' dorm, a nearby Spanish volunteer says, "Woah, you bought those yourself?" You nod. He raises his eyebrows, "Wow, you're a dedicated volunteer!" You nod and proceed to lift Isaac's legs so you can wipe. There are white pus-filled lesions all over his rear.

After your lunch of waakye—a Ghanaian cooked rice and bean dish—you continue chipping away at the stack of research articles you had printed off in the U.S. You sip on a mug of milky English breakfast tea while you read an article about the critique of the “Barbie Savior,” which describes an unwitting young woman, usually white and Western, who takes performative selfies with black or brown babies in order to boost her social media presence. “Two words, one love,” the bio on the satiric Instagram page reads. “Dear child,” reads the caption below an image of a Barbie holding a black baby doll. “One of the happiest moments in your life was definitely when you met me, but I am sorry to tell you that there is a very small chance we are ever going to meet again.”

The article you’re reading argues that by pointing to the individual female volunteer as the primary offender, the Barbie Savior critique fails to account for the broader political and historical contexts of the volunteer tourism industry. “Popular critiques of the industry would benefit from a more historicized, multi-scalar and place-based analysis of the particularities of the volunteer tourism experience,” the article argues, meaning it is more productive to understand how voluntourism functions as a structural system rather than pointing fingers at just one player in the system. We need to look critically at all the forces at play—volunteer agencies, NGOs, governmental departments, local economies—and understand the nuances of each voluntourist experience. This article resonates with you and eases your guilt. You think you’re not fully responsible for all the problems in the orphanage volunteerism industry. You also feel redeemed because you’ve been taking ethnographic notes and plan on writing about your

particular experience, which will provide a place-based analysis and contribute to the growing body of research on voluntourism.

The article makes you think about how the system is designed to keep voluntourists in the dark, to hide the truth behind glossy advertisements, orientations and handbooks, so you do not fully understand what's going on backstage or how you're affecting the host community and country. You did not want to be a part of a Western-run organization because you thought that would be neocolonialist and paternalistic of you to think you knew better than the local people. But since agencies, like IVHQ, place volunteers directly with local organizations, you felt confident and assured. You assumed that working for a Ghanaian-run orphanage was not problematic. You assumed that you should trust Mama Grace because as a Ghanaian woman, she understands the needs of her country and community better than you ever could.

Later, you discover scholars who contend that voluntourism isn't all bad. One scholar argues that the desire of young people to act upon the world shouldn't be condemned but encouraged. And anthropologist Andrea Freidus writes that in an increasingly violent and xenophobic world, cross-cultural engagements can help people understand and appreciate each other. You wholeheartedly agree. "If volunteers can understand the people they work with as citizens with rights rather than objects of charity," Freidus writes, "they can begin to think about long-term partnership, justice and structural change."

That evening, you sit shoulder-to-shoulder with Maxwell, one of the children you sponsor, atop a cinderblock foundation reading *Jack and the Beanstalk* as dusk falls over the banana trees. You're still breathing a little heavy after playing a game of capture-the-flag. No

one actually had a flag, so the Spanish volunteers improvised with a sweat-stained T-shirt. Maxwell had been so fast, he'd do a little jig while he waited for his competitor at the "flag," squiggling his arms around and smirking, before snatching the shirt, running back to home base and high fiving his teammate. You are happy to see Maxwell's athleticism and smile because the last time you were here, he hadn't had many friends, avoided sports and seemed to mostly cling to the walls of the orphanage courtyard. He also hadn't been able to read and only passed his classes because he could copy the sentences that his teacher scratched on the broken chalkboard into his notebook. Like many children in institutional care in Ghana, Maxwell was behind the national standard. Studies show that while orphanages may provide higher-quality food, they ultimately have lasting negative effects on children's psychological development because most caregivers focus on physical health and don't have time to prioritize play, socialization or education. One study found that incorporating 90-minute sessions of daily play improved institutionalized children's motor skills, cognitive and social functioning. "Orphanage caregivers could serve as important motivators for orphans' educational goals," another study concludes, which inspires you and makes you think that you're not a Barbie Savior, you're different and what you're doing actually matters.

"Using the leaves and twisty v----," Maxwell pauses and looks at you.

"Sound it out," you say and place your finger under the word. "Vvee-iiiye-nn-ss."

"Vines," Maxwell says and continues, "vines like rungs of a ladder, Jack climbed and climbed until at last, he reached the sky."

"Great job, Maxwell!" you say. "I am so proud of you! Give me a high-five!"

He high-fives you quickly, bashfully, probably because he is becoming a teenager, thus, too cool for your dorky excitement. He turns the page.

“Jack ran up the road toward the castle...” Maxwell continues reading, pausing occasionally to sound out words with you until he finishes the story, “and they lived happily ever after.”

“Maxwell!” you gush. “That was AMAZING! Do you remember last time I was here—I read the entire book to you and this time, you read the entire book *to me!*”

He smiles and nods his head stoically. You can’t believe how grown-up he’s become. His high cheekbones are defined, his eyebrows thick and he’s grown taller than you. You remember when he was ten and used to tap your shoulder and hide when you turned around. You used to bring him the daily iron tablet the doctor had prescribed for his spoon nails and help him with his homework. You would go on well-intentioned rants about how reading could open up a whole new world for him and it’d be a skill he’d cherish for the rest of his life. He had always seemed to zone out, but now, you wonder if maybe he had been listening all along. Maxwell had recently been honored at the schoolyear commencement ceremony for having the third best exam grades in his class. When the teacher handed Maxwell his certificate, you crouched in front and snapped a photo. You were glad you could perform the role of the excited relative for Maxwell.

“When will we learn together again?” Maxwell asks as you close *Jack and the Beanstalk*.

“Tomorrow afternoon, after your summer classes get out,” you say and put the storybook in your backpack. “I made some multiplication flashcards, so we can do those!”

You high-five Maxwell again, give him a hug goodnight and go look for Skye. Maxwell walks to the boys’ dormitory in his purple foam flip-flops caked in clay dust. The flip-flops are a few sizes too big, so they slid off his feet. In the dorm, the boys are probably crowded around a desk playing FIFA or watching a movie. Potter’s Village had recently bought the boys a small flat screen and PlayStation 2 so that they’d stay inside before bedtime and wouldn’t be running

around outside in the dirt field getting bit by mosquitos. The mosquitos are especially bad here because the orphanage is adjacent to the upscale Forest Hotel that has an outdoor swimming pool from which the owner empties dirty chlorinated water onto the Potter's property, creating small green algae-filled marshes—the ideal breeding ground for malaria mosquitos. Mama Grace made the children write letters to the owner. *Dear neighbor, by the grace of God we ask you to please stop dumping your pool water on our site. Thank you. God bless you.*

Skye sits on the white-tiled porch of the girls' dorm, holding perpetually wide-eyed and quiet eight-month-old Ishmael, whose head has outgrown his malnourished newborn-sized body. Skye bobs Ishmael up and down on her lap, while a little girl named Charity plays Candy Crush on Skye's iPhone.

“Hey, Skye, are you ready to go back?” you ask.

“Yeah, sure,” she says. “Just give me one sec—I'll bring baby Ishmael back inside.”

While you wait for Skye, you look at the girls' dorm, which houses about fifty girls aged three to twenty-four and is much smaller than the boys' dorm. Girls have to double and even triple-up on mattresses, and still, some sleep on the floor. This is only meant to be temporary until Potter's can raise enough donation money to continue building the new girls' dorm atop the cinderblock foundations you and Maxwell had been sitting on earlier. The temporary girls' dorm is actually meant to be the ‘medical center’ and dormitory for the Italian volunteers who financed the building's construction.

Skye comes back and it's already 7:15 and dark outside. Technically, according to the volunteer handbook, you're supposed to leave Potter's by 6:30 at the latest, so the children have time to settle down before bed at 8, but no one really follows that rule. You and Skye walk past the pavilion, where the kids go to school, eat their meals and play. You walk past the new two-

story administrative office, which is developing quickly. In just the two weeks since you've been in Dodowa, the construction workers finished building the entire second floor.

Skye walks in front of you on the narrow dirt path through a residential area of Dodowa. You pass a small mud house with a roof made of rusty tin-sheets held down by pieces of wood. Buckets and half-filled bottles of cooking oil litter the orange clay yard. A woman sits outside on a stool, stoking a flame with twigs. Like usual, children run toward you, wave and say, 'obroni, good evening.' Sickly kittens trail behind the children and bedsheets, socks and shirts hang from a nearby clothesline. As you continue on the path, you wonder if this village mother can afford to send her kids to school, feed them?

Stray chickens cluck and pick at the empty black plastic baggies and Fan Milk wrappers strewn across the grass, and straggly goats cry as they chase each other around crumbling cinderblock. Many structures and houses along this path seemed to be empty, abandoned or only half-finished, which reminds you of Mama Grace's big dreams for "The Kingdom of Potter's Village." The day before, Mama Grace had called a volunteer meeting and bellowed about how one day, the Kingdom would have an in-ground swimming pool, guesthouses for volunteers' families, classrooms for each grade, a soccer field, ping-pong table and everything painted in vibrant blues. "All we need is for you—our volunteers, our angels—to help us raise the money," she smiled, her chunky necklace glittering in the sun. But currently, Potter's Village could barely afford fruit, vegetables and meat to feed all the kids, and was struggling not to get shut down by the Department of Social Welfare.

"So, how'd it go talking to Mama Grace this afternoon?" you ask Skye. "Did you give her your donation money?"

“Yeah . . .” Skye says as you walk by people packing and locking up their market stalls for the night. “Mama Grace is going to use the \$1,000 I fundraised to tile the office.”

“Oh . . .” you say. “Not to work on the new girls’ dorm?”

“Yeah,” Skye sighs. “I’m not too happy about it either. I don’t know how all the people who donated are going to react to hearing that their money’s being used for *tiles*. I love Mama Grace, but she doesn’t always do the best job prioritizing and it’s so hard to talk to her . . . I don’t want to come off as being disrespectful or culturally insensitive, you know?”

“Yeah,” you say. “I think Mama Grace just assumes more donation money will always be flowing in, so there’s no need to prioritize.”

Later that night, you sit on a stool in the closet-sized kitchen and talk to Auntie Kay while she fries noodles for you and the other volunteers’ dinner.

“I got another one for you—July 27th,” Auntie Kay says. She pauses from chopping carrots and smirks mischievously. “Look it up—I’m curious.”

You pick up your iPhone and search *Astrology-Zodiac-Signs.com*.

“So, whose birthday is it?” you ask as the webpage loads.

“Mama Grace,” she replies, and tosses some chopped onions into the skillet on the hotplate.

“Well, Mama Grace is a Leo,” you say. “Her animal is tiger and her strengths are creativity, passion, generosity and cheerfulness.”

“Mmmhmm,” Auntie Kay nods. “It’s true—Mama Grace is generous and creative. What about the weaknesses?”

“Arrogant, stubborn, self-centered...”

“Mmmhmm,” Auntie Kay laughs. “It’s also true.”

“...lazy and inflexible,” you finish.

“Hmm, it’s all true except for lazy,” Auntie Kay says as she dices a tomato. “Mama Grace is not lazy, but, oh, she is *stubborn!*”

You laugh and nod reluctantly. You agree with Auntie Kay but are unsure if it is your place to poke fun at the matriarch of Potter’s Village. Mama Grace has published many books in Ghana, one of which you discovered on the bookshelf in the volunteer house. From the worn back cover of “Women in Development,” published in 1996, you learn that Mama Grace has roots in the royal family of Anomabo, is interested in the advocacy of women and studied French in Saint-Étienne. She also served as an Official Delegate from Ghana at the United Nations Conference on the Commission of the Status of Women in 2002, which makes you feel guilty and paternalistic for questioning her ethics. You sometimes wonder if Mama Grace is pocketing donation money, but you always squash that supposition because it’s neocolonialist and very white savior of you to doubt someone who has been running an orphanage for fifteen years.

Whenever Mama Grace arrives at the orphanage, in a taxi with an entourage, everyone accommodates her like royalty—rushing to wipe dust from a chair, getting her water and fanning her face with cardboard. Traditional Ghanaian customs requires one to deeply respect and never question their elders, but you’ve become skeptical that this is the best approach to running a non-profit organization. You feel guilty for your skepticism.

“Mama Grace was so stubborn today,” Auntie Kay shakes her head and tsk, tsk, tsks her tongue. “Oh, she made me so angry!”

“Really?” you say. “What happened?”

“I told Mama Grace I would leave if she didn’t start paying me, I’ve been saying so for years now and she always says she’ll pay me soon, and that I get to stay in the volunteer house, but it’s not enough for me anymore! I work so hard, oh! I take care of the volunteer house and I’m up at Potter’s every day waiting on Mama Grace, and I go to the market to buy vegetables for the children. And Mama Grace said she wants me to start supervising the Potter’s dorms at night, to walk around and make sure everyone is sleeping in their own beds because we can’t have any more girls getting pregnant.”

Auntie Kay pauses from cooking, puts her palms together, raises her eyebrows and looks hard into your eyes.

“I tell her, Eh, Mamee, let me understand, you expect me to walk *up and down* from the volunteer house to Potter’s all *day*—cooking, cleaning, taking care of children, doing anything you ask of me, and *then*, you expect me to stay up all night too? And you don’t even pay me! It’s not right,” Auntie Kay shakes her head and goes back to chopping cabbage. “It’s not right.”

“Oh, I’m sorry Auntie Kay,” you say. “That’s not right at all. It’s not fair. You work so hard; you deserve to rest *and* get paid!”

“Uhh huhh,” Auntie Kay seethes. Steam rises as she flips the vegetables in the skillet.

“Hey, Auntie Kay,” you ask. “Whatever happened to that bakery that Amelia founded?”

Last time you were here, Amelia Griffiths was the poster volunteer who had been crowned by Mama Grace as “the Queen of Potter’s” for her fundraising. Amelia had raised enough money to open a small bakery in order to provide Potter’s with a source of self-generating, sustainable income. Amelia didn’t want Potter’s to continue to rely 100% on donations and thought the bakery could provide the high school grads at Potter’s with jobs. And

any leftover, unsold bread could be used to feed Potter's children. You thought it was a great idea and danced merrily at the grand opening.

“Oh, you didn't hear?” Auntie Kay says. “It's done, closed. Mama Grace couldn't trust anyone to work there. She always thought the teenagers were pocketing money and purposefully miscounting the day's profits. And I would tell her, 'oh, Ma, you have to trust others! You can't control everything! And these are the children you've helped raise—why would they steal from you?' But oh, she didn't listen to me. That Mama Grace never listens to anyone.”

~ ~ ~

You are a senior in college sitting at your Ikea desk in your room discovering more and more documents and studies that make you think Potter's Village is severely corrupt and problematic. You learn that as of 2014, there were 148 institutions for orphans and vulnerable children in Ghana, only five of which were actually registered. Many of these unregistered orphanages are being shut down because they do not meet the requirements of the Department of Social Welfare. You find the checklist that social workers are meant to use when inspecting orphanages and you don't think Potter's should've passed. With 130 children and only a few permanent caregivers, Potter's doesn't meet the caregiver to children ratio. Each child does not have her own bed with a mosquito net. Each child does not have her own bag for clothes and belongings. Potter's is not fully fenced-in with a gate and lock. The Potter's promotional website certainly does have photographs of the children used for fundraising purposes. And Potter's fundraising strategy includes individual donations for children. There is no criminal record check

for Potter's volunteers and none of the volunteers have approval letters from the Department of Social Welfare.

You pick at your cuticles as you find more and more proof that that your presence has tangible negative effects on the children you're meant to be serving. You read a study which found that children raised in orphanages have immense difficulty finding employment as adults because they've lived a life isolated from their own society and thus, have no support networks. The Ghanaian author of the study writes that orphanages alienate young people from their extended families and communities, which are at the heart of the African way of life. "Even my biological mum can't stand me," said one of the participants in the study, a young woman in her twenties. "In the children's home we had our own culture and were brought up very European. I have white values in me. I see things from a different perspective. So, we are always clashing." You think about all the high school grads at Potter's, in their twenties, who continue hanging around, unable to find work and live independently. You read that other participants in the study were stigmatized for being orphans and you think of Abigail, an eighteen-year-old girl at Potter's, who failed out of senior school. She said it wasn't her fault, that she didn't have school supplies and that the teachers had treated her unfairly since she came from an orphanage.

You read another study about children in orphanages who have been reunited with their families. Upon re-entry to a Ghanaian public school, one participant had trouble because in the orphanage, he had been preparing for the SAT and was used to "living like he was in America," which makes you think of all the western fairytales you've read to the children. The study also found that children who were reunited with their families returned to the same issues, such as alcoholism and poverty, that caused them to leave initially. The study concluded that more support is needed to assist families during the reunification process, but one participant reports,

“unfortunately the donors made us aware that they will only support the children if they are in the orphanage.”

You read that unlicensed orphanages popped up around Ghana to cater to the influx of voluntourists. “Over the past decade, Ghana has been invaded,” a journalist writes in Ghana’s *Daily Graphic*. “This invasion has not come in the form of killer bees or illegal miners. No; over the past decade, Ghana has been invaded by voluntourists.” A Child Protection Specialist at UNICEF Ghana writes that despite the good intentions of some volunteers, their presence is often exploited by proprietors who go on “recruitment drives” of children, telling parents that the white man and woman have come to help the children. You read that less than 30 percent of donated money to orphanages actually goes to childcare and that the Ghanaian government’s Care Reform Initiative has made provisions to safeguard against harmful ‘volunteerism.’

You read that NGOs in Ghana are required to have a minimum of two directors, and you find that technically, according to the Potter’s website, a man named Alex Asamoah serves as the Vice President, but you’ve never seen or heard of him before and as far as you can tell Mama Grace wields all the power. You realize that Western volunteers and donors, like you, are the ones fueling neglectful and exploitative orphanages because without you, Mama Grace would have no source of revenue. People like Mama Grace are structuring orphanages as profit-making ventures to attract unwitting foreign tourists who supply donations and labor for free. You think you’ve known this all along but didn’t want to believe it.

You wanted, so badly, to believe in the narrative of cross-cultural exchange. You did exactly what the scholars argued you shouldn’t do—you thought of Potter’s Village as an isolated entity, separate from the trends in the rest of the country. You thought that the way you did volunteer-tourism, with a focus on education and literacy, was okay and left a positive

impact, not like other volunteers, such as the Spanish family who wore white billowy clothes and forced the kids to sing “The Lion Sleeps Tonight” every day while they took endless videos. You thought you were different.

But the fact of the matter is, if voluntourists didn’t volunteer and donate, corrupt people wouldn’t open unlicensed orphanages. Auntie Emma wouldn’t be able to exploit children for donations that she’d sell at the market. Mama Grace wouldn’t be able to use donation money to build a two-story, tiled office building while girls sleep on the floor and Auntie Kay goes unpaid. You thought that as long as you worked hard, respected everyone and increased literacy rates, you were being helpful. But the truth is, no matter what you did, you were still supporting an industry that preys on the naivety of young do-gooders in order to unnecessarily isolate children from their families and culture.

You wish this weren’t the essay you were writing. You wanted to write a story of hope, community, mentorship and cultural exchange. You wanted to write about your connections with Maxwell and Auntie Kay but now you’re writing about all the harm you’ve caused Maxwell and Auntie Kay. You didn’t want to portray yourself as the clueless Barbie Savior and you didn’t want to portray Mama Grace as the corrupt ringleader, but that’s exactly what you’re doing.

You show up to Potter’s Village one afternoon in August 2019 to discover that Maxwell is leaving the orphanage. A woman is at a table under the pavilion signing paperwork with Mama Grace’s daughter, Martha. Nearby, Maxwell is slumped in a blue plastic chair, with a tote bag full of his belongings on the ground next to him. You run over to the pavilion.

“Maxwell, are you leaving? Why didn’t you tell me?” You try to catch his eye, but he only stares at the ground. He wears loose brown pants and a rumpled polo.

“Maxwell, are you going on vacation? Is this all your stuff?” He refuses to look you in the eye.

“Are you excited to go home and see your family?”

Martha introduces you to a kind-looking woman in a black V-neck and skinny jeans. You learn she is Maxwell’s mom. But Maxwell never spoke of his mom. You didn’t think he had a mom because Mama Grace told you he was an orphan. *Maxwell’s story is like all the others*, you remember Mama Grace saying flippantly when you decided to sponsor him. *His parents abandoned him, and you know the rest*. You wonder if you ever really mattered to Maxwell, or did he just Facetime call you because he was bored? Does his mom know you’re his sponsor? Did she use her son to profit off you? She doesn’t look poor or ill, she looks healthy and happy. You feel guilty for judging Maxwell’s mom from only her appearance. You don’t know her—she could be struggling.

“Maxwell is just going on summer vacation,” Martha tells you. “He’ll be back in September when the new semester resumes.”

“Oh . . .” you say. “Well, I’m leaving at the end of August, so I probably won’t see him again.”

“Oh,” Martha says.

“Is it okay if I give him a hug good-bye?” you look at Maxwell’s mom.

“Of course,” she smiles.

You hug him and tell him you’ll miss him, then you watch him walk down the dirt road with his mom. You think of all the memories—frisbee, charades, soccer—that you won’t make

with Maxwell anymore. Later that day, you ask Mama Grace if you could visit Maxwell at his family home, she smiles and says, of course, but then, a few days later she tells you that no one can find the scrap of paper on which the administration had written Maxwell's address. You return to the U.S. to finish your last year of college. Eventually another volunteer tells you that Maxwell has permanently returned to his family home. You doubt you will ever hear from him again. You wonder if he received the letter you wrote him and the giftbag full of books that you asked Potter's to send him. You imagine him at home, eating banku with his mom and sharing jokes in the local dialect, Twi. You wonder if Maxwell will remember you and you feel guilty for caring.

Wanted: Someone with Whom to Simply Pass the Days

"I'm twenty—too young to get married!" I said in Mandarin to a Chinese mother at the grassy People's Park in Shanghai. "But," I playfully nodded at my roommate, Xiao Feng, "she is twenty-four, a graduate student and she's single!"

The mother's eyes jumped from me—an outspoken, petite, blonde, blue-eyed American in a pink floral sundress—to Xiao Feng—my sweet and very shy friend who had yet to kiss anyone on the lips.

“Oh, no, no, no,” Xiao Feng laughed and shook her head before the woman could speak.

On a wooden table in front of the woman, a piece of paper listed all that her son's statistics, like a baseball trading card. *Male, Age: 33, Height: 1.80 meters (5'9), Education: Master of Finance, Work: International Banker, Housing: Apartment in Pudong, Income: ¥450000 (about \$63,000). Wanted: Simply someone with whom to pass the days.* The man's phone number was scribbled in blue marker on the bottom.

Similar ads were taped to polka-dot and plaid umbrellas. Ads were placed on park benches and in rows on the edges of the brick pathways. Aged parents paced, hands clasped behind their backs, or sat on little plastic stools, yawning and fanning their wrinkled faces as they waited to broker a match. Others held up their phones to show pictures of their adult kids in professional attire. The animated parents were framed by trees, bushes and fountains. And sleek skyscrapers, like the Shanghai World Financial Center, loomed in the distance. I imagined the adult kids on the umbrella ads typing away in a tenth-floor office.

As part of an intensive summer language program at Shanghai University, our assignment was to attend this weekly marriage market, take notes and interview at least one parent. The markets began in the early 2000s as an attempt to promote marriage among the increasingly single young population. According to the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs, Shanghai has the lowest marriage rate in the country. Single people in their twenties and thirties, often referred to as “leftover” in Chinese, are waiting for or abstaining from marriage because they want to pursue professional careers and women no longer rely on husbands financially.

Such apathetic attitudes toward marriage are a source of resentment among parents who want their children to find lifelong companionship and to continue the family line. Many single young people have even begun to “rent” boyfriends or girlfriends from escort services to bring home during Chinese New Year, which, to me, sounds like the plot of a romantic comedy.

The director of my program had “hand-selected” roommates for us according to mutual interests, and I think she really got it right by pairing Xiao Feng and me. Xiao Feng was just as much of an obsessive overachiever as I was. The two of us often stayed up well past 1 a.m.—she, making PowerPoints for the kindergarten English-language class she taught, and me, writing articles about my experiences in Shanghai for the school paper back home. One night, my laptop crashed, so we tag-teamed with her laptop—one of us lying half-asleep in bed while the other furiously typed. She joked that the laptop was our relay baton.

Roommates were also required to assist us American students in our language-learning. So, Xiao Feng joined our field trip to People’s Park to help me, and we made plans to grab lunch afterwards. On the crowded Saturday morning subway ride to the park, we chatted about my boyfriend back home. Drew and I had only been together for a few months and wanted to keep things “casual.” I tried to explain the concept of an open relationship to Xiao Feng, but she didn’t see the point of being with someone unless it would lead to marriage. “Love is like . . . a bottle of water,” she said and held up her pink thermos, “if we empty out all the water on someone we don’t really care about, then there will be no love left for our soulmate!” I shook my head but wondered if maybe she had a point. Was I dumping all of my love-water too quickly? Drew and I hadn’t really been doing well keeping things “casual” . . . a few weeks before I left for China, we had driven twelve hours to my hometown, he met my parents, and before I knew it, he was

playing chess with my grandpa and being featured on my grandma's Facebook page. On the last day of Drew's visit, we cuddled under the duvet in the guest bed and said we loved each other.

Xiao Feng and I emerged from the subway onto crowded Nanjing Road, linked arms and walked through the park entrance. Many parents snubbed us at first. I had expected them to welcome my curiosity, but Xiao Feng said they took their matchmaking role very seriously and only wanted to talk to people with legitimate offers. Also, she said, they were probably sick of foreigners and journalists questioning their practices. Eventually, though, the mother of the 33-year-old banker, who had a gentle face, agreed to speak with us. I asked her why she was helping her son find a partner and she said because he was too busy working.

"He leaves early in the morning and works overtime, so he doesn't get home until 9," she said. "He has no free time to go out and find a girlfriend!"

I nodded and wondered if the guy had ever used Tantan, a Chinese app similar to Tinder, or had ever drunk-texted acquaintances to come meet him at bars, which was what I had done to first get Drew's attention and spark our relationship. I asked the mother what she was looking for in her son's potential mate and she said she just wanted an "ordinary" wife. Her desires were very different from what my parents wanted for me—unforgettable happiness. Later, when I brought this cultural difference up to Xiao Feng, she said an ordinary wife was probably preferable because a unique wife may be unpredictable.

The mother added that it would also be nice if the wife was pretty—perhaps, she could look something like me. I smiled, understanding—not only was I pale, which was extremely sought-after in China because tan skin signifies farm work, but I also offered a pathway to U.S. citizenship. Then I asked the mother how she would react if her son rejected the match she found for him.

“I’ll find another,” she said. “This is my responsibility as a parent.”

I admired her dedication but wondered if her son would agree. My Chinese teacher told me that many parents go to this blind date corner without their children’s permission and that many people are embarrassed to be advertised at the market.

I smiled and told the woman Xiao Feng was very pretty and smart and finishing up the last year of her master’s degree in Teaching Mandarin as a Foreign Language.

Xiao Feng abruptly thanked the woman for her time and whisked me under a tunnel. Advertisements hung from string on the walls. *Female, Birth Year: 85, Height: 1.65 meters, Education: Professional College, Major: Business, Income: ¥300000 (about \$42,000).* Which papers would Cupid’s arrow pierce? Which couple would someday paste these ads into their scrapbook, like my mom did with her wedding invitation?

“Jacqueline, please don’t try to set me up again like that,” Xiao Feng said. Her voice was somehow raspy and squeaky. “I’m still young, I’m not trying to get married anytime soon.” Xiao Feng told me she thought marriage markets were odd because parents essentially commodify their children. But I was having too much fun pretending to be her matchmaker. Even though I thought the marriage market concept was absurd, I figured I would humor the parents and get bashful Xiao Feng to laugh. Also, I thought Xiao Feng was a really great person who didn’t give herself enough credit. Bragging about her accomplishments to the parents was my weird way of showing I cared.

In a discussion in Chinese class, my American peers and I had ranted about how marriage shouldn’t revolve around the Chinese expression of Méndānghùduì, which means that couples of the same socioeconomic status make the best marriages. One should marry for true love and nothing else, we thought. Arranged marriage was originally a cruel method of female

imprisonment and so, even in its current form, it is ultimately unfulfilling. *How can someone be too busy with work to put themselves out there and let chance take its course?* I wondered. *What happened to fate?* Now that I look back on it, maybe we were unconsciously subscribing to Orientalism, Edward Said's term for an imperialism whereby the West creates a sense of its own 'civilization' in opposition to a presumably backward, mysterious, and exotic East. My classmates and I had automatically assumed our Western "free love" superior to Eastern collectivist marriage.

Even though I didn't think the marriage market really worked, I was still infatuated. The endless possibility was like Tinder, but for lifetime compatibility, not just sex. The hundreds of papers that lined the stone pathways could represent someone's future wife or husband. *Oh, all the love in the air*, I romanticized. Maybe Orientalism and the fact that arranged marriage seemed so "wrong" to my Western mind made it all the more exotic and sexy. Or maybe, my infatuation had nothing to do with global power dynamics and I was just in a boy-crazy stage. On the average weeknight in Shanghai, I would flirt with my classmate crush over some beers, then, facetime Drew, then, call my ex and finally, stay up past 2am comparing the three guys in my journal—who was the most intelligent? The funniest? The kindest?

Xiao Feng and I strolled past decaying green leaves floating on glassy pond water. The tired leaves seemed to push their lotus buds to reach for the sun. Lotus flowers are sacred in Eastern culture because every night they submerge into muddy water and then miraculously re-bloom in the morning with clean, pink petals. It was a warm July afternoon and parents pushed babies in strollers, young children ran around, and some teens played frisbee, which reminded me of Drew because he loved ultimate frisbee and disc golf. The leisurely scene also reminded me of the times Drew and I had rolled down grassy hills at the park near our campus. One time

he picked some tiny white star-like flowers, which were actually chickweed, put them in my hair and kissed me. *Ah, I wish he was here right now*, I thought and texted him saying I missed him.

On a corner near the exit, I was surprised to see rows of advertisements in English.

Wanted: Foreign woman.

Chinese fathers beckoned me to their laminated ads. I was intrigued and flattered so I pulled Xiao Feng to the corner. A sea of men encircled us and yelled over each other.

“Where are you from?”

“You are very beautiful!”

“Do you live in China?”

“Are you looking to get married?”

I laughed and basked in the attention. But skittish Xiao Feng wasn’t pleased. She grabbed my arm and told the men to back up.

“She’s not marrying anyone anytime soon!” she said loudly and turned to me. “Are you okay? Maybe we should go?”

“I’m okay, but yeah, let’s go,” I said. We moved out of the center of the ring that had formed. A few determined fathers trailed behind us and continued to talk up their sons. One man announced that his son was a doctoral candidate in computer science at Columbia and I perked up. Those credentials were pretty impressive, I thought. Plus, the fact that he lived in the U.S. made a relationship more feasible.

“You know AI?” the father asked. “That’s what my son studies and develops—he’s going to earn a lot of money.”

“I know AI,” I nodded and thought about how I will probably end up with very little money if I become a writer.

I appreciated the man's approach. My relationships in the U.S. seemed random. The two guys I've seriously dated just felt "right" in my gut and I hadn't really cared that they had poorer grades than I and little ambition—my ex was in ROTC and dreamt of living on Mars, while Drew seemed to have no plan besides "becoming rich." As the cliché goes, I just "followed my heart." And now that I think about it, my heart led me to goofy and immature white guys with muscular bodies . . .

"Look, this is my son!" the father held up his touchscreen. The son wore blocky glasses and a plaid polo. His smile was kind and he looked broad-shouldered.

"Oh, he's very nice-looking!" I said.

"Can I get your WeChat?" the father asked.

"Sure!" I typed my ID into his phone. Xiao Feng laughed and shook her head.

"Thank you," the father said. "I'll tell my son to send you a text!"

Other fathers noticed that I had given out my contact information and started to get their phones out, too.

"Okay, let's go now," Xiao Feng said.

We walked to the exit. Xiao Feng asked me if I was really going to text that man's son.

"Eh, probably not—at least, not anytime soon," I said. "Maybe one day. Who knows?"

Online sources report that marriage markets rarely lead to any real matches. Most people do not want to marry someone just because their parents found a one-page ad taped on the sidewalk. Unlike traditional arranged marriages, such as those often practiced in India, there is no obligation to pursue a date that was arranged for them at the market. "The ultimate decision is, of course, up to my daughter," a father I interviewed said. "I do not control her."

Parents are simply providing more opportunities for their children. *The Diplomat* magazine even compares Chinese dating corners to online dating apps. The real difference between online and offline, though, is who is doing the swiping, the article reports. But while traditional Chinese culture might be more collective and conducive to arranged marriages, globalization has caused individualistic Western culture to spread into Chinese cities, thus increasing the popularity of romantic self-chosen love, especially among young people.

The markets are less about finding an actual marriage, a Hutong blog post argues, and more about providing parents with a space to socialize and do what parents love most: talk about their kids. I think the act of searching for matches also makes the parents feel like they're playing an active and vital role in their child's life. Advertising their kid is an act of love, not a business transaction. I feel for the parents because when I was rattling off Xiao Feng's accomplishments, I wasn't trying to commodify her, I was just proud of her.

Lunchtime was approaching and Xiao Feng and I were sweaty and hungry, so we headed back to the subway and said goodbye to the marriage market. Since then, over two years have passed and Drew and I have been on-again-off-again. In the off periods, I "dated," or maybe more accurately, "hung out" with a lot of romantic interests in the U.S., and nothing stuck. There was the guy who I thought was in the Army but who had lied to me about his entire identity. The guitarist who got sloppy drunk and insulted my friend. The accountant who invited me on his family vacation after only two dates. The online gamer who, during our first date, serenaded me with a Jason Mraz song in the car. *Sister, you've got it all*, he sang and held my hand.

Dating in the U.S. felt forced and only made me miss Drew more. I missed his carefree smile, and how, if I was having a stressful day, he would pick me up at a moment's notice and take me to the lake. I missed our Monday night yoga and Smoothie King routine, our two-scoop

Tuesday ice cream dates, and I missed jamming out to The Mamas and Papas in his apartment while I wrote memoir and he painted a mural. I missed how he always held my hand and rested his head on my chest, even when we were around his friends. I missed his disdain for social media, how he referred to it as “The” Snapchat. I missed how he lived fully in every moment—when he studied abroad in Kunming, China, he explored the city on the first day, befriended a group of hacky-sackers and joined their daily afternoon hacky-group. He balanced my type A personality and reminded me that it was okay to be human, it was okay to slow down and enjoy the sweetness of life.

When I missed him, I’d usually end up calling him and we’d get back together, but then, whenever we hung out, a little voice in my head would compare him to other imaginary guys—*he’s not eloquent, his sense of humor is unsophisticated, he wears the same paint-splattered lacrosse sweatpants almost every day*, The little voice told me that there were millions of other options and I could do better. That I should be with someone who “challenged” me. That I should break it off because there was a more “perfect” soulmate somewhere out there just waiting to be found—perhaps, an older man with 5 o’clock shadow, a briefcase and witty cocktail-party banter.

Research shows that we tend to fall in love with someone who is similar to ourselves: someone of the same ethnic, social, religious, educational and economic background. Someone of similar attractiveness, attitudes, expectations, values, interests, communication skills, and of comparable intelligence. Someone who lives near us. Someone who, say, your parents might try to set you up with at Shanghai’s marriage market . . .

If we tend to fall in love with someone who our parents would set us up with anyway, maybe arranged marriage isn't such a bad idea? Proponents argue that arranged marriages start cold and heat up over time as the couple grows, and that they remove the anxious questioning of 'is this the right person?' But critics point out that the passionate, all-consuming poetry of love is lost in the pragmatic transaction.

The family I babysat for in high school was the product of an arranged marriage in southern India. In her early twenties, Prisha's parents and grandparents selected four potential matches from their social caste and she was responsible for choosing the one she wanted to marry. Prisha has always been very spiritual, so she asked her guru which man would lead to a spiritual partnership. The guru said Kabir, who enjoyed drinking beer and watching cricket. Prisha was surprised because she didn't think Kabir even meditated, but the guru told her that was the point—Prisha would patiently guide Kabir on his path to enlightenment.

We have kept in touch over the years and recently, during a summer visit, I ate homemade chickpea soup and chatted with Prisha and her 15-year-old daughter, Myra, in their kitchen. Myra was telling us about her first crush. "It was so weird!" she said. "I just couldn't control this feeling, but eventually, thankfully, it faded away." Myra went to the bathroom and Prisha told me she didn't know how to offer "dating advice" to her daughter because she had never dated. "To me, the matter is entirely spiritual," Prisha said. "Kabir and I have been married for over fifteen years and we're just entering into the infant stage of compatibility."

While I liked the idea of starting cold and warming up, I didn't think I was patient enough to wait fifteen years for compatibility to emerge. Then again, Prisha, Kabir and their children seem to live in blissful harmony.

In the past thirty years, there have been four main studies conducted in China, Turkey, the U.S. and India, two of which found self-made marriage more fulfilling and two of which showed no difference between arranged and self-made. So, I guess that means the heart wins and rationality loses? I was sort of disappointed. I wanted to believe in arranged marriage because the idea of diving into a life with an almost-stranger is not only intriguing, but shows that love is not a story of fairytale soulmates, but rather, a skill that can be fine-tuned over the years, which is what German psychologist Erich Fromm argues in his classic 1956 book *The Art of Loving*.

One of my Chinese professors in the U.S. had recommended I read *The Art of Loving*, because it made her completely rethink love. Fromm criticizes the Western ideal of “finding the right person” and instead focuses on developing the act of giving, not receiving, love. “Love isn’t something natural,” Fromm writes. “Rather it requires discipline, concentration, patience, faith, and the overcoming of narcissism. It isn’t a feeling, it is a practice.” Ironically, taking away the mystical elements of love made *The Art of Loving* even more beautiful to me because it meant that loving someone was a decision. “If love were only a feeling, there would be no basis for the promise to love each other forever,” Fromm writes. The book also made me think of Prisha and Kabir. They grew into love because they decided to give themselves fully to each other and their relationship. Meanwhile, with the façade of endless options on Tinder, Bumble and Grindr, my generation is vetting and tossing away less-than-ideal candidates.

In the words of biological anthropologist Helen Fisher, my generation often conducts the “sex interview” to decide if someone is worth spending the time, energy and money on a first date. Apparently, sex is one area in which millennials want to make sure they’re compatible. And we’re getting married later, Fisher argues, because we take love more seriously and are willing to take our time to get it right. She calls this phenomenon “slow love.” So, instead of uncovering

the layers during an arranged marriage, millennials gather as much information as possible before making an educated decision. But the two courtship practices may be blurring together more than we think: *The New York Times* writes that millennials are prioritizing financial matters more than previous generations, which reminds me of the marriage market. The article quotes a twenty-four-year-old woman who said that when she first met her fiancé, she asked “what’s your credit score?”

This past summer, Drew and I got back together after a long break and things feel different now because I finally let go of the internalized pressure to “upgrade.” I realized that I never even wanted to be with some charismatic, satchel-toting intellectual in the first place, I just thought that’s what I *should* want. I realized that if I wanted to make things work with Drew, in the words of Xiao Feng, I had to stop sprinkling my love on all these random guys and decide to focus instead on developing gratitude in the relationship I wanted to grow. I realized Drew’s supposed lacking qualities are charming—his monosyllabic expressions are funny and counter my endless rants, his sense of humor *is* ridiculously immature, but it always makes me laugh, and it’s cool that he wears ratty old sweatpants because that means he’s not superficial.

This summer I embraced the attitudes of Prisha and Kabir, Erich Fromm and *The Art of Loving*. Instead of dwelling in the future and the fantasy of what could be, I decided to give my all to the person I loved standing right in front of me. And instead of measuring Drew’s credentials on an ad taped to an umbrella—credit score, career, respectability—I became aware of how I felt around him, which, even after two years, was always giddy and giggly. I know all the dating apps and the marriage markets would tell me that there’s someone better out there for me, but all I’m looking for is someone with whom to simply pass my days, and currently, I’m

happy to cook homemade guacamole, play scrabble and watch *America's Next Top Model* with Drew.

I also texted Xiao Feng for the first time in months and I discovered that she has a boyfriend. "He's a silly boy," she texted me with a tear-streamed laughing emoji. In the photo she sent me, her arm is woven through his and they stand in front of a huge pink plastic heart at the Wanda Plaza mall. She smiles softy. And no, they didn't meet through the marriage market.

NOTES

The Introduction

vi *vulgarity and materialism of modernity through rigor and beauty*: Cultural anthropologist Sherry Ortner's book, *Life and Death on Mt. Everest* (2001) was published by Princeton

University Press. *Life and Death on Mt. Everest* is a hallmark text in the field of cultural anthropology.

vii *saturating your observations with your own subjectivity*: Quote is from page 89 of communication scholar Carolyn Ellis's book *The Ethnographic I* (2003), published by AltaMira Press.

vii *accommodates mess and chaos, uncertainty and emotion*: From the book *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research* (2014) written by Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones and Carolyn Ellis and published by Oxford University Press.

vii *engage with the local community through interviews and reporting*: A comprehensive list of all my journalistic publications can be found on <https://muckrack.com/jacqueline-knirnschild/articles>.

vii *American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus*: Sociologist Lisa Wade's book (2017) was published by W. W. Norton & Company.

viii *I didn't know if this was empathy or theft*: Quote is from the titular essay of Leslie Jamison's collection *The Empathy Exams* (2014), which was published by Graywolf Press. This collection won the Graywolf Press Nonfiction Prize in 2014.

ix *coaxed chorus like a bushfire*: Quote is from Leslie Jamison's article, "Leslie Jamison: confessional writing is not self-indulgent," published in *The Guardian* on July 5, 2014.

ix *It investigates its own seams. It traces what leaks*: Quote is from Leslie Jamison's introduction to *The Best American Essays of 2017*, which was published by Best American Paper. This quote can be found on page xviii of the book.

ix *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity is Hurting Young Women*: Feminist writer Jessica Valenti's book (2009) was published by Seal Press.

- ix *Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain*: This Leslie Jamison essay was a part of her 2014 collection, *The Empathy Exams*.
- ix *The Happiness Project*: Gretchen Rubin's book (2012) was published by HarperCollins.
- ix *Bird by Bird*: Anne Lamott's book (2014) was published by Random House.
- ix *Assassination Vacation*: Sarah Vowell's book (2006) was published by Simon & Schuster.
- x *The Rise of the Valkyries*: Seyward Darby's article was published in the September 2017 issue of *Harper's Magazine*.
- x *The Dark Power of Fraternities*: Caitlin Flanagan's article was published in the March 2014 issue of *The Atlantic*.
- x *Bee-Brained*: Vauhini Vara's article was published in the May 2017 issue of *Harper's Magazine*.
- x *Sim Life*: Leslie Jamison's essay was published in the December 2017 issue of *The Atlantic*.
- x *What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us*: Michael Pollan's book (2018) was published by Penguin Press.
- xi *recreate the process of learning that's behind the book*: This quote is from the Longform Podcast's interview with Michael Pollan in episode #347, which first aired on June 12, 2019.
- xi *The Photographs That Make Me Feel Less Alone*: Leslie Jamison's essay was published in the December 2019 issue of *The Atlantic*.

- xi *wanted her to be and not to be*: This quote is from Joan Didion’s 1966 essay, “Where the Kissing Never Stops,” which was published in her collection *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* (1968).
- xii *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*: Katherine Boo’s book (2014) was published by Random House. *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* won The National Book Award, and earned Boo a Pulitzer Prize for Public Service and the MacArthur “Genius” Grant.
- xii *Lost Cat*: Mary Gaitskill’s essay was published in *Granta* 107 on May 2, 2019. The essay is also featured in her collection, *Somebody with a Little Hammer: Essays* (2017), which was published by Pantheon.
- xii *The Reckonings*: Lacy Johnson’s essay collection (2014) was published by Scribner.
- xii *In your eyes, you, have never been completely whole*: This quote is from Bassey Ikpi’s essay “Yaka,” which is a part of her collection *I’m Telling the Truth, But I’m Lying* (2019), published by Harper Perennial. The quote is from page 33 of the book.
- xii *You’re not a monster. You’re not innocent*: This quote is from Kiese Laymon’s essay “You Are The Second Person,” which was published in *Guernica* on June 17, 2013. This essay is also a part of Laymon’s collection *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America* (2013), which was published by Agate Bolden.
- xiii *Great with Child: Letters to a Young Mother*: Beth Ann Fennelly’s book (2006) was published by W. W. Norton & Company.
- xiii *Eat, Pray, Love*: Elizabeth Gilbert’s book (2007) was published by Riverhead Books.
- xiv *Kate Julian*: Julian wrote the article, “Why Are Young People Having So Little Sex?” which was published in the December 2018 issue of *The Atlantic*.

xv *few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time:* This quote is from the 30th Anniversary Edition of William Zinsser's class book *On Writing Well* (2016), which was published by Harper Perennial. The first edition was published in 1986.

xv *Now keep going:* John McPhee's article, "Writing By Omission" was published in *The New Yorker* on September 7, 2015.

xv *Another word for this is revision:* This quote is also from Leslie Jamison's introduction to *The Best American Essays of 2017*, page xviii.

xvi *sift until I found a way to free the memory:* This quote is from Kiese Laymon's memoir *Heavy: An American Memoir* (2018), which was published by Scribner. *Heavy* won the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Nonfiction and was one of *The New York Times* Notable Books of 2018.

The Red Swimsuit

2 *photographs help people take possession of a space in which they are insecure:* This quote is from page 22 of writer Susan Sontag's essay collection *On Photography* (1977), which was published by Penguin.

3 *When I think back on this part of my life, I imagine it like an Edith Wharton book:* Edith Wharton (1862-1937) was an American writer who drew upon her insider's knowledge of the New York City upper class to portray the lives of the Gilded Age.

3 *metropolitan Perth during the city's mining boom of the early 2000s:* A journalist in 1870 described Perth as a "quiet little town of some 3,000 inhabitants spread out in straggling allotments down to the water's edge." Then, in the late 19th century, the discovery of gold led to population and mining booms. By 1984, Perth became the fourth-most-populous city in Australia. And in the early 2000s, mining companies from around the world, such as Cliffs

Natural Resources, where my dad works, sent teams into Perth to extract more resources. From 2006 to 2011, the population grew over 14% to exceed over 1.7 million.

3 *Lisi Harrison's The Clique series*: This is a young adult novel series, published from 2004 to 2012, about five girls known as the Pretty Committee, which is the popular clique at the fictional, all-girls middle school, Octavian Country Day in Westchester, New York. A new girl named Claire moves to Westchester and is initially considered an outcast due to her family's financial situation. Claire eventually earns membership into the Pretty Committee.

3 *they're so wild because they're all probably descendants of convicts*: Indigenous Australians inhabited the Perth area for at least 38,000 years until, in 1829, British Captain James Stirling arrived in his ship, the HMS Success and named the colony after Perthshire, Scotland. Then, around 1850, the British Empire shipped thousands of convicts to the newly designated penal colony in order to provide labor to the farmers and businesspeople in Western Australia. The majority of these convicts were charged with petty crimes, like thievery.

9 *touted my magazines and Mean Girls DVD along with me for the sleepover*: Mean Girls is a 2004 American teen comedy movie starring Lindsay Lohan, which was partially based on Rosalind Wiseman's 2002 non-fiction self-help book, *Queen Bees and Wannabees*. Lohan plays sixteen-year-old homeschooled Cady, who returns to the U.S. after spending most of her life in Africa with her zoologist parents. Cady has trouble fitting into North Shore High but then joins the most popular clique, "The Plastics."

10 *no guide for girls to know how to respond to the way others were behaving and treating them*: This quote is from Nancy Jo Sales's book *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers* (2016), published by Vintage, page 371.

11 *It is less mortifying to believe one's self unpopular than insignificant*: This quote is from Edith Wharton's 1905 novel *The House of Mirth*, page 122. The novel follows Lily Bart, a well-born but penniless single woman in New York City's high society during the turn of the last

century. Bart goes through a two-year social descent from privilege to a lonely existence on the fringes of society.

13 *nudes that wind up on online “slut pages” available for boys to rate and judge:* This quote is from page 371 of *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers*, published.

13 *trying to feel comfortable in your changing body, and not always succeeding:* This quote is from page 371 of *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers*.

13 *smartphones are ruining a generation:* All of the included information from psychologist Jean M. Twenge comes from her article in the September 2017 issue of *The Atlantic*, titled *Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?* For more information, check out Twenge’s 2017 book *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*.

Suburbia & Hollywood Stardom

15 *the four-story “Clout House” in Los Angeles:* The tour of the “Clout House” and all of the quotes from Alissa in this paragraph were found in YouTuber, Shane Dawson’s video, “Ex Girlfriend of Jake Paul,” uploaded on October 16, 2018.

15 *The house’s rent is 34,900 per month:* The property details of the house were found on Realtor.com for 6447 Weidlake Dr, Los Angeles, CA 90068.

15 *a staircase full of Louis Vuitton purses:* All of these posts were found on Alissa’s Instagram account @alissaviolet.

15 *asks him if she looks good:* This clip was found at the end of Alissa Violet’s YouTube video “REUNITING WITH TESSA,” uploaded on October 28, 2018

15 *going shopping while cuffed to her friend's wrist*: This clip was found at the beginning of Alissa Violet's YouTube video "REUNITING WITH TESSA," uploaded on October 28, 2018.

16 *taking shots on the helicopter*: This quote was taken from Alissa Violet's YouTube video, "COACHELLA (Things Got Crazy), uploaded on April 27, 2019.

16 *some of my favorite designers at 90% off*: This quote was taken from Alissa Violet's YouTube video, "My Everyday Makeup Routine," uploaded on August 3, 2019.

16 *thumbnail of Alissa leaning in to kiss a female friend*: This thumbnail is from Alissa Violet's YouTube video, "BEST FRIEND CHALLENGE (ft. RiceGum, FaZe Banks, Chantel Jeffries)," uploaded on August 15, 2017.

16 *two white, blonde sorority girls, also document their lives on YouTube*: The Daily Mississippian reported on these young women in the article, "Students document their lives at Ole Miss on YouTube," which was written by Maddie McGee and published on September 27, 2018.

16 *drag crabby Charlie the unicorn to Candy Mountain*: This video, "Charlie the Unicorn" was uploaded to YouTube by FilmCow on January 10, 2008.

16 *fictional brace-faced Fred Figglehorn*: This video, "Fred on Halloween" was uploaded to YouTube by FRED on April 30, 2008.

17 *we can't, cause that's fuckin' stupid*: Kingsley took a long break from YouTube and deleted all of his old videos from the early 2010s but I have a vivid memory of this quote because it made me laugh so much.

17 *it's the best thing I've ever come up with*: This Jenna Marbles video, "How to Avoid Talking to People You Don't Want To Talk To" was uploaded on February 15, 2011.

17 *under the age of 32 will not subscribe to a pay TV service*: This statistic was found on Google's study, "The latest video trends: Where your audience is watching," published in April 2016 by Celie O'Neil-Hart and Howard Blumenstein.

18 *SouthPark Mall in Strongsville with her friend to shop for a commencement dress*: This anecdote and all of the quotes from Alissa were found in her YouTube video, "What you've been waitin for," uploaded on June 9, 2017.

18 *FUCK your chicken strips*: This vine, "Fuck Your Chicken Strips." can be found on YouTube, uploaded by Top Best Vines on May 6, 2014.

19 *Logan's early vines include*: All of these vines can be found in the YouTube video, "Funny Logan Paul Vines (W/Titles) Logan Paul Vine Compilation 2019" uploaded by Vine Time on January 7, 2019.

19 *made dumb and dumber into reality*: This quote was found on Quora.com under the feed, "What is the difference between Jake Paul and Logan Paul?" Sarang Prajapati wrote on April 7, 2018 "They both made dumb and dumber into reality."

20 *allegedly, they were already making more money than their parents*: All of the biographical information on the Paul brothers was found in YouTube video, "The Story of How Logan Paul. Became Famous," uploaded by TheTalko on January 14, 2018.

20 *a neighbor said in an interview with KTLA5*: All of this reporting was found in KTLA5's news article, "In Beverly Grove, Social Media Star Jake Paul's Antics Stir Up the Neighborhood" written by Chris Wolfe and published on July 17, 2017.

20 *shoved raw fish and squid in the faces of people walking by*: This clip can be found in YouTube video "Logan Paul Being Massively Disrespectful in Japan" uploaded by YouTuber News on January 5, 2018.

20 *zooming in on the body and then showing his awestruck reaction:* The clips of the dead body have been deleted but new coverage of the controversy can be found in YouTube video, “YouTube star under fire for video of apparent suicide victim” uploaded by ABC News on January 2, 2018.

21 *I would do anything for him, that’s why I signed a contract for five years:* All of Alissa’s quotes in this paragraph can be found in her YouTube video, “What you’ve been waitin for,” uploaded on June 9, 2017.

21 *social media fraternity:* This term was taken from J-14’s article, “Break It Down: What Is Team 10? Here’s The Deal With Jake Paul’s Empire of Social Media Stars” written by Brie Hiramine and published on September 27, 2018.

21 *pretended to date and sold #Jalissa t-shirts with cartoon versions of themselves kissing:* This information can be found in Shane Dawson’s YouTube video, “Ex Girlfriend of Jake Paul,” which was uploaded on October 16, 2018.

22 *Jake chases the Easter bunny away:* These Alissa and Jake vines can be found in YouTube video, “Funny Alissa Violet and Jake Paul Vine Compilation | Funny Vines 2017,” uploaded by Funny Vines on October 22, 2017.

22 *does this dildo come in a bigger size:* Alissa Violet Vines can be found in YouTube video, “Alissa Violet Vine compilation – Funny Alissa Violet Vines & Instagram Videos – Best Viners,” uploaded by Best Viners on December 5, 2017.

22 *I was just a pawn in their game:* All of the quotes and information in this paragraph can be found in Shane Dawson’s YouTube video, “Ex Girlfriend of Jake Paul,” uploaded on October 16, 2018.

22 *Every guest you had over had to be approved by Jake:* From Alissa Violet’s YouTube video, “What you’ve been waitin for,” uploaded on June 9, 2017.

23 *couldn't manage her own money*: From Shane Dawson's YouTube video, "Ex Girlfriend of Jake Paul," uploaded on October 16, 2018.

23 *I'm at where I am because of him*: From Alissa Violet's YouTube video, "What you've been waitin for," uploaded on June 9, 2017.

23 *Panera is your home*: Lyrics found in Jake Paul's YouTube video, "Jake Paul – It's Everyday Bro (Song) feat. Team 10 (Official Music Video)," uploaded on May 30, 2017.

23 *now she in the Logang and you know she on my team*: Lyrics found in Logan Paul's YouTube video, "FULL SONG: The Fall Of Jake Paul (Official Video) FEAT. Why Don't We," uploaded on July 9, 2017.

23 *Alissa Violet's net worth is estimated at \$8 million*: The net worth of Alissa Violet and the net worth of Jake Paul were both found on WealthyPersons.com, which I know is not the most accurate source, but I was unable to find a more reliable source.

24 *distinctly possible to stay too long at the Fair*: This quote is from Joan Didion's 1961 essay "Goodbye to All That," which can be found in her essay collection, *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* (1968), on page 236.

25 *Infamous mirror pic*: This photo was uploaded to Twitter by @savmontano on November 29, 2013.

25 *Last night in a pic*: This photo was uploaded to Twitter by @savmontano on May 3, 2014.

26 *writes that there are two types of celebrities*: All Joshua Gamson quotes come from "The Unwatched Life is Not Worth Living: The Elevation of the Ordinary Celebrity Culture"

published in Vol. 126, No. 4, Special Topic: Celebrity, Fame, Notoriety (October 2011) of *PMLA*, the journal of the Modern Language Association of America, pages 1061 – 1069.

26 *stars in his or her own life movie*: Quote is from Neal Gabler’s *Toward a New Definition of Celebrity* (2001) published by Los Angeles: Normal Lear Center, U of Southern California Annenberg School of Communication.

26 *more intimate, relatable and authentic than traditional celebrities*: More information can be found in The Guardian’s article, “Why are YouTube stars so popular?” written by Stuart Dredge and published on February 3, 2016.

26 *candid sense of humor, lack of filters and risk-taking spirit*: Quote is from Variety article, “Survey: YouTube Stars More Popular Than Mainstream Celebs Among U.S. Teens” by Susanne Ault and published on August 5, 2014.

26 *the unwatched life is invalid, insufficient and even not worth living*: All Joshua Gamson quotes come from “The Unwatched Life is Not Worth Living: The Elevation of the Ordinary Celebrity Culture” published in Vol. 126, No. 4, Special Topic: Celebrity, Fame, Notoriety (October 2011) of *PMLA*, the journal of the Modern Language Association of America, pages 1061 – 1069.

27 *They come in multiple camera angles with all the boring parts spliced out*: Quotes from NPR’s Hidden Brain Podcast episode “Close Enough: The Lure Of Living Through Others,” which first aired on February 11, 2019.

27 *aspire toward a career a YouTuber rather than an astronaut*: Toy production firm Lego surveyed 3,000 children between the ages of eight and 12 from the U.S., the U.K. and China and almost a third of the kids said they wanted to be a YouTuber when they grew up, while 11% said they wanted to be an astronaut. More information can be found in CNBC article, “Kids now dream of being professional YouTubers rather than astronauts, study finds” published on July 19, 2019.

28 *So that we can boost our way up:* All GAM Girl quotes are from their YouTube video, “SLIME CHALLENGE” uploaded on May 29, 2018.

29 *Those with the capital are still the ones who determine the value of a celebrity:* All Joshua Gamson quotes come from “The Unwatched Life is Not Worth Living: The Elevation of the Ordinary Celebrity Culture” published in Vol. 126, No. 4, Special Topic: Celebrity, Fame, Notoriety (2011) of *PMLA*, the journal of the Modern Language Association of America, pages 1061 – 1069.

29 *Silicon Valley is a male-dominated culture:* Quote is from page 11 of Nancy Jo Sales’s book *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers*.

30 *It’s foreign territory that I’ve never seen before:* All Keemstar quotes are from Shane Dawson’s YouTube video, “Ex Girlfriend of Jake Paul,” which was uploaded on October 16, 2018.

A Record of the World as She Sees It

32 *joint photography exhibit with her husband:* The exhibit, *Two Lives in Photography*, was the University of Mississippi Museum from September 17, 2019 to February 15, 2020.

32 *finding poetry in this slow, languorous countyscape:* This quote is from Grace Glueck’s *New York Times* article, “ART IN REVIEW; Maude Schuyler Clay,” published on June 30, 2000.

32 *I had written a review of the book:* The review I wrote of *Mississippi* is titled, “Mississippi: Poems by Ann Fisher-Wirth with Photographs by Maude Schuyler Clay,” and was published in online southern arts magazine *Burnaway* on June 11, 2018. Maude would send photos to Ann and then Ann wrote poems that told the stories of the voices she imagined in the 47 images.

34 *personal reflection informs historical document in perfect combination*: This quote was found on Maude Schuyler Clay's website (www.mauDECLAY.com). On the website, the quote's attributed to *Black and White Magazine* but I wasn't able to find the magazine article online, so I assume it's only in print.

34 *allegedly flirting with a white woman*: According to History.com, Carolyn Bryant, the white woman working the counter at Bryant Grocery Store in Money, Mississippi, accused 14-year-old Emmett Till of having grabbed her, made lewd advanced and wolf-whistled at her as he sauntered out, when witnesses report that he had actually just bought some candy and said "Bye, baby" to the woman. Four days later, on August 28, 1955, Bryant's husband and brother beat Emmett to death, gouged out his eye, shot him in the head and threw his body, tied to a cotton-gin fan with barbed wire, into the river. Three days later, the corpse was recovered. It was so disfigured that Till was only identified by his initialed ring. Till's mother requested the body to be sent back to Chicago and held an open casket funeral so the world could see this atrocious act of racism. On September 23, the all-white jury deliberated for less than an hour before issuing a verdict of "not guilty," claiming that they believed the state had failed to prove the identity of the body. In 2017, Carolyn Bryant admitted that Till had never touched, threatened or harassed her.

36 *in front of a shiny red car, blue skies and tree branches*: This photo is titled *Jasper and Lucille and Anna* and it is a Color Archival Print of 14 x 14 inches. This photo can be viewed on TheDoGoodFund.org.

39 *her cousin, William Eggleston, practiced color photography*: William Eggleston, born in 1939 in Memphis, is famous for legitimizing color photography as an artistic medium. His exhibition, *The Beautiful Mysterious: The Extraordinary Gaze of William Eggleston*, was at the University of Mississippi Museum in the fall of 2016, when I was a freshman.

39 *photographer and painter Randy Hayes's exhibit*: The article I wrote about Randy Hayes is titled, "Life through the lens of Randy Hayes" and was published in *Number: Inc* February

2018. Randy Hayes's exhibition, *Unwritten Memoir*, was at the University of Mississippi Museum in the fall of 2017, when I was a sophomore.

41 *Mississippi History*: Maude Schuyler Clay's book (2015) was published by Steidl.

42 *a photo of Langdon Clay holding a beer glass sell for \$1,250*: This photo, "Langdon, Rooftop Glass" can be purchased on JacksonFineArt.com.

43 *keep on doing what we do: Making and consuming art*: These quotes are from Michael Chabon's essay "What's the Point?" published in *The Paris Review* on September 23, 2019.

43 *involves making an uneasy truce with that reduction*: Quotes is from Leslie Jamison's essay "Maximum Exposure," which can be found in her collection, *Make It Scream, Make It Burn* (2019) on pages 124 to 152. This particular quote is on page 148.

44 *there's more, there's more, there's more*: Page 148 of *Make It Scream, Make It Burn*.

44 *that this woman existed, that her life mattered*: Page 140 of *Make It Scream, Make It Burn*.

44 *moralizing arguments about inequality or guilt*: Pages 136-137 of *Make It Scream, Make It Burn*.

45 *vectors of emotion churning between ordinary moments*: Page 152 of *Make It Scream, Make It Burn*.

45 *mirroring the way they would elect to be seen*: Page 147 of *Make It Scream, Make It Burn*.

46 *the strangest ruts and crevices*: All quotes from Leslie Jamison on Gary Winogrand are from her article in *The Atlantic*, “The Photographs That Made Me Feel Less Alone,” published in the December 2019 issue.

48 *Charlie Buckley painting of a field of sunflowers with a warm soft purple sky*: Charlie Buckley is a Tupelo-based painter who does mostly colorful landscapes. I’ve written two articles about him: “Local artist manipulates pictures to recreate Mississippi landscapes, architecture” published in the Daily Mississippian on October 25, 2017, and “Charlie Buckley’s Paintings Embody the Spirit of Oxford,” published in Sharp Oxford on April 27, 2018.

Reckoning with Your Barbie Savior

50 *Children’s Welfare Home in Bawjiase*: The documentary expose on the Countryside Children’s Welfare Home can be found on YouTube. The documentary, titled “CAREless” was produced and uploaded by investigative journalist Anas Aremeyaw Anas on February 6, 2015

52 *a new government initiative to return children to their families*: The Care Reform Initiative was launched in 2006 as a joint venture between the Department of Social Welfare, OAfrica, UNICEF and other children protection agencies in Ghana. The goal of CRI is to “establish a more consistent and stable approach to caring for vulnerable children in Ghana so that each child will be assured of a permanent home in a supportive and loving family.” More information can be found on ovcghana.org

54 *the world’s best range of affordable programs*: IVHQ was founded by New Zealander Dan Radcliffe in 2007. In 2006, upon completing a master’s degree in Finance and Management from the University of Otago in New Zealand, Dan Radcliffe began work at a corporate company, but just three days in, he quit his job because he realized he would never be happy in the corporate financial world. Dan saved up money and then backpacked and volunteered in Kenya. Although Dan loved the experience of volunteering in Kenya, he was disillusioned with the large disparity between what he had paid, and the actual cost of the volunteer trip. So, while in Nairobi, Dan began meeting with potential local partner organizations and in 2007, he took a

loan out to register International Volunteer HQ, which, according to their website, has since grown into “the world’s premier volunteer travel organization.” IVHQ has proudly supported 100,000 volunteers abroad since 2007 and strives to “provide trips that are responsible, high quality and affordable.”

IVHQ achieved recognition as a Certified B Corporation in 2015, meaning it joined the ranks of ethical businesses, like Kickstarter and Etsy. “Certified B Corporations are businesses that meet the highest standards of verified social and environmental performance, public transparency, and legal accountability to balance profit and purpose,” the website reads. And IVHQ founder Dan Radcliffe said, “it’s no longer good enough for businesses to think about their success solely in terms of financial performance.” IVHQ essentially serves as a third-party liaison that connects volunteers with local Ghanaian organizations. After the arrival orientation in Accra, IVHQ dropped me off at my host site, which was run entirely by Ghanaian people and I never saw IVHQ again during my first two-month stay. But without IVHQ, there’d been no way I ever would’ve found out about The Potter’s Village.

60 *there is a very small chance we are ever going to meet again:* The full caption can be found on the @BarbieSavior Instagram post uploaded on March 22, 2018.

60 *place-based analysis of the particularities of the volunteer tourism experience:* The scholarly article I reference about the Barbie Savior was written by Stephen Wearing, Mary Mostafanezhad, Nha Nguyen, Truc Ha Thanh Nguyen & Matthew McDonald, and is titled, “Poor children on Tinder and their Barbie Saviours: towards a feminist political economy of volunteer tourism.” It was published on July 31, 2018 in the *Journal of Leisure Studies*, volume 37, issue 5, pages 500-514.

61 *long-term partnership, justice and structural change:* Quotes from Andrea Freidus can be found in her article, “Volunteer tourism: what’s wrong with it and how it can be changed,” which was published in *The Conversation* on November 8, 2017.

62 *lasting negative effects on children’s psychological development:* A few studies which show the consequences of institutional orphanage care include: JJ Sigal, JC Perry, M Rossignol

and MC Ouitmet (2003) “Unwanted infants: psychological and physical consequences of inadequate orphanage care 50 years later” published in the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* Volume 73, Issue 1, pages 3-12. And V Makame, C Ani and S Grantham-McGregor’s “Psychological well-being of orphans in Dar El Salaam, Tanzania” published on January 2, 2002 in *Acta Paediatrica*, volume 91, issue 4, pages 459-465.

62 *don't have time to prioritize play, socialization or education*: Richter, L (2003) “Poverty, underdevelopment, and infant mental health.” *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health* volume 39, issue 4, pages 243-248.

62 *improved institutionalized children's motor skills, cognitive and social functioning*: V. Tanega, S. Sriram, R.S. Beri, V. Sreenivas, R. Aggarwal, R. Kaur (2002) “Not by bread alone: impact of a structured 90-minute play session on development of children in an orphanage” published in *Child: Care, Health and Development*, volume 28, issue 1, pages 95-100.

62 *caregivers could serve as important motivators for orphans' educational goals*: Joanna Ellen Bettmann, Jamie M. Moretensen, Kofi O. Akuoko & Callie A. Tatum (2017) “Orphanage Staff's Perceptions of Children's Psycho-social Needs” published in *Children & Society* volume 31, issue 1, pages 37-49.

69 *only five of which were actually registered*: Department of Social Welfare, Accra, Ghana (2008) *The Care Reform Initiative* available at ovcghana.org

69 *shut down because they do not meet the requirements*: “Social Welfare closes down 48 children's homes” published on March 16, 2014 on *CITI FM Online*.

69 *the checklist social workers are meant to use when inspecting*: “Annex A: Inspection Checklist on National Standards for Residential Homes,” which can be found on www.ovcghana.org/publications_press.html

70 *children raised in orphanages have immense difficulty finding employment:* Kwabena Frimpong-Manso (2018) “Building and utilizing resilience: The challenges and coping mechanisms of care leavers in Ghana” published in the *Children and Youth Services Review*, volume 87, pages 52-59.

70 *another study about children in orphanages who have been reunited with their families:* Kwabena Frimpong-Manso, Abraham Gyimah Bugyei (2019) “The Challenges Facing Children Reunited With Their Families From an Orphanage in Ghana” published in *Children & Society*, volume 33, issue 4, pages. 363-376.

71 *over the past decade, Ghana has been invaded by voluntourists:* Arku Jasmine “Ghana attractive to voluntourists” published in the *Daily Graphic* on June 19, 2013.

71 *the white man and woman have come to help the children:* This quote from a Child Protection Specialist at UNICEF Ghana was found in the document “Collected viewpoints on international volunteer in residential care centres, Country focus: Ghana,” which can be accessed on www.ovcghana.org/international_volunteering.html

71 *less than 30 percent of donated money to orphanages actually goes to childcare:* Statistic found in article “Protecting children from orphan-dealers” published in *The New Humanitarian* on May 27, 2009.

71 *made provisions to safeguard against harmful volunteerism:* The Republic of Ghana Care Reform Initiative (CRI) “National Standards for Residential Homes for Children in Ghana.” Can be found on ovcghana.org/publications_press.html

71 *NGOs in Ghana are required to have a minimum of two directors:* John Kwasi Adjei “Corporate Governance among Ghanaian NGOs” published on *GhanaWeb*, April 18, 2015.

Wanted: Someone with Whom to Simply Pass the Days

75 *intensive summer language program at Shanghai University*: This intensive program is run by the University of Mississippi's Chinese Language Flagship Program, which is national initiative by the U.S. government to increase proficiency in critical languages. I was a part of the Flagship program for two and a half years.

76 *Shanghai has the lowest marriage rate in the country*: In 2018, the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs reported that Shanghai's marriage rate was 4.4 people out of every 1,000 people. More information can be found in China Daily's article "Marriage rate in China hits lowest on record" published on March 21, 2019.

76 *women no longer rely on husbands financially*: More information on China's decreased marriage rate can be found in NPR's article, "China's Marriage Rate Plummets As Women Choose To Stay Single Longer," written by Rob Schmitz and published on July 31, 2018.

76 *escort services to bring home during Chinese New Year*: This information can be found in Al Jazeera's YouTube video, "Single in China? Rent A Fake Boyfriend," uploaded on September 6, 2016.

79 *opposition to a presumably backward, mysterious, and exotic East*: Edward Said was a literature professor, public intellectual, cultural critic and founder of postcolonial studies. He wrote the book *Orientalism* (1978), which transformed academic discourse.

82 *compares Chinese dating corners to online dating apps*: These quotes were found in The Diplomat's article, "Finding Love in China's Marriage Markets," written by Layne Vandenberg and published on November 27, 2018.

82 *providing parents with a space to socialize and do what parents love most*: These quotes were found in The Hutong School's blog post, "The Marriage Market in Shanghai," written by Alexis Quevedo and published on March 8, 2018.

84 *interests, communication skills, and of comparable intelligence:* This research was found in the book *The New Psychology of Love* (2006), which is a collection of perspectives on love from various leading scholars in the field, edited by Robert J. Sternberg and Karin Weis.

84 *they start cold and heat up over time as the couple grows:* This information was found in *The New York Times* article “Modern Lessons From Arranged Marriages,” written by Ji Yun Lee and published on January 18, 2013.

85 *In the past thirty years, there had been four main studies conducted in China:* “Love Matches and Arranged Marriages: A Chinese Replication” (1990) by Xu Xiaohe and Martin King Whyte, published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* Volume 52, No. 3, pages 709-722.

Turkey: “What Is the Impact of Choosing One’s Spouse on Marital Satisfaction of Wives and Husbands? The Case of Arranged and Self-Choice Turkish Marriages” (2019) by E. Olcay Imamoglu, Mentalla Ads and Carol C. Weisfeld, published in the *Journal of Family Issues* Volume 40, No. 10, pages 1270-1298.

The U.S.: “Relationship Outcomes in Indian-American Love-Based and Arranged Marriage” (June 2012) by Pamela C. Regan, Saloni Lakhnpal and Carlos Anguiano, published in *Psychology Reports* Volume 110, Issue 3, pages 915-924.

India: “Marriage Satisfaction and Wellness in India and the United States: A Preliminary Comparison of Arranged Marriages and Marriages of Choice” (Spring 2005) by Jane E. Myers, Jayamala Madathil and Lynne R. Tingle, published in the *Journal of Counseling & Development* Volume 83, Issue 2, pages 183-190.

85 *energy and money on a first date:* All of the Helen Fisher quotes come from *The New York Times* article, “Should We All Take the Slow Road to Love?” by Tara Parker-Pope, published on July 2, 2019.

86 *what’s your credit score:* Quote is from *The New York Times* article, “Should We All Take the Slow Road to Love?” by Tara Parker-Pope, published on July 2, 2019.

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