

## THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SCREEN

“Look at this asshole,” I said.

Our faces are lit up by the tiny windows in our hands. Every night, we open them up to look into other people’s lives hoping to see a bit of ourselves.

“Why’s he an asshole?”

“Because this shit isn’t real. This isn’t his life. Well, not his real life at least.” “You don’t post bad shit about your life.”

“I do. Sometimes.”

I can’t help but feel like everything I do is motivated—social media, text threads, forums—it’s all motivated by something. I’m sure Freud would say it’s sex, but for me, it’s validation.

Brownie points. That surge of dopamine that slams into the backs of my eyes as my fingers run a mad dash across the screen.

It’s always the same. Should I post this? Fuck yeah. People are going to think it’s so funny.

Everyone’s going to think it’s brilliant.

But more often than not, afterwards, I don’t feel so brilliant. I don’t get the likes or comments, or when the comments come, I wind up regretting the whole thing. Even when it goes great. I wind up thinking that’s not me.

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And that's pretty much how I got here. Alone in an apartment I don't recognize, surrounded by things not my own. The smell of Pine Sol, the most familiar part of what I've come to call home. The faux-wood picture frames on the desk are filled with people I don't know. Projections of people's lives I can't begin to understand. Old pasta water sits in the sink. A withered fern sits on a plastic stool encroaching on the cheap blinds separating me from the world I've come to fear.

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"It's not such a crazy idea," I said.

"It's not, but it sounds like a waste of money. Why do you care so much? And I thought your whole problem with people's posts was them 'not being real.'"

Her air quotes hung in the air as I tried to laugh it off.

"True. It's bullshit, but so is social media."

The long pause was interrupted only by the clings, clangs and swallowing of our regular dinner routine. Macaroni and Cheese is a loud meal to eat. You wouldn't think it, like, it's not obviously loud like toast or an apple, but in a quiet room with the person you've decided to share your deepest, darkest secrets and life with—it's pretty loud.

"What about companies?" I said. "What about them?"

"They have social media managers. People who post for them to make them look better. Why can't people have them?"

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“People do have them. They’re called celebrities and the people who handle their social media are called publicists. Publicists who went to school for Public Relations or Communications and probably Business. They’re not cheap. And they certainly don’t run their businesses out of an apartment or strip mall or wherever.”

“It’s not a strip mall.” I say defensively. “It’s a business park. Near the strip mall with the Panda Express.”

“It’s your money. If it’ll make you happy and stop stressing and obsessing about other people’s lives, I say go for it.”

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The next day I took an inventory of my most recent posts. In the last three months, I’ve posted four hard posts: two meals I was particularly proud of, one of the books I recently finished, and one of a sunset, a picture I took while I was out running. I had posted memes, shots of my car, pics of me and Marie on hikes and runs on my stories but nothing that really stuck out.

“Anything good?”

There weren’t a ton of lunch options around work, so I wasn’t surprised to see Cindy sitting a table over from me. She was wearing a knowing smile, more like a grin. I hadn’t looked up from my phone in at least five minutes.

“All consuming, these things, right?”

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I waved my phone. And, realizing it was my account I was staring at and now waving at her, quickly pressed my phone facedown onto the grimy deli table next to my turkey, bacon and avocado sandwich.

Almost imperceptibly, her eyes motioned to the open book in her hands. I took the cue. “Smarter option. Literally.” I said with a chuckle.

“We all have our vices. I just can’t stand how social media makes me see the world. Like everything is being rated or something. I just kinda gave up.”

“Sounds healthy.”

Potato chips. Bacon, turkey, mayo. White bread. Large Coke. My phone, scratches and frays of rubber jutting out like hairs on the back of a businessman’s neck. Splayed out on a very suspect-looking table. Not such a healthy-looking post at all.

On my walk back to work I daydreamed of what my perfect account page would look like.

White-water rafting. A sunset from atop a cliff somewhere in Utah. Marie and I splashing each other under a waterfall in some tropical climate. Maybe a shot of us in bed on a lazy Sunday morning, a few blades of sunlight stretched across the bed would be a nice touch. Maybe a lazy Sunday afternoon? Who cares, just something to show that not every post had to be awe-inspiring

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My hands were sweating. I had told my boss that I had a dentist appointment. I had changed out of my work clothes into my best interview outfit. A blue oxford button up and faded brown tie.

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Marie was always reminding me to be myself in interviews, but I liked how I looked in this outfit. How it made me feel.

The waiting room was also the entryway. A plant stuck in the corner guarded four square windows stacked on top of each other. The industrial carpet was thin and lifted in places from years of shuffling feet and anxious shifting. I checked in with the grad student sitting behind the front desk. His account was probably full of pictures of him and his dog. If you went far back enough you might see him in college with the boys drinking at parties, maybe a bachelor party, maybe a high-school sweetheart.

He showed me back to a cramped office, one window, one desk and a computer. I flipped through my account like I was reviewing notes before a final. The coordinator, Mike, introduced himself and we got to work.

“When was your last hard post?”

“A week or two ago?” I replied.

“How much traction did it get?”

“I’m sorry?”

His genial nature, his mid-level suit, haircut and freshly scrubbed cheeks all perked up a bit as his smile broadened.

“Likes? Comments? Engagement. How was the respons...”

“Of course. Yeah, traction. It was alright. It was just of a sunset.”

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He repeated the word, pronouncing it sun-set drawing out the sun as he scrolled through a list on his screen until completed the word in unison with a *click*.

“Nice. Were you on vacation?” “A run.”

“Of course.”

*Click.*

“And are your posts generally artistic?”

“Not all of them, but I love art. So, I guess an argument could be made...”

“What did you want to achieve with your posts?” he interrupted. “Like your old posts? What is it you want people to see, feel, think?”

“I don’t know. I just post stuff I think is interesting.”

“Bullshit. You wouldn’t be sitting here if that was true. What’s the real reason?”

“I want people to be jealous of me.” “Jealous.”

*Click.*

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The first couple of posts weren’t so special. In fact, I was starting to think I should ask for my money back. It wasn’t until the fourth post, the one of Marie and I on our wedding night that I saw what Mike from the agency had referred to as traction.

“You see what they posted today?” I asked.

“That was them? I was kind of hoping that was you.”

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“Nope, that was all them. Look at these likes. It’s the most comments I’ve gotten since I ate that whole pizza and almost had to go to the hospital to get my stomach pumped. Took me like thirty minutes just to respond to all the comments. Who knew a picture of us eating cake would get such a response?”

“Yeah, who knew.”

“Are you jealous?” I asked.

“Jealous? No. Kinda creeped out and sad. Yes.”

“Creeped out how? And how can you be sad? I haven’t talked to half these people in like two years. This is the best post I’ve had in years.”

“It’s just weird they have complete access to every photo on your phone and cloud. Do they have access to the photos I’ve shared with you, like in texts?”

“You said you were cool with this.”

“I am. It just seems like you’re giving up a lot of your privacy for something you could probably do yourself.” She said as she plugged in her phone and set it on the nightstand next to her.

Typically, we’d scroll for a bit, share a few funny memes, I might show a post I found particularly cringy or great. We’d eventually kiss and she’d go to sleep, leaving me to my window to the outside world. But tonight, we didn’t kiss, a fact made more difficult because of the happy couple staring back at me from my screen.

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From the outside looking in, their magic formula wasn't so magic at all. The next six posts focused entirely on Marie. They were telling a love story. Our love story. After the fourth post, I could almost predict the next picture they'd use. They'd started with a shot of us out front of the Getty, one of our first dates. We were so young, and it was so y2k. A series of borderline cliché shots of us moving in together, painting the walls, and lying in bed followed. The obligatory, I'm madly in love with this woman portrait of Marie made its way in there eventually. Cliché or not, each post gained more and more traction.

“You guys are so sweet!”

“We need to get together soon. Love you guys!”

“So jelly of you two lovebirds! Glad to see y'all are doing so well.”

The comments wouldn't stop. They'd come in waves; they'd come in at all hours. Stragglers would crop up when I was at work, comments on old posts. I'd never seen anything like it.

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“I can't sleep.”

“You don't sleep, you mean.”

“I mean I can't. I close my eyes and it feels like my heart speeds up. Like I can hear it.” “Maybe you should stop looking at your phone before bed.”

“That has nothing to do with it.”

“Doesn't it?”

“You look at your phone, too”



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“I’m not nearly as engaged with it as you are. It’s like you’re writing a school paper or something. Every night. I love that you’re getting such a response from these posts, but not if it’s affecting your health.”

“My health? How is it affecting my health?”

“Not sleeping for one. And maybe this isn’t related, but you’ve been acting kinda like a dick lately. Like even more so than usual.”

“It’s probably the lack of sleep. Sorry.”

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“Wake up. Wake up. Wake the fuck up!” Marie was clearly irritated about something.

“What?”

“This.”

She held out her phone. It was a picture of her and her mom standing in front of the house Marie grew up in.

“And?”

“And it’s fucking private and look at the caption.”

*“Marie never learned how to love as a child. That’s why I’ve been working so hard to make this work.”*

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“What the fuck is that? What did you tell them? Where’d they get this picture from?” I hadn’t told them or given them anything. They’d figured it out on their own.

“Take it down. Fucking delete it.”

“I can’t. I don’t have control over the posts.”

Have you ever been in a store or in public and seen a couple fighting? And you know it’s over because one of them gets a look on their face like all the love they had for the other person just drained out of their face? Marie had that look, and I knew I was fucked. My marriage was over and all I could think about was how I’d respond to the comments the post about Marie and her mother had stirred up.

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Continuing to answer posts about our life together and happy marriage was easier than I thought it’d be. When Marie was packing up her things, when her dad came to help her move her furniture and box up the pots, pans and dishes, the thought crossed my mind that it’d be difficult to maintain the story.

About a month after she moved out, the agency called. “We’re thinking about announcing the breakup.”

“The breakup?”

“Yeah, we’ll send you some studies on this type of story, but it’s pretty easy to explain. People are losing interest in your relationship. Your breakup will bring you back up to 80% engagement.”

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“80% engagem... wait, how do you know we broke up?”

“What do you mean?” The agent was confused.

“I haven’t told anyone. Your posts are telling the love story. How the fuck do you know?” “Your phone told us. What do you mean?”

“My phone told you? Like you can hear and see everything my phone sees?”

“Yes.”

Everyone loves how their phone looks. They buy it a special case. They update to a newer sleeker one. One less cumbersome. Smaller, bigger whatever makes them feel more comfortable. But what are we doing really? We’re making it more like us. More like an extension of ourselves.

Studies show that 90% of all cell phone users aren’t more than ten feet away from their phones for longer than 45 minutes a day. Sure, they’re not looking at it when they’re sleeping, but it’s close by. Close enough to know how well you’re sleeping. Close enough to be the first thing you look at when you wake up.

It’s there with you during your most personal moments.

We have given our phones access to our most private, vulnerable part of our lives. And I’ve given that access to a fucking two-bit social media company—agency, whatever.

“I’m gonna need to make an appointment to come into the office.”

“Sure thing. Let me get my calendar pulled up here. How about next Thursday? I have openings at 1 and 3:30.”

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“Next week? No, I need to come in today. I need to cancel your service now.”

“I’m sorry. That’s not possible at this point in your contract. You’ll have the option to buy back your account in six months, but there’s nothing we can do before then.”

And that’s about all I remember from that conversation. I remember ending the call at some point. And I remember parking in front of the agency and screaming at my windshield for a long, long time. Thinking how pathetic I must look to my phone (them); I stepped out of my car and threw my phone at their front door. My screen cracked, but their office was unchanged.

Fuck em. Fuck everyone. Fuck likes. Fuck comments. I’m fucking over it.

But I wasn’t. I lasted about ten hours. Like an addict, I drove to the agency at 3am with one thing on my mind—getting my phone back. Getting the screen fixed. Plugging it in to charge.

The dopamine rush and relief I felt when I found it sitting there where I’d thrown it had to be akin to what an addict feels once they score.

And that’s not where the similarities stopped. It’s just the first one I admitted to myself.

Like an addict, my friends and family were the most vulnerable. Once Marie and I’s relationship ran its course, the agency and I decided on our next targets, penciling them in on a calendar like doctor’s appointments: A fight with my brother. Outing my dad for cheating on my mom (didn’t happen). Sitting in on AA meetings with my best friend only to convince him to drink with me weeks later.

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Within a year, I was completely alone. And worse, my followers were no longer my followers. My friends and family had unfollowed me months ago. The parasites still following me were waiting for the inevitable.

There was only story left to tell. One person left to cut ties with.

So here I am. Alone, in an apartment I don't know, surrounded by things I didn't buy, holding a phone in one hand and a bottle of pills in the other. Suicide is easier to talk about when it's not violent, or at least that's what the agency said. They're the ones who recommended the pills.

THE END