

*MEMOIR OF A NOBODY: IDENTITY IN PURSUIT OF LEGACY*

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## Abstract

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A 2012 study found that “fame for its own sake” was the most popular future goal among a group of ten- to twelve-year-old’s, trumping aspirations for wealth or a sense of community. The thesis examines the human urge to “matter” in the context of technologies that facilitate the average person’s quest for stardom. On a platform like YouTube, for example, anyone could amass an audience of millions and sustain mass friendships of one-way intimacy.

Through a creative and academic perspective, the thesis explores the psychology behind and the ramifications of lusting after fame and legacy. The creative component is the first part (six chapters) of a novel, *Memoir of a Nobody*. Jamie, the main character, is a university senior majoring in Content (on the Realness & Relatability track) who tries to become “somebody” in a futuristic world dominated by influencers and, to an absurd extent, the You® conglomerate. When she is rejected from the “Hall of Humanity,” an influencer’s project to exhibit the day-to-day lives of “regular people” to his massive audience, Jamie will stop at nothing to get seen on her own. As she increasingly obsesses over broadcasting her “true” life, she begins to question whether it’s possible to project any real image for public consumption.

The academic component is an accompanying treatise addressing five questions—regarding fame, legacy, and identity—with which I engaged while researching for and writing my creative thesis.

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## Treatise

The rusty railings up the Seoul Namsan Tower, the winding neighborhood alleys of Palermo, and the creaky bathroom stalls of Parlin Hall at the University of Texas at Austin have one commonality that isn't its visitors spending far too much money to be there. Graffiti, in letters and numbers, in spindly text and giant neon bubble fonts, litters all visible surfaces, carving out poems and reflections and unsolicited advice that all say one thing: "I was here."

When I was younger, I thought myself above graffiti even while engaging in similarly futile activities. Before I'd reached ten years old, I decided that my ultimate life goal was to write a novel, despite having no ideas or much worldly experience, because I was enamored with the vision of my name on a bookshelf. At sixteen, I started an anecdotal humor blog, on which I dramatically recount unfortunate experiences to make my life sound more exciting than it actually is. I've always wondered, over the years of developing my blogging persona and seeking out experiences solely in case I would encounter something interesting to blog about, to what extent that persona has shaped who I am (and vice versa.)

In hindsight, recognizing the pointlessness of an impulse doesn't dull its strength. Curious about why we want so badly to "matter," how social media has influenced this motivation, and how commoditization of "authenticity" can impact one's identity, I wrote part one of a novel, entitled *Memoir of a Nobody*. *Memoir of a Nobody* follows Jamie, a directionless college senior who sees no alternative for her life other than to embrace its absurdity and become a star on a futuristic YouTube-esque platform. As she increasingly obsesses over portraying her "true" life, the line between what's social media and what's reality blurs. The following treatise will address five questions—regarding fame, legacy, and identity—with which I engaged through research and through the process of writing my creative thesis.

## Question 1: What does it mean to “matter?”

“To matter” is defined as “to be important or significant.” People may disagree on what it means to matter, especially in considering *to whom* one is important—oneself? Friends? Family? A stranger? The public?—but the scope of my thesis involves those who wish to matter to people they do not personally know. Specifying the *level* of significance brings us to the distinction between fame, legacy, and impact.

### *Fame*

Kaysar Ridha, a previous star of the hit CBS reality series “Big Brother”—where contestants live together in a house under constant surveillance that is broadcasted to the public until one winner remains—has described the appeal of appearing on such a show. “To be noticed, to be wanted, to be loved, to walk into a place and have others care about what you’re doing, even what you had for lunch that day: that’s what people want, in my opinion.” (Carey, 2006).

Fame entails a widespread reputation. There are different levels of fame, of course, so one could be known and talked about by strangers within a niche or known by the public at large. Vi Hart, a YouTube mathematics channel that rants about the pointlessness of Pi Day, may be famous within the YouTube space for educational math content, making the creator an example of the former, while the singer Beyoncé exemplifies the latter.

Some older definitions of fame indicate that a famous person is glorified by mass society for having accomplished a deed of note, a process that researchers have traced back to Alexander the Great and the Roman Empire. Celebrity, closely related to this concept of fame, is a more modern phenomenon in which mass media exposure creates “[people] who [are] known for [their] well-knownness” (Rockwell & Giles, 2009). As is becoming evident in our increasingly connected digital era, anyone might become famous for anything. However, this kind of celebrity—the idea that “in the future, everyone will become world-famous for 15 minutes,” a quote that Andy Warhol is famous for yet may never even have said—is often transient (Nuwer, 2014). The concept of being known in a more lasting manner, then, leads us to a discussion of legacy.

### *Legacy and impact*

I developed my idea of legacy through discussions with my second reader, Professor Matt Valentine. Legacy is the monolithic reduction of identity, i.e. Benedict Arnold might have had a rich, complex life but be remembered for one historical moment like betraying his country to the British. Exploring, in *Memoir of a Nobody*, the inevitable contrast between Jamie’s multidimensional life and her legacy—as she spends most of the novel’s first part attempting to get famous, the issue of a legacy would be explored more in depth later on—offers much potential as a source of humor.

Although both impact and legacy relate to a person’s desire to make a difference, impact is less about the perception by others and their continued telling of a person’s story. Rather, impact entails making a difference, regardless of whether the person pursues social impact in

self-interest (i.e. to feel like a good person) or on a family, community, or societal scale.

Someone concerned with achieving a legacy may require that “difference” to change the world in a memorable way. Legacy is secondary to impact, as it is difficult to have the former without the latter, but people generally seek one or the other. Jamie’s story progresses when she begins by yearning for fame, then seeks to define her legacy, then evaluates herself based on her impact.

## **Question 2: Why do people want to matter?**

In 2006, Benedict Carey of the *New York Times* stated that the field of psychology had overlooked fame as a significant motive for human behavior, as this factor had seemed “too shallow” and “too culturally variable.” However, around 30 percent of Chinese and German adults regularly daydream about being famous, and more than 40 percent “expect to enjoy some passing dose of fame” at some point. American rates are roughly equivalent, and the rates among teenagers are even higher (Carey, 2006).

More than a decade after Carey’s caution against dismissing the fame motive, Arthur Brooks, a *Washington Post* columnist, relegates the allure of fame to the realm of narcissism. He references a 2019 Populace study on American views of what constitutes “success,” which finds that 92 percent said fame is part of how they think other people define success but only 3 percent said fame defined their personal success. The other 97 percent claimed that personal success follows when one pursues his own interests and becomes accomplished at them. Despite our natural desire to seek recognition for accomplishment, Brook concludes that people actually don’t want to become famous, or at least grow out of the desire as they mature.

## *Narcissism*

Brooks categorizes the three percent who seek success from fame as “psychologically amiss,” “narcissistic people who are unusually socially insecure and those especially afraid of death.” He references a 2013 study published in *Elsevier*, in which researchers explored the relationship between fame and the social self. Researchers found that the need to belong, narcissism, and relatedness (the social nature of human beings and the connectedness with others) were each linked to the appeal of fame (using dimensions labeled Visibility, Status, and Prosocial. Prosocial behavior promotes social acceptance.) Results show that the need to belong is associated with the increased appeal of all three fame factors, as well as the increased frequency of fantasizing about fame. Narcissism was related to the increased appeal of Visibility and Status, more frequent fantasies, and “greater perceived realism of future fame.” Finally, Relatedness solely predicted the increased appeal of the Prosocial factor.

But Brooks may have gone too far in asserting that the fame motive is only relevant to narcissists, as his referenced research may not necessarily be inconsistent with the decade-old findings. We might consider, for example, a potential lurking fundamental attribution error in responses to the Populace study. People often underemphasize situational explanations for others’ behavior and overestimate dispositional explanations for their own behavior. Because the chances of achieving fame are relatively unlikely and most people don’t experience it, one might be more likely to choose to believe an alternative prescription for success.

But the accuracy of the percentages may not even detract from Carey’s point that the fame motive is prevalent. In his article, he recognizes that “for all the dreamers, only one or two in 100 rate fame as their most coveted goal” (Carey). Even now, perhaps an overwhelming

majority of Americans don't singularly chase fame but may recognize it plays a partial role in their definition of success. While Carey does not mention the influence of narcissism, which no doubt could be an influential trait in those who seek to be widely known (which also begs the question of directionality, if it would be feasible to isolate the effects of achieving renown on one's narcissistic tendencies,) there indeed is more to the fame motive.

### *Psychological compensation*

Carey differentiates between devoted seekers of fame versus wealth and influence, stating that coveting fame results from "a desire for social acceptance, a longing for the existential reassurance promised by wide renown." He compares celebrity to the "ultimate high school in-group," which people might use to compensate for the hurt of social rejection or parental neglect stemming from their childhoods (Carey).

I considered what kind of character traits and psychological profile would make sense for a fame-seeking person when I created Jamie, drawing inspiration from Bo Burnham's (unfortunately cancelled) MTV show *Zach Stone Is Gonna Be Famous*. Zach, instead of going to college, hires a film crew to follow him around in hopes that he can become an overnight sensation despite having no marketable skills or talent. Zach's character is oblivious, obnoxious, and attention-seeking, and we discover these traits are rooted in an underlying sadness from peer rejection (*Zach Stone Is Gonna Be Famous*, 2013).

Like Zach, Jamie is attention-seeking and fears rejection. Her social anxiety (her fear of embarrassment or shame,) has led to avoidant behavior (her phobia of embarrassment or shame) and verges on an avoidant personality disorder. "As avoidant personality takes hold,

rationalization and detachment combine to create a narcissistic vortex” (Berent, n.d.).

“Vulnerable narcissists” fear they will not be admired and avoid relationships based on their fear that they won’t be able to tolerate the disappointment of their unrealistic expectations. In portraying her interactions with her (two) close relationships and with peers and strangers, I indirectly show that Jamie’s overwhelming desire for genuine connection is what prevents her from achieving the closeness with others that she desperately seeks.

Jamie is incredibly lonely. A first-semester college senior, she has just one close friend, Graham. Prior to the start of *Memoir of a Nobody*, as is revealed in hints until the flashback at the end of Chapter Six, Jamie, having no other outlet through which she can unleash her neediness, has put significant pressure on their friendship. After Graham began to distance himself without explanation, especially after his (now ex-) girlfriend Dani became uncomfortable with him and Jamie spending so much time together, Jamie spiraled until Graham reentered her life. Months later, at the start of the novel, he still somewhat resents her for causing Dani to break up with him. Jamie is hurt that he hasn’t fully confided in her as, in her opinion, best friends should.

There are several reasons for Jamie’s dependency. She idealizes close relationships because she wishes to be special to someone. However, she realizes that others only consider this form of intimacy a part of romantic partnerships, an avenue that makes her feel “othered” as she finds herself on the asexual spectrum.

Jamie’s childhood is another factor. Born to a Chinese mother and French father, she has no siblings and spent most of her time as a child alone at home, as her single mother had to work to support them. Her mother didn’t speak about her father—who is only reaching out now that she is in college—and Jamie copes with her father’s absence through humor, making up far-

fetches tales to explain his fate every time the subject comes up. Jamie harbors some resentment toward her mother for keeping their divorce from her and speaks curtly when her mother calls. Her mother's frequent calls only serve to exacerbate their distance, as her mother refuses to discuss any other topic than Jamie's future, which makes Jamie anxious. Her mother insists that Jamie should take a stable job, but (despite having done little work over the past year,) Jamie believes she is destined for something grander.

Her interactions with peers and strangers reveal other reasons why she has difficulty forming lasting connections. In classrooms and at every opportunity, Jamie seeks the attention of an audience. She makes rude comments or takes some over-the-top actions—for example, jumping onto Graham so she can get seen by an Internet celebrity—without regard for other people, so long as it elevates her in the eyes of an audience. In a self-fulfilling prophecy, her fear that people will abandon her because she can't sustain their interest causes her to overcompensate. Some people find it off-putting that she seems “on” all the time.

### *Fear of death*

The third factor in the fame motive may be biological. Not only does nature select for traits that engender reproductive success, but also the desire to leave something behind and not be forgotten naturally increases with age, according to Nicky Newton and his co-authors of the article “Selfish or Selfish? Generativity and Narcissism as Components of Legacy.” People who equate self-worth with fame display a “subconscious but acute appreciation of mortality.” To avoid believing that we are merely “material animals fated only to obliteration upon death,” we try to consider ourselves “enduringly valuable contributors to a meaningful world. And the more

others validate our value, the more special and therefore secure we can feel” (Carey).

Expectations of fame, especially when not met, can morph into attempts to achieve posthumous fame and a desire to leave a legacy to signify that our presence on this earth was not pointless.

A study that interviewed people who had, at some point in their lifetimes, achieved fame found that the participants who fared best assumed their position as an opportunity to “give back” and “make a difference” to make a lasting mark on humanity, which entails “a symbolic meaning of immortality.” During interviews, the participants emphasized their larger-than-life reputations and did not mention interpersonal, family-oriented roles (Rockwell & Giles, 2009). The interviewees’ aspiration for symbolic immortality is consistent with the pursuit of legacy and impact. Famous people find themselves in a better position to leave a lasting mark.

In *Memoir of a Nobody*, I instill this persevering mentality in Jamie, who believes that she must make something of herself, to make something come of the unhappiness she’s experienced. She quickly recognizes the illusory nature of Internet stardom and the futility of subverting it, but she continues her quest anyway, attempting to convince herself she is heading somewhere and can expect things to become worthwhile in the end.

### **Question 3: How has media/technology shaped the landscape?**

With digital platforms come bountiful new means to grow larger than life. From 2008 to 2019, the percentage of Americans with a social media profile grew from 10% to 79% (Clements, 2019). Online spaces have evolved a new type of online celebrity, more accessible and “relatable” than its traditional counterpart.

We've long heard the "apocalyptic cry" that apps like "Instagram will be the death of all things," as though "social media is some pseudo-Satanic bridge to warped minds and weak spirits." But Instagram, and other social media platforms, may not have changed society; rather, they have amplified the basic human fears and impulses that are already there. "We've always been scared of being alone, and constantly in despair of our own selves. Those things, too, are timeless—it's merely that we've found the perfect platform to funnel all that angst into" (Loughrey, 2017). In Matt Spicer's film *Ingrid Goes West*, Ingrid's obsession with Instagram arises from loneliness, triggered by her mother's death. She sees the seemingly perfect Instagram influencer with the perfect life and strives to mold her life exactly into Taylor's. (*Ingrid Goes West*, 2017).

YouTube, a popular online video sharing platform, is another place that offers the convincing illusion of authenticity and the promise of companionship. YouTube houses content that ranges from mini-clips of funny home videos, to filmed-in-the-bedroom beauty tutorials, to hour-long, professionally produced documentaries. In his investigation into YouTube fame, *Forbes* contributor Michael Humphrey begins with a basic question: "What makes YouTube in particular, and digital video in general," different?

"Connection" appears to be the answer. YouTube began as a platform for "entertainment you could imagine happening in your own house." This "rawness [looked] like authenticity. Channels [felt] like communities." It blurs the line between audience and entertainer (Humphrey, 2016).

When researching YouTube celebrities, I came across David Dobrik, a famous "vlogger" (video logger who records everyday life) whose four-minute-and-twenty-seconds videos consistently hit millions of views mere hours after upload. Prior to watching Dobrik's vlogs, I

could not imagine why people would invest so much of their time and energy into watching the antics of a stranger and his friends, until I got addicted, myself. Dobrik's weekly videos edit together a dizzying rush of high-stakes activities, escalating pranks, and quippy conversations. Each high-energy video kept me clicking to the next one so I could continue vicariously having that much fun, and I quickly got to "know" every recurring "character." (Dobrik has admitted that some clips are scripted "bits" and they sometimes drive around for hours searching for content, but the clips are entertaining and didn't seem obviously manufactured so I didn't enjoy them any less.)

With traditional celebrities, there is an understood degree of separation between the fan and the star. YouTube closed the physical and metaphorical distance. "Everyday" people could speak conversationally with audiences of millions to sustain mass friendships, bringing their subscribers a virtual but intimate look into their everyday lives. Significant to the appeal of many YouTube stars are their relatability, authenticity, and normalcy—any regular person, theoretically, could ascend to YouTube idol. YouTuber Emma Chamberlain's fans catapulted Chamberlain's life from painting "GUCCI" on T-shirts to getting sponsored for vacations and invited to international fashion shows, starting the current trend of famous lifestyle YouTubers beginning to lose the "accessibility" that got them famous.

While the creator-viewer relationship is mainly one-way—viewers know infinitely more about the creator than vice versa—YouTube audiences offer feedback through like/dislike buttons, comment sections, and other social media, where they often send the creator suggestions, feedback, and questions. Audiences become participants in their own entertainment, feeling the illusion of connectedness to a content creator through this "technology of intimacy" (Berryman & Kavka, 2017.) At the 2016 YouTube convention, "VidCon," YouTube CEO Susan

Wojicki said in her keynote address that “40 percent of Millennial subscribers say that YouTube creators understand them better than their friends do, and over 60 percent say that YouTubers have changed their lives” (Humphrey).

In the world of *Memoir of a Nobody*, the You® conglomerate is present in every facet of Jamie’s life. Social media platforms have consolidated under an umbrella platform, YouNiverse, which houses YouPic (future-Instagram,) YouHurl (future-Twitter,) YouNeek (future-YouTube,) and so on. On YouNeek, Jamie and her peers “orbit” (follow) hundreds to thousands of YouNiverses (channels) and are thus barraged with constant updates from “You-sers” (creators) to stay in the know. Even early in the novel, Jamie uses YouNiverse to substitute for personal relationships.

#### **Question 4: What are the ramifications of commoditizing identity?**

In 1902, the American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley coined the term “looking glass self” when discussing how we construct our mental self-images. The concept of “who we are” is shaped by socialization, and we might not have an independent inner essence at all. Our self-image is shaped in three steps: 1) we imagine how we appear to another person, 2) we imagine what judgments that person makes based on our appearance and way we present ourselves, and 3) we imagine how that person feels about us on the basis of those judgments (Squirrell, 2019).

Therefore, a person’s self-image is shaped by others, but this interaction is mediated by the person’s own mind. One can’t be certain what someone thinks of him; he can only imagine others’ judgments, and he might be wrong. Whether accurate or not, one learns what others think about him and tries to use that knowledge to manipulate the impressions and responses of others

(Squirrel). Even us non-YouTubers “self-perform” every day as “we present and enact our identities to the outside world... When you crack a joke, you’re putting yourself out there as someone with a sense of humor... Each of us tries out roles and constantly adjusts to the reactions. This is so embedded in our lives, it becomes relatively effortless. You might not think you do it” (Humphrey).

However, YouTubers may be more conscious of and more actively engage in this manipulation, and the stakes of self-performance can be much higher. While many YouTubers start off by randomly filming their daily lives, as they grow their audiences they realize that to sustain interest and increase subscribers, they need to project and maintain a brand, or a consistent, easily digestible outward image. The public increasingly demands, through social media’s explicit “judgments” in the form of likes and views, that they live up to their own images—i.e. Emma Chamberlain’s fans expect her to remain the snarky, relatable high school girl years after her early videos. The celebrity may feel an increasing disconnection between his true self and his public self yet not want to disappoint.

The situation becomes even more complex when commodified. Advertisers quickly identified that consumers “typically replicate styles of celebrities when they feel they relate to them, which justifies their reasoning to buy into the fashion trends” (Stone, 2007). If a YouTuber expects to create videos full-time, he must court advertisers and sponsors, which also impose their own expectations on a YouTuber’s brand. The conflict between the self, viewer expectations, and advertiser expectations lead to a loss of identity, relationships, and control.

### *Loss of identity*

Those who seek fame and legacy to validate themselves find that “celebrity” can come to define their identity to a greater extent than any talent or action that might have gotten them seen. In balancing this assumed identity and who they are beyond fame, celebrities can feel like frauds. “Closely related to freedom and individuality is the value of authenticity. A person is either present... or is role-playing and engaging in stereotyped modes of behaving. Nobody is more aware of this than the person who suddenly realizes that the activities and actions of everyday living have no real meaning when they are based on others’ preferences, expectations, and standards” (Rockwell & Giles).

Famous people often worry that they will disappoint their audiences’ expectations and create “two different dialogues,” one for thinking and one for saying, so one is “not necessarily as authentic as [they’d] like to be.” “There is not enough time,” they say, to “show [their] true [selves].” “By creating an image to offer to the public and reserving the other moments of privacy and intimacy,” the famous person holds back the more authentic “I” to showcase the “celebrity self” (Rockwell & Giles).

In Jennifer Egan’s novel *Look at Me*, Manhattan model Charlotte Swenson struggles to become remarkable. After receiving reconstructive surgery after a disfiguring car crash, a dotcom startup enlists her to display her day-to-day, “authentic” life alongside all kinds of people for public consumption. The more she shares of herself, the more of herself she loses. Identities have become commodities, which becomes fully apparent when Charlotte returns to her hometown to sensationally restage the crash she doesn’t remember for the website and realizes the hollowness of a world that constructs images “from the outside”-in (“Look at Me by Jennifer Egan”, 2002).

*Ingrid Goes West's* Ingrid, on the other hand, attempts to reinvent her own identity by imitating an influencer's. Trying to escape the reality that she does not know who she is anymore, she latches onto Taylor, only to find that Taylor's bohemian image is just that—an image. She isn't everyone's best friend and she hasn't even read the books that she claims to followers are her favorites.

*Memoir of a Nobody* also explores the loss of identity. Since the first chapter, Jamie has recognized the inauthenticity of current star You-sers, seen especially through her occasionally disparaging comments about the way famous You-ser Tom Kabara interacts with his audience. However, she only internalizes the inauthenticity to a degree, as she continues to watch him and strive to follow in his footsteps, and to the extent that she tries to be more genuine than other creators in hopes of differentiating herself. Her efforts to portray herself as truthfully as possible actually make her efforts less authentic, i.e. putting on an authentic “front” and intensifying aspects of her personality. In her later attempts to force her on- and off-camera selves to be identical, Jamie will lose her sense of self. In Part One, even as just a rising YouNeek star, Jamie is already experiencing an increasingly warped reality. The fonts indicating reality and interactions occurring on social media platforms progressively mix as we progress through chapters, and at the height of her YouNeek fame, almost all of the text will be in script form, denoting the medium of YouNeek video.

### *Deteriorating relationships*

In discussing *Look At Me*, Egan mentioned that “[cultivating] one's outward self occurs at the expense of any real human connections” (“Look at Me by Jennifer Egan”). So much of

Charlotte's life was based on her appearance as a model that she struggles with her identity and relationships after she receives reconstructive surgery and no one recognizes her. By the end of the novel, in exchange for the fame she had desperately sought, Charlotte has a "relationship" with the public, where her every thought and feeling is consumed by the masses.

Rockwell and Giles, following their interview study, stated that "an experiential turning point in the self" occurs when one "[transitions] from a taken-for-granted belonging and solidarity with others" to "being separated as famous. Overnight, the celebrity is introduced to a different world, where people express a 'faux intimacy.'" While at first a celebrity may feel freed from his "powerless anonymity," there comes a different limitation in the form of public ownership and expectations. One interviewed celebrity, "lacking fulfillment with those closest to her," began "treating her fans like friends and family members... [seeing] the love she longed for in her fans' eyes." (Rockwell & Giles)

Similarly, Jamie is motivated to seek the connection she feels is lacking from her one friend and her mother. When Graham and her mother distance themselves because they feel like they are being used as props, Jamie throws herself even further into her attempts to connect with her YouNeek audience. The more known she becomes, and the more she is recognized in public, however, she feels a new "loneliness that happens because [she is] separate" (Rockwell & Giles).

### *Loss of control*

Our culture not only enables the confusion of "fame with worthiness or value as a person" but also enables celebrity to represent "the heart of capitalistic culture as a money generator" (Rockwell & Giles).

By the end of *Look at Me*, Charlotte achieves the fame of her dreams but feels trapped, living as a mere object off of which corporations profit. She sheds her identity to start a new anonymous life, but the “Charlotte Swenson” brand lives on through 3D animators and product managers (Egan).

Elizabeth Sugg, a popular lifestyle YouTuber, started out at least professing to be an older sister figure to her audience of young girls. However, she increasingly sells her lifestyle to these girls. In 2017, Sugg received major backlash from their parents when she sold a “tat” and “overpriced” advent calendar for 50 euros each, taking advantage of impressionable viewers. (McGoogan, 2017).

In 2015, there was also a trend of publishing houses racing to offer book deals to YouTubers. Within the first ten months of 2015, at least twenty YouTube personalities had released books. These YouTubers, all under the age of 30, had “[apparently already lived enough to warrant [autobiographies]]” and were releasing titles left and right, signifying that it didn’t matter so much *what* one had to say so much as *who* had to say it. Or really, how much money was involved. Publishers sought the stars’ built-in marketing. YouTubers eagerly jumped at the opportunity to “tell their story,” cement their fame, and exploit this new avenue of monetizing their audiences. Michelle Phan, makeup tutorial millionaire, stated that “influence is the new power—if you have influence you can create a brand” (Robehmed, 2015). This phenomenon was one of the earliest inspirations for my thesis project.

*Memoir of a Nobody* also features highly consolidated corporations, such as You®, which infiltrate all aspects of life, in classrooms and daily products and YouNeek sponsorships. When we’re introduced to Tom Kabara, he’s promoting a white protein powder that doubles as a

“detoxifying sugar scrub” for the teeth and launching the Hall of Humanity project, sponsored by the large corporation, while denouncing YouNeek for becoming “too corporate.”

### **Question 5: Would we want to discourage fame-seeking, if it were possible?**

In thesis advising meetings, we have discussed to what extent art and creation is a form of pure expression versus a desire to imprint oneself on the world. Writing, for example, can be a vehicle through which the writer interprets the world for himself. Writers are often encouraged to simply write for ourselves without an audience in mind, but the reality is that most of us still want people to read our work (that is, if it was intended as an artistic work rather than a private journal.) Many writers have an aspiration that their work is going to matter, and the same holds true for YouTubers, who likely do not spend hours upon hours recording multiple takes for the right angles, adjusting background music levels, and trimming milliseconds off clips for the perfect cuts, just for themselves.

One might say this question is irrelevant, as what does identifying the motivation behind producing creative work matter so long as the motivation facilitates creative expression? I believe, however, that there is value in recognizing the motives and impact of an imprint-driven mentality on an individual. Not only is trying to achieve and maintain fame hard work that often detracts from time one could be spending with his art, but also, substantial psychological damage can come with the territory.

People who tie their value to whether they achieve renown are obviously dissatisfied with themselves when they fail to do so. But even people who do succeed may not achieve satisfaction. If what one “[wants] is personal immortality, no amount of fame will ever be

enough—but that is usually experienced as ‘I am not yet famous enough’” (Brooks). There will always be others even more well-known than you are; the standards merely rise out of reach.

While fame has brought its seekers gratification of ego needs, symbolic immortality, wealth, access, and temptations, it has also led to the loss of privacy, demanding expectations, and increased concerns about impact. Psychologically, fame has led to character-splitting, mistrust, isolation, and an unwillingness to give up fame. (Rockwell & Giles) Celebrities also experience higher levels of self-consciousness and distress than their counterparts. (Carey)

Despite the clear negative implications for one’s wellbeing, it would be difficult to discourage others from that path by showing them the pitfalls of wanting so desperately to matter. Fame “is fickle, sometimes random, and its effect on any one person is not predictable” (Carey). Even people made aware of the effects of fame might assume that they could be the exception, or they might even accept the sacrifices. In the interviews with celebrities, all “participants claimed that despite its negative elements, fame is worth it after all and they would not trade it back.”

## **Conclusion**

*Memoir of a Nobody* addresses the five questions through Jamie’s quest for stardom, even though she does not consciously engage with ideas of fame and legacy. From the beginning, Jamie is fascinated by the world of YouNeek and its famous You-sers. Although she picks up on notes of insincerity, Jamie envies You-sers for their large audiences that obsess about them. She turns to pursuing Internet fame because she does not feel like she receives the sense of belonging

and importance from her existing relationships, and her social anxiety and narcissism have prevented her from forming others.

In the second part of *Memoir of a Nobody*, Jamie will travel to Los Angeles, and meet many of the Hall of Humanity members who initiate her into a farcical influencer culture. She will find that, just like YouTube, the world of YouNeek provides the illusion of connection, even among its stars. You® invites Jamie into the Hall, as she has accumulated a large following for her anti-HOH content, and she becomes increasingly miserable from the burden of presenting a consistent online construct of herself while she loses her native self-image. After she quits HOH, in an absurd turn of events, she becomes even more famous.

Jamie ultimately seeks connection but will not find it through courting millions of new “friends” to “know” (validate) her. However, after abandoning her channel, Jamie starts an anonymous blog. She still, even after her unhappy experience chasing fame, wishes to be heard.

I started writing *Memoir of a Nobody* in part as a letter to myself. I’ve known all along that recognition through a novel or famous blog would not be fulfilling, and I wanted a reminder. However, as I wrote and realized Jamie also knows the futility of her efforts yet keeps herself in denial, I recognize that knowing the pitfalls of wanting to matter may be insufficient. The desire to matter may simply be ingrained in the human psyche, emboldened by a want for connections, amplified by social media platforms, and exploited by for-profit interests. At the end, for some, nothing is as important as proving to ourselves, to others, to someone, that we were seen and heard and “here.”

# *Memoir of a Nobody*

## **Chapter 1**

Jamie's first hint that her issues ran much deeper than imagined was when she saw Tom Kabara's new 53-minute vid on YouNeek, "POV - I'M YOUR THERAPIST AND THIS IS OUR THIRD SESH," laughed, and then immediately added the vid to her watch queue. She exhaled and leaned back into the chilled surface of her pod, careful that her left shoulder didn't touch the "MODE" button. Pressing it would activate the pod from "HERMIT" to "SOCIAL" and cause it to careen across the shop, knocking into other pods like an unsteerable bumper car. That was how you could tell it was someone's first time at Domoro.

Three blocks from campus, the town's only coffee shop-startup had been founded by a Franklin alumnus and was thus one of the university's two legacies. Domoro boasted innovations like Dark Mode for Lights, which reduced eye strain by making it too dark to read, and other tech that helped customers do everything except drink their coffee and study in peace. A "member of the Franklin University Community"—or "student," before protestors had marched into Powers' office demanding equalized power dynamics in academia—Jamie had accumulated hundreds of discount codes from three years of homework rewards on YouKnow. By now she had seen so many Domoro reinforcements on that platform that she would've pointedly avoided the shop if Graham didn't inexplicably love it so much. Now she was a daily patron.

Her best friend sat less than two feet across from her in the pod, engrossed in his 54<sup>th</sup> edition of *Explain the Brain* (previously *Cognitive Neuroscience*.) They'd been spending the afternoon studying (read: Graham had been studying.) She watched his gaze zigzag methodically down his YouBook screen. The darkness of his irises enlarged his pupils into perfect circles of liquid ink.

In the low light, Jamie fished the sleeve of his vintage *Rick & Morty* sweater out of her matcha latte. She'd gotten him the sweater, along with *How to Act Human: For Aliens* and a \$20 game credit in *My Virtual Girlfriend*, for his 21<sup>st</sup> last year. She lifted her drink and sipped at sweet, frothy air. The strong scent of coffee grounds in the pod must have been from air freshener, because it certainly wasn't coming from Graham's "Asian fusion" monstrosity of a durian espresso, either. Jamie paused her current vid, UpGr8's "7 THINGS PEOPLE HATE ABOUT YOU AND YOU WON'T BELIEVE THE 8<sup>TH</sup>," and skipped toward Tom's, eyeing the swirls of yellow and dark brown in Graham's mug. "Isn't that drink a cultural betrayal of sorts?" she asked.

With difficulty, Graham peeled his eyes from his screen. "I'm Korean," he said. "That's racist."

"What happened to Asian solidarity?"

"You're only half."

"Right," said Jamie. "It's hard to keep track of what you can say when you're only Asian half the time." Graham smiled, barely, but turned back to his YouBook and didn't respond. He hadn't indulged her in more than one minute of conversation since they'd settled in four hours earlier. "Is it good? Been a few months since I've visited the ER. Should I try it?"

Graham looked patently unamused.

"Do you have another exam?" she tried again. "Could I help with anything else?"

"Neuroscience again," said Graham, draining the rest of his drink. "Did you take my survey from the link I sent you?"

"The sixth or seventh one?"

“Sorry,” he said. “Mark refuses to approve any of my iterations. He’s like a second father.”

“Daddy issues are my thing. Find your own niche,” said Jamie. “And yeah, I always do them right after you send them. For your 22<sup>nd</sup> I’m just gonna give you the last bits of my personal data you don’t already have. Need anything else?”

“Thanks. Do your own work.”

She’d used to quiz him before exams, but he hadn’t taken her up on study help in months and she wondered if she was reading too much into it. “Okay,” she said, averting her gaze and pulling her YouBook closer to her. “We’re one week into Fall sem, but okay.” Jamie waved her hand above the keyboard, waking the laptop from sleep, and her YouNeek watch queue filled the screen. Normally she had around 50 vids lined up at any moment, but an entire afternoon on YouNeek had whittled the vids down to less than ten. The thumbnail of Tom Kabara’s therapist vid, at the bottom of the list, stood out in neon splashes of color and its bold, all-caps title. In the picture, the You-ser was leaning forward on a couch, grasping a clipboard and gazing into the camera with a concerned expression. The title text framed the creases in his forehead like a crown.

Tom Kabara was definitely not a practicing counselor. He hadn’t even graduated Franklin before he’d moved to LA to do YouNeek vids full time. But he’d increased the people in his YouNiverse orbit by tens of millions, which, arguably, was much more impressive than her achieving four years of seniority in a Franklin University Community membership. If she even made it out with a degree.

Jamie clicked “PLAY.” She had watched the first two vids in his one-sided therapy series before, albeit on 2x speed. Vid-Tom would introduce himself and make some small talk, pausing

for silences where you were supposed to engage in the conversation. It reminded her of a toon series she'd watched as a kid before her mom had sold the YouBox. In the toon, a girl and her talking monkey would go on quests and ask for audience assistance when making decisions, not that Jamie remembered ever helping. She'd just kept the YouBox on, especially when it got dark, to make it feel like there were people talking in the house.

She felt much too vintage now to respond to Tom's canned questions, like "How does that make you feel?" or "That sounds hard. Why do you think that bothered you so much?" but still played the vids all the way through, leaving the silences. The vids never made her feel better, but they didn't make her feel worse, especially when there was always another ready before she could think about what she'd just watched.

Vid-Tom launched himself into his couch, patted his neon-tipped hair into place, and grinned at the cam. His typical vid intro, a quick pan across hoodies and backpacks emblazoned "KABARA KREW" and a vague teaser for his huge project launching next month, played before he jumped into the "sesh." Jamie was listening for whether the questions across all vids were the same, just in a different order, when she heard a crash in the background. Tom, who was mid-silence, didn't react.

It took a moment for Jamie to register that the crash had not come from the vid. She removed the bud from her left ear and peeked outside. A customer had accidentally activated SOCIAL mode and bumped into another pod. Coffee leaked from the door of the first pod, pooling on the floor screensaver of hardwood. A girl emerged, a dark stain blossoming from the side of a mug she was holding against her pink Tri-Kappa tank crop. The girl said something to the door of the other pod. Jamie heard a man's muffled shout.

On her YouPhone, Jamie punched in another order for two coffees.

“Every time,” said Graham as Jamie stood up. The ceiling was an inch short of her five-foot-five. “Don’t bother. She’ll be all right.”

“I’m just getting coffee,” she said, and exited, looking both ways for stray pods as she walked toward the counter.

Several feet away, the girl dropped her mug, which shattered on the floor and splashed her stir-stick legs with more coffee. Her expression contorted.

“Are you okay?” called Jamie as she picked up Order #312 from a cube. She requested napkins. Another cube opened with a steaming plate of them.

Tri-Kapp didn’t look in her direction. Other customers peeked outside their pods, curious, and seeing the girl still standing among the glass, returned to their important business. Jamie, who had been watching YouNeek for hours and had no such excuse, walked over to Tri-Kapp, set the drinks on the floor, and knelt to scoop up some ceramic shards with the napkins.

Tri-Kapp stood in place, watching her clean up. Jamie looked up from the girl’s YouGlides, to her stained tank crop, to her pinched expression and flush of embarrassment. “Thanks,” the girl muttered, but didn’t meet Jamie’s eyes or make a move to help her. Jamie, not knowing what else to do but increasingly conscious of the heat rising to her forehead, finished picking up the shards, threw them in the trash, and picked up her drinks. The girl probably thought Jamie worked there.

Jamie glanced up to catch the girl looking down the bridge of her nose and broke eye contact. She was supposed to say something. Or had she missed the appropriate window? Her cheeks prickled, heartbeat accelerated. “Youlcome,” said Jamie in a strangled rush, as her throat closed around the words. “Sorry. Um. You’re welcome.”

Tri-Kapp, obviously wondering what Jamie was waiting for, furrowed her eyebrows.

Jamie extended the hand that was holding a regular espresso. When the girl didn't move to take the drink, Jamie felt her soul curdle. "Here. Sorry."

The moment Tri-Kapp's fingers finally closed around the espresso, Jamie spun around, nearly causing Tri-Kapp to drop another drink, and fled for the pod, where she slumped into her side and narrowly missed MODE. She exhaled, then slid Graham the durian espresso. He was still reading *Explain the Brain*. "I didn't ask for this," he said, taking the drink from her. "Thanks."

"Why am I so weird," she said to no one.

Graham shrugged. "Do you ever wonder, if you one day left the mess for Domoro, they might figure out the pods aren't working?"

"Maybe they'll hire me," Jamie said, and almost laughed at the prospect of being employed.

"You might as well try," said Graham, who was now apparently in a talkative mood. He raised an eyebrow. "Also, when I made you promise to go to therapy, I didn't mean turn to Tom Kabara."

Her head snapped up. "Were you *snooping*?"

"It was still playing when you left," he said, gesturing to her YouBook, which was facing the door to the pod. She snatched it off the table. Graham had paused the vid for her. "Real therapy didn't work out for you?"

Jamie had only gone to therapy once, which was one more time than necessary for her to understand that therapy was useless. The counselor had been a graduate member of the Franklin University Community wanting to include footage of the session in her research study, "Blackmail: You Never Know When You Might Need It." (Probably.) Jamie, who had waited three weeks for the appointment and who at the time was an idiot freshman as opposed to an

idiot senior, consented. She then spent the whole hour hiccupping snot into one balled-up Kleenex and avoiding eye contact with the YouCam's blinking red light as Xiaoyu gave the occasional nod and scheduled a follow-up, which Jamie's mom promptly made Jamie cancel to avoid tarnishing her pristine university record of 31 absences in one semester.

Hi Xiaoyu, she'd emailed, carefully vague, I've gotten help elsewhere. Please delete the footage. Thanks so much.

Hi Jamie, thank you for letting me know you've found an outside therapist. Understood. I will be cancelling all future appointments.

"No," she said to Graham. "But you never stipulated the quality of the therapist, so you don't get a veto."

"Of the two of us, I was not driven to the ER to get her stomach pumped from alcohol poisoning."

Jamie laughed. "I go too hard *one* time—"

"It's really not funny," said Graham, shutting his laptop and casting himself in darkness.

She shrunk back. Sometimes they were okay and normal and laughed at anything. Other times, conversations would instantly sour. She minimized Tom Kabara's vid and added a couple vids on her recs sidebar to her watch queue. "Um. Sorry. Anyway, clearly, real therapy was a bust."

"Sometimes it just isn't a match," said Graham.

"Like I gotta hold out for a therapist soulmate? Seems unsustainable. I mean, think of the business model."

"Of course not," he said. "Soulmates don't exist."

She laughed, relieved at the joke, then thought of Dani, his skinny redhead ex-girlfriend. She twisted to eye the `MODE` button. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea, to have a built-in escape from uncomfortable conversations.

Graham continued. "If it makes you feel any better, I had to go through a couple therapists, too. It sounds pretentious, but for me, I had to get a therapist whom I felt was smarter than I was, because otherwise I wouldn't respect him. Or her."

"Who're you seeing right now? If they're smarter than you, they're smarter than me."

His gaze slid off his screen, but away from her. "What are boundaries?"

"If you refer me, I'll actually go to therapy?"

"You were going to anyway. You'd already promised me you'd go."

"Yeah, well, I meant it this time."

Graham eyed her.

"I mean, I meant it this time, too," said Jamie. "I always say what I mean." Her shoulder itched.

#

Jamie had not exactly been thrilled to find herself (allegedly) intellectually inferior to a 23-year-old who went by *Boomer*, but perhaps Graham's therapist was strategically making people feel bad about themselves so he'd be in the position of offering therapy for that, which seemed, in its own way, fairly shrewd. Although, five weeks in, Jamie still couldn't tell whether Boomer was actually smarter than she was or he just knew to ask questions she didn't know the answers to. Same difference, possibly.

Otherwise, she liked Boomer. He was a genuinely good listener, which she knew—the only way you could be certain of such things—because he wasn't getting paid for it. Boomer was

a master's member of the Franklin University Community working *pro bono* at the community counseling clinic. The clinic still took her cash but just didn't pay it to him.

She and Boomer had sessions in his cramped office on the sixth floor of Minds. (After the fifth building at Franklin had gotten named after the You® conglomerate, she'd started referring to buildings by the majors they housed.) The Minds department didn't have as much funding because most members of the Franklin University Community who were interested in the mind were also interested in money and became Marketing majors instead.

She wondered, if not money, what motivated Boomer's diligence. They met every Monday at 8AM, an early hour counterintuitive to Jamie's impression that therapy was supposed to improve her well-being. She'd brought this up in each of their sessions so far, to no avail. Not only did Boomer not talk much, but he was also a tough crowd. His sessions with Graham probably entailed the two guys just sitting across from each other in silence.

Edging through the gap between the door and the filing cabinet—she hadn't ever seen one of those outside of a textbook—she tossed her backpack over the chair. It sailed into the couch and snagged on something sharp protruding from the leg. Boomer, in the corner, looked up from his desktop, his shadow swamping his thin frame. He was even slighter than Graham, who, since middle school, looked like someone had vertically stretched his image on a computer but forgotten to preserve proportions.

"Hi Boomer," she said, flicking her braid over her shoulder. "Love what you've done with the place." There was a stack of papers that hadn't been on the coffee table last time.

He watched her sit down. "Hi, Jamie."

"I don't know if I have enough new material for you this week."

"I would encourage you not to regard this as a performance."

“Every week, I try to get some form of reaction from you. Initially I was trying to go for laughs but now I’m thinking it’s gotta be shock value.”

Boomer continued to give her nothing. “We could start with whether anything is different this week.”

“Did you get a new chair?”

Undeterred, “How have you been feeling?”

“I mean, I still don’t drink. My party day is over, as I’ve been saying.”

“How are your relationships?”

This was a new route. They’d mostly talked about the past in previous sessions, though Jamie supposed she had been running out of content about her parents’ non-relationship anyway.

“You know I don’t have any,” she said. “Okay, two. Which is functionally the same as zero.”

“You don’t think you have enough relationships?”

“Sure.”

“How does that make you feel?”

“Bad.” Boomer waited. She ran her fingers along the sides of the chair, down the cool metal of the legs. “Like I have a communication problem, I guess.”

“How so?”

“I don’t know how to communicate it.” She paused. Nothing. “Okay, yeah, I’ll do better.”

Boomer waited.

“I don’t know. I just feel—” she paused. On either side of her, Jamie’s arms pushed her an inch out of the seat and back down, adjusting her position. Her spine felt like it wasn’t sitting straight. “I just feel, all the time, like I’m missing some part that was supposed to come included. It’s a month into senior year and I still only know how to talk to Graham and my mom. I already

rely on him too much and he doesn't really ask me for anything. Like, what if he gets tired of it? Any time I start *actually* talking to Mom, we just end up arguing. I need more friends, I guess. I talk to people at Domoro sometimes but it's always so... bad. I don't know what to say to people."

"You carry on a conversation fine with me."

"You're a therapist," said Jamie a little thickly, looking toward the ceiling. "All I do is talk about me in a safe space. I don't know how to be interesting to other people."

"You are a Relatability major, correct?"

"I'm a Content major. Relatability & Realness is a track. And R&R's more like how You-sers make themselves likeable so their orbiters don't skip the reinforcements. Maybe I chose it as an excuse to watch YouNeek vids for three years and counting," said Jamie. "I was obsessed with YouNeek. Am. But I'm probably going to end up at You® doing reinforcements with everyone else anyway. If they're even still hiring."

"One thing at a time," said Boomer, jotting something onto a notepad, which had materialized out of nowhere. He flipped back a page. "Do you find yourself initiating conversations often?"

She blinked. "Not really."

"Why?"

"I might say something stupid."

"Say that, just for today, you tried talking to people and saying the first thing that came to your mind. What is the worst that could happen?"

"They think I'm stupid?"

"Is that preferable to them not thinking of you at all?"

Jamie sighed. “Boomer, I don’t not-pay you for this. Could you just tell me the right answer?”

“What do you want, ultimately?”

“I want to know how to answer this question so you won’t follow up with another.”

“I don’t know if there is an answer to that.”

There was a pregnant pause. “And how does that make you feel,” asked Jamie.

#

Jamie exited the Minds elevator and into the connecting hall of the ETC buildings, stepping into Vintage at 9:03. Boomer always ended on time because she had American Studies at 9, despite her reassurances that the class was almost exactly three floors down and that no one there cared about America in the slightest.

She grabbed a bottled YouCaf Americano from the hallway vending machine and stepped into the lecture hall. Four minutes late and she was the third person present. She settled into her seat in the back, slightly left of center, and pried open her YouBook to find the tab she hadn’t closed from last night, when she’d binged three hours of You-sers’ vid challenges: trying every “flavor” of fish, dating every kind of race, contracting every kind of illness.

She twisted open the Americano and refreshed her overall YouNiverse feed as more haggard members of the Franklin University Community loped into the hall. From the top left, the YouNeek icon, a small “U” with antennae, bounced with a notification. She clicked and a new Tom Kabara vid, “EXCITING PROJECT ANNOUNCEMENT – MUST WATCH” appeared. Jamie hooked in her buds and played the vid. The short bursts of his perpetually hoarse voice, on 2x speed and punctuated by jump cuts of himself leaping around his room, had the force of two thousand milligrams of caffeine. Jamie set down her Americano, lowered the vid

volume, and decreased the default to 1.5x. Frames she'd already seen from the previous minute—the spiked tips of Tom's neon yellow tips bouncing from side to side—popped up on YouBook screens in rows ahead of her as everyone in the lecture hall found “EXCITING PROJECT ANNOUNCEMENT – MUST WATCH” in the top slot on YouNeek Trending.

Tom was now probably present (at least on screen) in more classrooms than he'd been as a member of the Franklin University Community. Tom was practically Franklin's mascot. He had a banner on You® St, a cutout in Main, and a statue in Content. Apparently, you could take the man out of Franklin University, but you couldn't take Franklin out the man's ass.

Another Tom materialized, two screens ahead of Jamie. American Studies had a no laptop policy, but most members—or the 30 of 100 members who showed up, anyway—were there to fulfill their core America requirement and not because they were Vintage majors. No one cared less than Jamie and her classmates about the standing of their nation, except maybe Professor Ehries, who slouched into the lecture hall at 9:06.

Like every class for the past six weeks, Ehries flung his shapeless, unopened briefcase onto the podium and cast a cursory glance toward all the empty seats. Then he switched to his first PowerPoint slide, a photo of the unit's historical figure, and began speaking, facing the projector. Sometimes Jamie read the textbook during lecture. Other times she tallied the moments Ehries managed to tie things back to Father of Our Great Nation George Washington.

Ehries' stilted voice began tangling with Tom's vid intro, and Jamie slid the volume bar back up. Tom had been teasing his “top-secret” announcement for months now, the frequency of his day-in-the-life vids decreasing from four times a week to weekly. Despite technically being in his orbit, Jamie, like everyone, subscribed to several hundred Youuniverses. For her, Tom's

was in the outer ring, meaning she watched random uploads in full or a minute each from vids she'd missed.

Jamie wondered if the announcement was a new line of merch, or if he was no longer going to be uploading daily vlogs. While he would never run out of days the same way he'd exhausted FU public facilities two months after his series reviewing Franklin's bathrooms had gone viral, maybe he'd finally run out of shit to film.

**EXCITING PROJECT ANNOUNCEMENT – MUST WATCH**

**DATE:** October 3

**VIEWS:** 5,032

**ORBITERS:** 50M

In his room, TOM, a long-faced 22-year-old with neon yellow tips, swivels in his chair at his desk, turning to face the cam in mock surprise.

TOM

(cheerily)

Didn't see you there! What's up, Kabara Krew!! How you doin'? Talk to me. I'm like a friend. Comment down below. You happy? Are you sad? Let it out. Let me know, and make sure to *hit* the "JOIN ORBIT" button to get updates on this YouNiverse!

He'd started his vintage vids with the same long-winded greeting, Jamie remembered. Even in his bathroom-reviewing days, two years ago when he'd been a sophomore at Franklin, he'd addressed the maybe three people who'd watched his vids as "Kabara Krew."

She hadn't watched him until he'd hit three million, of course, but she'd gone back, once, to see his first vids. His friends must've thought he was delusional. Or maybe they'd seen it coming. Regardless, something had to be said for his consistency.

TOM gets out of the chair. The cam focuses on the clock on the nightstand, 8:41 AM, and follows him into the kitchen where he makes himself a shake. Slow pan over the label, Grow&Gain.

TOM

You know we gotta get that daily GG fix before anything else. Woke up kinda later than usual since I'm usually up by 6, but having a protein shake and then working out starts any day out right.

TOM tosses an avocado and a handful of kale into the food processor and dumps in a scoop of white powder.

TOM

I've had this every day for breakfast for over a year and it's my go-to morning detox. The protein in it builds muscle and the sugar scrub whitens your teeth. If you wanna try it out, use my link in the description box for 20% off. I honestly really love it—you know I wouldn't recommend anything to you guys that I don't honestly use.

Jamie fast-forwarded 30 seconds. Tom began pouring out the shake into a cup. 30 more seconds. Tom cracked two eggs above a skillet. Jamie hovered over the play bar to find a frame with a setting befitting an important announcement.

TOM sits down on his white couch, fingers clasped together. He stares straight into the camera.

TOM

So I know you guys have been waiting for this announcement for months now. I've been working really hard on a project and it was so hard to keep it from you guys, because I tell you everything, right, and... well, today's the day we launch.

TOM flips his hair exaggeratedly to his left. Cut to him looking into a different cam. He grins.

TOM

Every You-ser is publishing a book.  
Everyone's getting their own TV series. I'm  
not doing either of those. My project is  
gonna include *you guys*. It's called...

TOM flips his hair back to the right, signaling another jump cut. He faces the center cam and slaps the glass coffee table for a drumroll.

TOM

The Hall of Humanity.

Vid effect of confetti exploding.

TOM

You're probably wondering what that is.  
Basically, I've been feeling lately like  
You-sers, well, we aren't appreciating how  
we all got to where we are, and that's you  
guys. My fans. Kabara Krew. You guys let me  
do what I love, make vids for a living and  
make you guyses lives happier. And so I want  
to showcase you, too. I want to, we want to  
know you like you know me.

TOM (CONT'D)

And so when You® reached out to me for a  
collab, I knew what I wanted to do. The Hall  
of Humanity project is gonna be a website  
that features the lives of 22 normal  
individuals—because ya boy just turned 22—  
and share their lives with us. Your hopes,  
your dreams, your friends, your darkest  
secrets.

TOM laughs.

Jamie observed her own stony expression, faintly reflected from her laptop screen. She supposed part of the charm of YouNeek was that your joke had, in Tom's case, 50 million independent chances of landing a chuckle.

TOM

I'm just kidding. But check out the website and you can apply there. Super pumped to have you meet not just me but the whole Kabara Krew.

The Hall sounded a bit like a casting call for his vids, but Jamie reserved further judgment and opened a new window to visit Tom's site. It was sleekly designed, a futuristic white background with minimal text and a photo of Tom sitting on the floor, posing with 22 empty photo frames and training an exuberant smile on the photographer. There was an energy to his eyes, like he was poised to spring right up at her. APPLY HERE, said a simple box beneath.

"What does everyone have their headphones on for?" asked Ehries abruptly. Jamie suppressed a flinch. Ehries had never called them out on being distracted during class before.

Jamie watched the frames of Tom Kabara on other laptop screens further down the lecture hall blink away, one by one. Members of the Franklin University Community sheepishly tugged buds out of their ears and actually opened blank documents to start taking notes.

But Ehries pressed on. Possibly in the morning he had run out of porridge for breakfast and had had to settle for instant oatmeal instead. "I asked, what's so interesting that everyone's listening to it instead of the lecture?" Ehries *would* assume that everyone with buds in was tuning in to the same "broadcast." But in this case he was actually right. "Enlighten me. What's more interesting than American Studies?"

A milestone in American history: the father of our great nation Tom Kabara uploading a new vid. She thought of Boomer. *What's the worst that could happen?* "A milestone in American history," said Jamie quickly, in one exhale, before she lost the nerve. "Tom Kabara just announced his Hall of Humanity."

No one laughed. A couple heads did begin to swivel in her direction but didn't turn all the way around. It was an unspoken rule in this classroom that no one acknowledged each other in fear of giving Ehries any ideas about classroom discussion.

Ehries, confused: "Who's Tom Kabara?"

"He's an American. To study," said Jamie over the blood pounding in her ears.

She heard what might've been an uncertain snicker two rows down. Some girl in the front row swiveled her entire body to glare at her. To her own surprise, Jamie shrugged. Ehries would forget anything by the end of the day, and she was a senior anyway.

Ehries, visibly debating between pressing her on the topic and resuming his lecture so all of them could leave, decided on the latter. "Put your E-electronics away," said Ehries. "Anyway, George Washington—"

#

Jamie waited for Graham by the statue in Neuroscience. Technically, it was "Brains," but the department had chosen not to update its name because its people liked feeling smarter than everyone else, which checked out. Graham did also make a point of never using abbreviations like normal people. Years of hanging out with her friend in the study lounge, and still her best guess at the statue's subject was a polyp with bird spikes at its base. It really made her brain hurt. What an irritating department.

She cleared the YouCal notification. It was 12:35. Usually, Graham was the one waiting for her, his calm demeanor the foil to her shortness of breath and rushed apologies. His 9AM was actually further from Brains than Jamie's class—they met in the middle for lunch in the member center—but Graham was built like a stick insect. He had practically double the amount of leg than torso. Of course his strides would be longer. It wasn't that she was chronically late.

Graham pushed open the door four minutes later. “Sorry—”

“*No* excuses—”

“—I’ve been trying out being chronically late to everything,” said Graham. And then, unnecessarily: “Like you.”

Jamie pointed to his dark fringe, which had blown upward from the wind outside. “Sick burn, Jimmy Neutron.” Graham reached a hand up to feel his hair and patted it down, glaring. “Did you get my survey link?”

“Started it while waiting,” Jamie slung her backpack over her right shoulder and walked toward him. “Why doesn’t Mark let you finalize it before you send it out?”

“He keeps finding new things,” said Graham. “It’s a power trip.” As they each pushed open an unnecessarily weighted door, Graham continued. “Also, there’s some commotion by Content.”

“Some non-major said they hadn’t seen a Tarantino vid?”

He let out one of his half-chuckles. When he had things on his mind, Graham laughed in one exhale, like he couldn’t spare the time to entertain his sense of humor. “Possibly. But I think I saw a news van and a camera crew. Do you know if something interesting happened this morning?”

“Not that I can...” Jamie blinked.

“What?”

“Which side of Content? Let’s go, I’ll explain as we run.”

#

She could pinpoint the moment people on You® St, the main road through FU, heard the news, because they would freeze and immediately jump on the autowalk toward Content. Jamie

didn't want to attract even more of a crowd, so she and Graham half-speed-walked, half-ran toward the building, deciding to cut through it to avoid the growing stampede outside.

"Sticking physical casting calls on virtual corkboards seems like a really inefficient way to spread awareness," said Graham, slowing down in the middle of a particularly long hallway.

"Did they teach you how to spread content or only how to create it?"

Jamie thought the corkboards were a vast improvement over the vintage announcements wall of vids that had clamored over each other in a hellish chorus each passing period, but she didn't have the time to get into that with him. "*Graham.*" She turned to grab him by the elbow of his vintage *Simpsons* sweater and paused, catching sight of a neon yellow flyer. It'd been less than four hours since Tom's vid, and someone had already designed, printed, and posted a "Hall for Humanity" casting call. "INFLUENCER MENTORSHIP PROGRAM," it shouted in block letters.

"And printed on neon yellow cardstock, too," said Graham, shaking his head. He'd noticed her reading the flyer. "Where do you even get neon yellow paper?"

"From neon yellow trees," said Jamie, and remembering they were supposed to be running, grabbed him, successfully this time. Four winding hallways later, they made it to the south entrance.

They could barely shove their way outside because people were lining up against the doors. Ahead, members of the Franklin University Community coalesced into what looked like a mosh pit. She craned her neck and glimpsed, on a news cam poking through the top of the crowd, the pink logo of RealityReach, one of You®'s pop culture media news brands.

"RealityReach is here. Can you see what they're filming?"

Graham eyed the door behind him like he wanted to go right back inside. “It’s a really big crowd.”

“I thought being tall was your one evolutionary advantage,” she said. “What about something useful?”

He squinted. “I think... there’s a reporter doing an interview with some man. It’s, oh.” Graham raised his eyebrows. “It’s Powers.”

“Powers?” She’d never seen Franklin’s president outside the main building. He seemed to always be near his office, except when members of the Franklin University Community organized a sit-in. Next time they needed to locate him to protest his prioritization of the university’s image over member concerns, Jamie figured, they could check in with RealityReach first.

There was no way Powers’ presence alone would’ve summoned so many onlookers, though. She’d expected the crowds to have something to do with Tom Kabara, but she didn’t see the You-ser. Not that she could see much of anything. “Come on,” she yelled to Graham over the noise. She pointed to the empty Members of the Franklin University Community ticketing office for the Content black box theater. The door was ajar. “We can try going through here.”

Before Graham could protest, she flung open the door, slid through the three cubicles, and emerged on the other side, closer to the RealityReach YouCam. Graham popped out behind her, and others quickly followed suit, five people crowding into the office and pressing against its glass windows.

“We’re very proud... of Mr. Kabara,” Powers was saying to a woman in a RealityReach T-shirt, his low voice slow and measured. “He does exemplify... the Franklin values of creativity and hard work. He’s had much success... with his online career... and we’re happy to host him

at any time. Maybe one of the mentees he chooses for his program... will be a member of the Franklin University Community.” He looked through the crowd, and the RealityReach cam-man followed his gaze. “It looks like someone... let the cat out of the bag, but I came out here to welcome him today for his visit. We ask that you respect his privacy.”

The crowd vibrated with murmurs and the pings of incoming and outgoing texts. Where was Tom?

As if on cue, a limo glided around the corner of Content. The RealityReach cam-man shoved someone who was about to step on his tripod. The crowd leaned into the driveway, immediately surrounding the vehicle. Then the members of the Franklin University Community closest to the door parted as a large man in a black bomber jacket stepped out of the car and elbowed them to the side. After him emerged none other than a beaming Tom Kabara, vlogging YouCam in hand.

The vibrations became screeches. “Tom! Tom! TOM!”

One arm vid-ing himself, the other draping around lucky members of the Franklin University Community with whom he paused for selfies, Tom waded forward as members started throwing their YouPhones at him. He reached Powers, and the two men shook hands firmly. Their bodies angled toward Content.

“How do you think Mr. Kabara’s time at Franklin University shaped his career?” asked the RealityReach reporter anxiously, realizing her time was nearly up.

Security started shoving stubborn members to the side of the entrance. “Mr. Kabara... was a member of the Franklin University Community in this very building, where he learned the invaluable art of envisioning...” The men were getting closer and closer to Jamie. “... of creating... of—”

“—dropping out,” called Jamie.

Powers, Tom, and the reporter’s heads turned, searching for the source of her voice. The people beside her pulled away to regard her more closely, and Jamie fought the urge to shrink back. She felt distinctly aware that she remained just barely blocked from view. Blood pounding in her ears, she muttered a warning to Graham and jumped on his back. He nearly crumpled beneath her, but the motion drew eyes.

“*Jamie—I’m—kill—you—*” whispered Graham, who, despite being winded, still managed a remarkable level of composure.

Jamie could hardly describe it, but she felt Tom Kabara’s gaze had a different weight. He stared at the two, mouth curved into a confused smile as he looked at their teetering structure.

“Hey, Tom,” she said, fighting to keep her voice steady. “I’m Jamie. This is Graham. We’re, ah, falling over ourselves to meet you.”

Powers looked aghast, his mouth still frozen in an “o.” Tom blinked. Then laughed, or more accurately, abruptly exhaled. “Meet this dropout?” His voice had a thinner, tinny quality in real life.

“Absolutely,” said Jamie. She tried not to swallow too obviously. “You’re the one who got out. I want to be you when I grow up.”

“Better apply to the Hall, then,” said Tom as he was ushered into Content by a recovered Powers.

By the time she stood back up from falling off Graham’s back, the two men had disappeared.

#

“Hey, Jamie,” someone said, tapping Jamie on the shoulder as the crowd began to disperse. Jamie turned around. The stranger, with her auburn ponytail high atop her head, was nearly as tall as Graham. “You think you made it into his vlog?”

Jamie had barely opened her mouth when the girl caught sight of Graham behind her. “Oh, hey, I thought I recognized you. I think we had Paxman together last sem? You sat with that other ginger girl, Danielle, I think? I’m Amanda.”

Jamie glanced at Graham, who didn’t visibly react to the mention of Dani. “Hi,” said Graham, extending his hand. “Graham.”

“You dating that girl?” Amanda asked, and the way she gave him a once-over, eyebrows raised like she was questioning Dani’s judgment, rankled.

“They broke up,” said Jamie so he didn’t have to. The words came surprisingly easily.

Amanda blinked. “Shit, sorry. Didn’t know.” Jamie’s shoulders untensed.

“I can’t believe... You’re going to be featured in his vlog,” said Amanda’s friend, a wispy blond girl. She watched Jamie reverently.

“You wanna get lunch later? Both of you? We’re meeting some friends around Main’s deli. Around 1:30, ‘cause they’ve got class.”

“We were actually about to—”

“Sure,” said Jamie. “See you there.”

They parted ways at the autowalk intersection. “Cool,” said Amanda. The girl who hadn’t yet introduced herself smiled and waved as they turned left, onto the path toward the member center.

Jamie faced Graham. “How do you want to kill half an hour?”

“What was that.”

“What was what?”

He looked like he was weighing the pros and cons of knocking Jamie out and dissolving her in a vat of sodium hydroxide like in that vintage toon they’d watched last week. The murderous expression, though, was slightly undercut by Graham rubbing his shoulder ruefully.

“Why did any of that just happen?”

“Well, I don’t know if you’ve heard, but Tom Kabara stopped by Franklin today.”

“I know that,” said Graham, reaching out a hand as if to shove her, before letting it fall to his side. “What I meant was, did you really make us run across campus to shout at a You-ser, or was that part unplanned and you dragged me there to watch him walk into Content?” His eyes sharpened. “Are you thinking about applying? Were you going to show him your resume?”

“No,” said Jamie so forcefully that several members of the Franklin University Community within earshot began giving them a wide berth. “No one should be subjected to my resume. I went because I saw his announcement vid and I was curious.”

“Okay,” said Graham, suspicious. “All right. But why can’t we just eat now? We’ll never see them again. And I’m starving.”

“No, that’s rude.”

Graham choked on his saliva. “Rude is our personality,” he said, slowing down as he coughed. “What is it, you wanted to make new friends? We have one semester left here. You meet people, then you leave. There’s no point.”

“She doesn’t know Dani,” said Jamie.

“That’s *not* it,” said Graham.

Jamie said nothing but continued walking.

Eventually, Graham matched her pace. “Fine. You’re buying my burrito. Actually, both burritos for me. I’ve learned you’re heavy enough as is.”

She whacked him on the back and laughed when he stumbled.

#

For all his griping, Graham fit right into the group conversation. Amanda and her blond friend—Hailey—had met them at 1:40 with two girls and three guys. They’d set their backpacks down on the center table in You® Plaza and separated to buy lunch.

Across from Jamie, Graham was talking to a Thinking sophomore about something to do with language comprehension and the brain. Jamie picked at her Mediterranean salad and looked around at the tables in the plaza. Her group was so large that they’d had to push together two tables, and so rowdy that passersby on You® kept glancing over at them hanging out. She wondered if, every Monday at this time, you could see Amanda’s group shooting the shit on your way to class.

Graham was now listening to the Thinking sophomore—was it Alex?—talk animatedly about something he’d discussed in some ethics seminar. Possibly-Alex had met Graham for less than five minutes, and the guy probably already liked him. Graham had that effect on people. That was what was so annoying about him—that he never had to try. People would just talk at him, like Alex was doing now; meanwhile Jamie was sitting there struggling to remember names she’d heard just a minute ago. Alex, Amanda’s friend... Hailey?

Another girl whose name Jamie had forgotten scooted to the side to make way for Amanda, who’d returned with a gigantic burrito from the deli. She slid into her spot and nodded at Jamie.

As though reminded of Jamie's existence, the guy next to her, Possibly-Trevor, turned to Jamie. "So what's up with Hall of Humanity? Amanda says you're on it."

"Treyvon. That's not what I said. We saw Tom today and she might've made it into his vid. The Hall's a separate thing."

He waved it off. "What's up with it?"

"Yes, what *is* up with it, Jamie?" Graham.

"Did you watch the vid?" asked Jamie, having to clear her throat. When Treyvon shook his head, "Are you in his orbit?"

"Yeah but he's not really my thing. I game. But I saw the notif. I just haven't clicked yet. I was gonna watch tonight."

It really was difficult to carry a conversation while not quite believing she was carrying a conversation. Must've been the YouNeek expertise keeping her afloat. "I'll save you the effort. Tom just announced his project. Basically he's choosing 22 people to make famous. They probably create their YouNiverses under him and we all follow their lives, too."

"Sounds like a lot."

"Yeah, sounds exhausting," said Jamie. "I don't even know 22 people in real life."

"Aw," said Possibly-Julia, sadly.

"You gonna apply?" asked a guy from the left corner, looking marginally more interested in Jamie's presence.

"He has 50 million subscribers," said Jamie. "He's picking 22."

"Isn't he choosing someone from FU, though?"

She'd forgotten. "I mean, that's not confirmed. Powers hinted at it, Tom didn't say."

“Maybe you should apply, too,” said another girl, who was clearly interested in Treyvon, to Treyvon. She elbowed him in the side.

“Nah, he wants interesting people,” said Jamie before she could think better of it. Amanda snorted and fist-bumped Jamie lightly. The girl who liked Treyvon looked unamused.

Treyvon, on the other hand, seemed unruffled. “I should’ve dropped out of college and actually done something with my life,” he said. “Then I’d be interesting.”

“He said he was looking for ‘interesting’ people?” Graham asked.

“Implied.”

“That’s so broad. Is he looking for weird personalities? Weird careers? Weird families?” He finished the last of his burrito, chewing thoughtfully and of course with his mouth closed. “Weird number of followers? Weird amount of money?”

Amanda cocked her head. “I bet Kacy’s gonna apply.” To Jamie and Graham, she elaborated: “She’s this girl in Erin’s Abnormal Minds class. I heard she’s also a You-ser. 20K orbiters for fashion vids, but then I guess that’s a piece of cake now. And maybe Luis Garcia, the one who makes those science rants on YouNow? You’ve definitely seen the one that went viral. Painting with hydrochloric acid.”

“Heath Fossi, too.”

“Who?” asked Graham.

“Went to high school with him. He doesn’t go to FU, but if you’re on YouHurl, he’s Egg.”

“Egg?”

“The third-most followed account on YouHurl. He Hurls nothing but ‘I am egg’ every day. Last time I checked, he was at 20 mil. May have gone down after he went on Ellen 2.0 and couldn’t defend himself against the vegans in Q&A.”

“I was born into the wrong era.”

Jamie yawned. “Have at the bubonic plague, then.”

“You’re not applying, right?” asked Graham as they walked back to Neuroscience.

“Well, Jesus, maybe I am now, the third time you’ve asked.” Graham waited, like always, knowing she would elaborate if prompted with silence. “No. Obviously not. The chances are miniscule. Why would I do that? Why do you keep asking?”

“You keep talking about it.”

“Oh.”

“You’ve also been... different today,” said Graham, head slightly tilted.

She smiled. “In a good way?”

He didn’t answer, saying instead: “Who in their right mind would sign away their lives to Tom Kabara’s video content?”

“I mean, I think they’d be making their own vids—”

Graham eyed her suspiciously. “You’re going on his website later, aren’t you?”

“I’m *not* going on his site,” said Jamie.

## Chapter 2

Jamie went on Tom's site. She almost hadn't had a choice—the entire YouNiverse would not stop talking about the Hall. It was the night after Tom's announcement and she was already seeing YouPic ads. Sponsored posts as she descended the never-ending scroll of YouFeel. #HOH was trending with 60K Hurls. And the YouNeek reaction channels, timely as ever.

### REACTION TO TOM KABARA HALL OF HUMANITY ANNOUNCEMENT! GROUNDBREAKING!

NataliaReax

I mean, Tom's got a point. It's the same people on here telling viewers what to think. The content's getting stale, and I think it's great that he's using his platform to highlight marginalized voices and give back to those in need.

### HOT TAKE: TOM KABARA DOESN'T CARE ABOUT YOU

Hotcakes & Hottakes

It's the dumbest invention since the state of Florida... *arsch mit ohren*, we're going to make normal, boring people famous for no reason? And who thought giving *Tom Kabara* this kind of power was a good idea? Have we forgotten he brought a *child* into a strip club??

### REACTION TO HOT TAKE: TOM KABARA DOESN'T CARE ABOUT YOU

NoSheDint

On the subject of things that shouldn't exist, first is Hotcakes' channel. What's new, she's bitter she won't ever get chosen for the Hall. Has anyone ever heard her not complain? No one even knows who she is... She

is *literally* a hotcake... Like, just call them pancakes.

**REACTION TO REACTION TO HOT TAKE: TOM KABARA  
DOESN'T CARE ABOUT YOU**

Hotcakes & Hottakes  
Ooh, you got me. I hope he sees this, sis.

She wondered if Hotcakes would be applying, and if she got accepted, how she would break the news to the 1.6 million people who'd liked her vid.

Jamie heard the apartment door open and listened to the sounds of her roommate scuffling into her ballet flats, before there were three resounding yanks as Alicia struggled to fully close the crooked door. The key—their place was more vintage than *smart sensors*—turned with a click, and then, silence. Jamie restored her laptop's volume—the functionally useless apartment walls made adjusting volume levels meaningless, as they could hear all sounds regardless, but also a sign of respect, as they could hear the difference—and pulled up the Hall's official site. Jamie had saved revisiting the application for when she was alone in her room, where no one could perceive her embarking on a Hall of Humanity deep dive and question why she cared so much or suggest she spend the effort on her take-home midterm for Easy Nature.

She really had to stop complaining to Graham about her assignments, lest he actually hold her to completing them. “What’s even the point of anything,” she imagined asking, “if we’re all just going to end up at You®?”

“Not all ‘you’s are created equal,” he’d say.

***HALL OF HUMANITY***

**To celebrate his 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday, mega-star You-ser Tom Kabara is welcoming applications to his unprecedented Hall of Humanity!**

*Ever felt that YouNeek lacks representation? Vloggers collecting Teslas, corporations taking over "Trending" with vid ads for their talk shows... YouNeek used to be about forging real connections with Internet strangers through sharing experiences through vids.*

*In 100 years if someone finds YouNeek as a time capsule of our age, what's missing is a representation of 95% of the population. Normal lives on paper but each with a story that, if brought to life, could resonate with audiences. We're looking for regular, casual, relatable people. Don't try to "present" **You®**self. (Tom: People with knockout talents, make your own YouNeek. What we want here is **realness**. Remember, I was a regular person, too, once.) Anyone can be interesting. Why shouldn't that be **You®**?*

*The Hall of Humanity project is seeking 22 members for the pioneering cohort. Apps are rolling. In early January, there will be one in-person interview in LA, expenses paid. If **You®** make it into the Hall, expect a family, the most fun you've ever*

*had, and millions of new friends all over the world. Get on the record. Leave **You®** individual legacy.*

**SPONSORED BY You® .**

>APPLY HERE

**YouPic handle:** @jamie.rien  
**YouHurl handle:** @j.rien  
**YouFeel:** /jamie.rien

**Name:** Jamie Rien  
**Age (18+):** 21  
**City:** Franklin, Texas  
**Email:** jrien@fu.com

**LET US GET TO KNOW YOU®. PLEASE BE AS CONCISE AS POSS.**

**What would you add to the Hall?**

I'm interesting in the normal way you're looking for. I'm a 4<sup>th</sup> year "member of the Franklin University Community," majoring in Content on the Relatability & Realness track, like Tom did. (Saw him this morning when he visited campus.) I've lurked on YouNeek for a decade. I've studied content and I've consumed it, so I know what viewers want, i.e. not another exaggerated personality.

When people, especially You-sers, talk about being real, what they envision is a couple long sit-down vids where they take off their makeup and talk about what makes them sad, then come back next week with a performative vid. Maybe they'll even talk about rejecting a sponsorship because they don't use the product. My realness would be *truly* real. I can have little boundaries or filter, am narcissistic enough to crave an audience, and am insecure enough to continually work for their approval. You would see and understand *all* of me.

**If you could invite three people, dead or alive, to dinner, which?**

Preferably alive. As for people, Tom Kabara so I can pitch him in person. The inventor of Vegemite because I have many questions, the first one being "Why?" My dad so he can come back from getting cigarettes. One of these options is very much within your power to fulfill.

**If your plane crashed into a deserted island, what would be your role?**

Food.

**Is there something your friends wouldn't know that you could tell us?**

Yes. I can also tell you what it is in the interview.

**Do you have any skeletons in your closet?**

Tons. I refrain from cleaning out the bug corpses as a signal to their compatriots.

>SUBMIT

**Thanks for submitting! As soon as possible, send a vid of yourself to our email. No points for production quality (unless it's phenomenal.) We're looking for potential.**

Clicking submit gave Jamie a brief high, the kind of release she used to feel when she closed all the tabs she'd needed after completing a project or when she aced an exam. After a while of avoiding school and using YouNeek vids to distract herself from feeling bad, the sense of fulfillment felt slightly foreign.

Jamie turned on her phone's front-facing cam and set it onto her desk. From this angle, her face looked like a thumb. Her typically wide-set features looked squished together, outshone by the stubborn pimple on her chin. If this was the view from her phone and there actually were people spying through it like her mom always said, Jamie figured they could be her guest. She stacked together three unopened "required" textbooks that her Rock Appreciation professor had changed his mind mid-semester about using and positioned the phone on top, stabilizing it with two erasers from behind. The angle was still upward but now at least she resembled a human being.

She considered her vid backdrop, observing the state of her room through her phone before turning around as though the mess might look better in person. Jackets were piled on the dresser despite the empty coat rack adjacent. Books and notebooks lay strewn on her bed from when she'd dumped them that morning, searching for the Easy Nature homework she'd forgotten to do. But Tom had hinted at authenticity—which, for Tom, meant a vigorous force-feeding instead of the usual shovel to the head—so she kept the mess where it was.

>RECORD

JAMIE

Uh... Hi.

>STOP

As it turned out, it was a lot harder to talk to the camera when you had nothing to say. Quite a feat for Tom to make that a career.

JAMIE

I'm Jamie. I go to Franklin University, which is where Tom went, which you all know. Of course. I'm name dropping but if I call it out myself it doesn't count. Sorry. I don't make the rules, unless you don't care, in which case I do and stand by everything I just said.

She picked up her phone with her right arm, holding it away from herself and slightly above face-level, angled slightly downward.

JAMIE

So this is how I imagine you're supposed to vlog. I'm filming on a YouPhone so maybe the lighting's wack and I'm holding it all wrong, but I guess make sure to tell me in the comments because engagement drives orbiters and all that. And I care about you even though "you" doesn't exist yet since I have zero orbiters. It'll be like an IOU.

Jamie swiveled in her chair, panning across the state of her room. She imagined future viewers sitting at their desks, on their beds, in classrooms, seeing her through their laptops. Herself, introduced to screens and places she'd never visited and known by people she'd never met, but who might recognize her likeness.

JAMIE

I really was going to make myself look more presentable than this, but I'm trying to make my thing be realness and this level of oversharing is appropriate for the intro. We can reserve my trauma for future content. Anyway, that's my bed, where I spend a lot of time watching YouNeek in the dark when I should be sleeping, leaving me too tired to do anything except watch more YouNeek vids before bed. It's—

The screen showed an incoming YouCall from her mom and cut off the vid. Jamie cursed and picked up. In the seconds as she waited for the call to connect, she blinked at her reflection, the monolids that obscured the tops of her eyes and part of her pupils, making her eyes look half-open and lightless (or, in Graham's charitable opinion, "perpetually high.") The round cheeks that should've housed more cheerful features.

Her mom's sharp chin, the one feature they shared, popped into view, then her dark eyes and black hair styled in a mushroom cut as her mom moved the phone a couple inches away

from her face. Agnes Chan did not understand YouC yet insisted on using it exclusively. “Hi, Mom,” Jamie said. “Is this important?”

“What are you doing?”

“Studying,” said Jamie. Studying the art of vlogging.

“What are you really doing?”

“Filming a vid,” said Jamie.

“For class?”

“No.”

“For who?”

“I don’t know,” said Jamie. “People.”

“What do you do in video? There are weird people on Internet. On News channel this morning it say someone stealing penguins from zoo. Maybe do weird things to it.”

“I’m just talking, Mom.”

“Who wants to watch you talk?”

“I don’t know,” said Jamie. “People.”

“There are weird people on Internet. What do you do in video?”

Jamie felt like she was in the Matrix. “It’s for an application. I’m trying to demonstrate that I have a personality and am a real human being. So I just talk about myself.”

“That seems like waste of time.”

Jamie snorted. “Isn’t it your job to think I’m interesting?”

“Not when you sit alone in room talking to yourself instead of work.”

“How do you know I’m in my room talking to myself?”

“Are you?”

“... No.”

“I am your mother,” said her mom. “Anyway, I call because I am at Costco. Do you like red or green fuzzy socks? They are on sale.”

#

JAMIE

Hi guys, sorry about that. My mom just called. I don't know how to record a vid while calling, but this was pretty much the conversation.

Jamie scooted to the left side of the frame and cleared her throat.

JAMIE

(high-pitched)

Jamie, what you going to do with your life? You know I support whatever you do, but you need to thinking about your future. I am not pressuring you into career.

Jamie shifted to the right, mirroring the position like her “mom” was talking to her. She blinked slowly, exaggeratedly, and opened her mouth. Then she moved back to impersonate her mom.

JAMIE

(high-pitched)

Anyway, about lawyer—

>STOP

She tried another take.

>RECORD

JAMIE  
I just feel like jobs are the only thing you  
let me ever talk about.

JAMIE  
(high-pitched)  
This not true. We talk about anything. What  
else to discuss?

JAMIE  
Could we talk about you? How's the  
restaurant? Or the weather? Penguins? Or  
Dad? I mean, I've been trying to bring him  
up for, like, a decade. This cannot possibly  
be too soon. It really might be good for  
you.

JAMIE  
(high-pitched)  
Anyway, about lawyer—

This time her voice caught. She cleared her throat a little thickly, smiled uncertainly at  
the cam, and stopped the recording.

#

The next day, Graham didn't have a lunch break early enough to sit with Amanda and her  
friends. "You wanna go off campus for Pho Fuck's Sake?" asked Jamie when he met her by the  
Neuroscience statue. Pho Fuck's Sake was a hole-in-the wall Vietnamese place with cooks who  
only spoke Spanish. Normally she wouldn't have asked, just said they were going, except  
Graham was the one with the car.

Graham eyed her suspiciously. "Why?"

"You don't want pho?"

“What about we just stay here and eat from the endless options of a campus food hall that refuses to specialize nor do any cuisine justice?” asked Graham. “Today’s Japanese, which is the same thing.”

“Let’s do something interesting,” said Jamie, instead of their usual “that’s racist” schtick. “If you weren’t lazy and scared of change, would there be somewhere else you wanted to try?”

“What is this about?”

“It’s not about anything.”

Graham waited. He always used silence to prompt elaboration, and he was *so* transparent about it.

“It’s about me being bored,” she said after a minute.

“Could I entertain you in a way that doesn’t require my car?”

She sighed. “Compromise for Mien Noodles?”

“First of all, you are well aware of my stance on food places that are named the same word in two languages. Also, how would it be a compromise if we would still have to walk?”

“*You* know *my* stance on you saying ‘first of all’ for, like, two things,” countered Jamie. “And I’ll stop bothering you.”

“Will you take another survey? And go to my seminar?”

“I would’ve anyway, but yeah. Since when were you doing a seminar?”

“Since today. I’m fairly sure Mark just wanted to pass off the workload, but then he said it would look good to med schools.”

“Sounds like he really *is* your father.”

Graham sighed. “Fine,” he said. “Fine, we can go, but I refuse to get anything with ‘mien noodles,’ on principle. They ought to know better.”

Jamie pulled out her phone and pressed record on vid. “Say ‘hi.’”

Graham drew back and averted his gaze as though if he couldn’t perceive the cam, the cam couldn’t perceive him. “To whom?”

“No one. It’s a vid.” When he didn’t react, she stopped the recording. “Tell me how you feel about ‘mien noodles.’” She pressed record again.

“What’s this for?” asked Graham.

She sighed. “Why does it have to be ‘for’ anything?”

He was silent again, and this time Jamie actively restrained herself from blurting the first thing on her mind, instead stopping the recording. They got up from the bench and started walking west, toward Mien Noodles. She filmed a few seconds-long shots of the trees down You® St and of students milling around Design. She thought about commenting on the irony of Design being the ugliest building at FU but decided to add that in as a voiceover later, casting a sideways glance at Graham. He wasn’t looking.

#

Turning the corner to Mien Noodles, Jamie accidentally missed the button to start recording. “Uh, go ahead,” she said to Graham, awkwardly. “I’ll just... be a couple secs.”

“What’s the video about?” he asked. “Is it a documentary?”

“Of sorts,” said Jamie. “Get out of the shot.”

He stepped behind her as she did a quick pan of the storefront. “Please don’t tell me you’re doing the Tom Kabara thing.”

“Only ironically,” she mouthed to him because the cam was still on.

He looked to the sky and closed his eyes. “You’re trying to be a YouNeek star, and I wish I could say I was surprised.”

Jamie narrowed her eyes and shook her head, careful not to shake the cam. She'd probably have to voiceover this entire part. Except that wouldn't be real, so maybe she'd just cut it out entirely. Or would that also be unreal?

She tried a different shot, starting with restaurants further down the building complex front and ending at Mien Noodles. One of the vloggers she'd binge-watched until 4AM last night was Anna Shapivora, and that was her signature shot.

There was a crowd at Chipotle, as there always was, and some people at FORTUNE COOKIES, the bakery that never seemed to restock. There were also three guys loitering in the bushes near the corner, where you could always find high schoolers—their town had one of each level of institution, all named Franklin—hanging out. It didn't look like any of them were smoking cigs, but considering that one of them seemed to be standing *in* the bush, they were probably smoking *something*.

"That's why you wanted to do something interesting? For the vlog?"

"It wasn't just 'for the vlog,'" she defended. "I really wanted to do something different. It wouldn't be real if I didn't."

"Yes, authenticity is 'in' now," said Graham, waving it off. "But if you're going to be the most real, the 'real'-est, or whatever they're calling it, shouldn't you be completely real? If you start going out of your way to do things you wouldn't normally instead of being boring as usual, would that not already be lying by omission?"

She thought of Ethan Ewing, one of the most popular vloggers, who posted vlogs that were four minutes and twenty seconds, exactly, and clearly contained only the exciting snippets of his life. She'd avoided his vids—as she had Tom's—in the past because they couldn't possibly be realistic, but last night she'd found herself smiling in the dark to vids of him and his

now ex-girlfriend filming each other goofing off in department stores. “I guess,” said Jamie, “the solution is to film it all. The fun and the boring.”

Graham shrugged. “Then no one would watch. Are you done?”

“You don’t know that,” said Jamie, though she didn’t know either. Movement flashed in the corner of her eye, and she turned to the three guys at the corner, their attention focused on what looked like a large, black and white dog thrusting around in the shrubs. Bush Guy leaned down to scoop up the animal, which struggled so forcefully in his arms that she couldn’t even make out the breed through zoom. It just looked like a dark, star-shaped blob. Cradling the dog in his arms, the guy made a beeline for the parking lot.

“Probably left a surprise somewhere conspicuous,” remarked Jamie to either Graham or the cam. The gang followed Bush Guy and two minutes later, a red truck sped out of the lot and onto the street. “You’d think it’d be simpler to just clean it up instead of staging a getaway.”

“Whatever you say,” said Graham. “Let’s go get some noodles noodles, and if you ask me to wait for you to video my food before I eat it, I’m confiscating your phone.”

#

Stepping to the side of the counter after placing her order, Jamie scrolled through her notifs. Emails about awaiting mail order brides, a quiz in American Studies, and a couple YouFeel event invites. “Did Christina invite you to her birthday again?” she asked Graham.

“I’m sure she invites everyone on her friends list, given that I haven’t seen her since we were lab partners that one time in high school Nature,” said Graham. He stepped up to the YouPay. “Remember that awful group project she made me do by myself?”

“If you recall a little harder, I helped you do that project and I wasn’t even in the class. Although, on second thought, maybe it was charitable of you not to give me credit. That was the only all-nighter I’d ever pulled—not my best work.”

“I, too, reminisce on the days you used to study,” said Graham. “And glowing reviews of Christina, so far.”

“We didn’t have glowing reviews of anyone because we barely talked to anyone.” She had “met” Graham in elementary school in the library reading comics during recess and they had hung out like that, in silence, for months before even talking to each other. “Aren’t you curious at all how people have changed? It’d be like a mini reunion we got a last-minute invite to.”

“Oh, in that case. Let’s meet at 6, your place. I’ll bring the confetti, you write the card. We’ll bake her a cake, papier-mâché a pinata, and get there nice and early at 8PM,” he said after ordering his jungle curry. Jamie made a face, both at Graham ordering a Thai dish at a Chinese place (“technically,” Graham argued, “it’s Mexican”) and at even the sarcastic prospect of going to a college party when she’d successfully avoided them since their freshman year.

Jamie didn’t know Christina well, or actually, at all, besides having sat two tables down from her in junior advisory period five years ago, but Jamie *had* heard about her parties. And maybe she could use the content. “I think I’m going to go,” she said to Graham as he paid for his meal and stood aside to let a freshman in a Franklin Industries sweatshirt up to the counter.

“I don’t think you should, but I also know you’re not going to listen to me.”

“Why even tell me, then?”

“I want it on the record.” His buzzer vibrated, flashing red, and he picked up his tray.

“There’s going to be alcohol.”

“I could not drink.”

“You could also not go.”

“I keep telling you that was a one-time thing,” said Jamie.

“It really was,” said Graham. “The next time you drink that much, you might die, which I’m told only happens once.” Jamie’s bowl of classic pho slid onto the counter, and as she reached for it, he asked: “At least can you get someone to go with you? Not me, because that sets a bad precedent and also I have game night. But someone else. And message me when you get back, or when you leave?”

“Yes, Mother.” As they walked toward their secluded booth in the corner by the taped-shut exit, Jamie’s phone, on the tray, began vibrating with a YouC from her mom. “Speak of the devil,” she said, letting the phone ring as she continued to carefully balance the bowl of hot soup.

Graham didn’t acknowledge the call at all, but she could tell he was drawing some conclusion. She set down her tray at the booth, put in her buds, and called her mom back. “Hi, Mom. Could I call you back?”

“Why didn’t you pick up?”

“I was carrying a bowl of hot soup. And I called you immediately after I put it down.” She switched to her phone’s front-facing cam to show her pho, before switching back.

“Why don’t you ever call me?”

“Mom, then we would call twice a day instead of daily. Also, you only let us talk about jobs.”

“That not true. Are you outside? Stop eat out so often. Pho is salty, lots of MSG,” said her mom, squinting at the screen. “Are you by yourself?”

“I’m with Graham.” Jamie slid into the booth, gazing longingly at the—probably—cooling broth. “We’re having lunch. Did something happen, or could I call you back?”

“I forgot,” said her mom. “You having good times? Lots of friends?”

“Yeah,” said Jamie.

“Happy?”

Jamie remembered the call when she’d mentioned her first attempt at therapy. “You not crazy,” her mom had said, and they had never discussed it again. “Yeah,” said Jamie. “Are you happy? How are you?”

“I miss you,” said her mom. “Other than that, things are good.”

“The restaurant?”

“The restaurant is okay but workers keep stealing food home. I am not kitchen unless they pay me. How is school?”

“It’s great,” said Jamie, knowing where this was going.

“Did you find job? Are you looking? You are running out of time and I am worried.”

“I’m looking,” said Jamie, who wasn’t. “It’ll be fine. Don’t worry. It’s just, talking about it all the time makes me feel... it stresses me out. Could I call you back?”

“I heard from Stacy mom that you can look into data science. Big data become big. You can find job. You are smart and can learn.”

“I didn’t apply for grad school, Mom. I keep telling you I’d need a Master’s degree for that. Sometimes I feel like you don’t really listen—”

Her mom sighed. “You have to be open to things, Jamie. I hear you all the time saying ‘I can’t do this, I can’t do that.’ How you going to find anything with that mindset? Remember to be open to all jobs. It’s your first so you cannot have high standards but it is most essential for all later jobs.”

“Mom, I’m with Graham right now and also kind of hungry. Can we talk another time?”

“Oh, Graham. Okay. How is he?”

“How are you?” Jamie asked Graham, who gave her an uncertain thumbs up. “He’s great.”

Her mom remained on the line.

“Mom, I’ve been getting these emails from Dad—”

“Okay! Think about job. Bye.” Her mom hung up.

Buds still in, Jamie halfheartedly stirred the noodles with a spoon. She exhaled. The bowl still felt warm as she pushed it to the side. She eyed Graham, who was halfway through his curry, and removed her buds. “Now I really need a drink. So, you were saying you don’t want me to go alone to Christina’s party—”

“No,” said Graham immediately.

“Please?”

“Hell no,” said Graham.

#

Unfortunately unable to bully her one friend into keeping her company, Jamie found herself alone on Christina’s doorstep, wondering whether forty-five minutes late was late enough to be socially acceptable. The music was loud enough that she could feel the vibrations beneath her feet, which seemed like a good sign. She also wondered if people still rang doorbells—years of just walking into Graham’s apartment had ruined her for social niceties—and whether ringing even mattered if no one inside was close enough or in the right state of mind to hear her. She tried turning the knob, and the door opened with a slight creak.

To her relief, there were already plenty of people there. Some heads turned when she walked in, but a couple seconds later they resumed their conversations. She walked around the

staircase and into the hall toward the kitchen and living room, where the music seemed loudest. A couple people were taking pictures and YouSnaps already, so she pulled out her phone for a couple close-up shots of people leaning into each other that would've fit right into a ShopNow montage reel. A good shot of herself pouring a Topo Chico into a red solo cup.

JAMIE

(shouting)

Uh, hey. I'm at a party. I don't really know the person throwing it or really anyone here, and I'm talking to my phone like it's someone I'm YouCalling in, I guess. So it doesn't feel too much like I'm out of place. Not that anyone's really paying attention to me. I don't really know what to say.

She gravitated toward the wall, scanning the room for a familiar face. She tried making eye contact with several strangers, but no one seemed particularly interested in approaching her.

JAMIE

Hi! I'm Jamie, I don't know anyone here.

JAMIE extends her hand.

RANDOM PARTYGOER

Uh, hey. Nate.

After a silence, JAMIE clears her throat.

JAMIE

Uh, how do you know Christina?

RANDOM PARTYGOER  
I know her roommate, actually. Hey, listen,  
I gotta find my friend. Nice meeting you.

JAMIE  
Oh, sure. Nice meeting you!

JAMIE  
(turning to RANDOM PARTYGOER #2)  
Hey, Jamie, nice to meet you.

JAMIE extends her hand.

RANDOM PARTYGOER #2  
Oh sorry, I'm Samantha.

JAMIE  
(confused)  
What?

RANDOM PARTYGOER #2  
My name's Samantha.

JAMIE  
Oh, no, I meant *my* name's Jamie. Sorry.

SAMANTHA  
(laughs)  
Oh! Sorry! I'm a little drunk. Are you  
looking for someone?

JAMIE  
Uh. Christina, I guess?

SAMANTHA  
Sorry, girl. She's probably puking. She  
seemed out of it before this even started. I  
don't think she'd eaten. If not the  
bathroom, maybe the patio? Whatcha drinking?

JAMIE  
Um. Thanks. It's just Topo Chico.

SAMANTHA

(eyes wide)  
Ooh, are you abstinent?

JAMIE  
Um. Like I don't drink? No, I do. I just  
promised my friend I wouldn't.

JAMIE's phone pings with a text.

JAMIE  
Hang on. That's him.

Jamie ended the recording to check her messages.

**Graham:** Are you alive?

**Jamie:** Making you proud

**Graham:** Let's not get too excited.

"Oh, weird, why?" asked Samantha.

"He's a good friend. I got way too drunk last time and he was there for the aftermath, so it's more for his peace of mind since he's not here. He doesn't really party."

"Oh, girl. Sounds lit. You must go harrrrrd," Samantha said, drawing out the "r"s for so long Jamie thought she'd forgotten how to end the word.

"A good time until it wasn't," said Jamie, matching Samantha's wide smile. Drunk people were so easy to talk to. You could say anything and it'd be the right thing. "A real rager."

"TFTI," she said, frowning exaggeratedly. "Wish I could've been there. Did you go to the hospital?" asked Samantha conspiratorially. "Freshman year I drove my roommate to get her stomach pumped. Her 'rents were kinda cool about it, must've drank a lot in college, too! Lucky

bitch.” Samantha teetered on her four-inch strappy heels, and Jamie reflexively stuck out an arm to support her.

“I told my mom I’d gotten the flu,” said Jamie.

Samantha giggled. Catching sight of someone over Jamie’s shoulder, she waved.

“Brenda! Brenda... Sorry, I gotta find my friend. Nice meeting you!”

“Thanks,” Jamie called after her, before setting the cam to Record.

Jamie wandered around the house for another half hour, pretending like she was searching intently for Christina, who Jamie had noticed in the living room in the first couple of minutes. On her fifth lap, Christina, who somehow recognized her through glazed pupils, jumped up, hugged Jamie tightly, said “I haven’t seen you in for...eee...verrrr... is that a vid? Hiiii... I’m Christina,” and promptly passed out on the couch.

Fiddling with her solo cup, Jamie stood, listening to spiked laughter and the hiss of newly opened YouChug. People stumbled in and out in ebbs and flows, their eyes sometimes lingering on her for seconds. There was a mirror across the hall, and she could see her own reflection, standing alone against the pastel green wallpaper. She quickly panned away.

Her fingers itched to stop the recording, but instead Jamie made her way to the door, stepping around a couple lying on the carpet and staring into each other’s eyes. Maybe they’d been vaping alcohol, because passing by them, Jamie felt her eyes starting to water.

When she returned home, sitting at the top of her inbox was a rejection email from the Hall of Humanity.

### Chapter 3

**SUBJECT: Bad News - Hall of Humanity**

team@hoh.com -> jrien@fu.com

**DATE:** October 4 at 11:11 PM

Dear [Insert Candidate],

Sorry. Thank You® for applying to Hall of Humanity, but we cannot offer You® a spot to advance in the process. We received many strong applications and are unable to accept everyone.

Thanks again for You® time. Wishing You® the best!

Sorry,

The Hall of Humanity Team

Her stomach bottomed out. Jamie leaned backward and let herself slide down the chair as though to catch it. She hadn't even submitted her vid yet. Maybe she should've waited to submit it with the app, but the app hadn't mentioned a specific deadline.

She reached for her phone and scrolled to the vids she'd been planning to just splice together. She played back the first few clips, deleting the ones where she'd started then immediately stopped recording or where her finger blurred the footage. Then, chest prickling with indignance, she selected all the clips and deleted them.

Pulling up her YouC history, she found her mom's call at 11:09, meaning the first YouMail had been sent less than ten minutes after she'd submitted the app. It was impossible that they had gotten to her app so quickly.

**SUBJECT: Bad News 2 - Hall of Humanity**

team@hoh.com -> jrien@fu.com

**DATE:** October 4 at 11:39 PM

Dear Jamie Rien,

Sorry about the last email! We accidentally sent out a draft template before it was ready with all forms filled out. The news is still the same, unfortunately, and here it is again below:

Thank You® for applying to the Hall of Humanity, but we cannot offer You® a spot to advance in the process. We received many strong applications and are unable to accept everyone. Thanks again for You® time. Wishing You® the best!

Sorry,

The Hall of Humanity Team

Still feeling stomach-less, Jamie wondered why she'd actually expected to be accepted. With those odds? And she had only known of the Hall for a few days. She hadn't invested that

much into the app or even her now defunct vid, though it had been briefly fun to create. An uptick to “not unmotivated” from her baseline of “unmotivated,” a little blip of hope before the overshoot the other way.

She closed her YouMail. The tabs before it had YouSearch results for the queries she’d searched during the first week of Fall sem.

Search: jobs content major

Search: jobs content major not creating reinforcements for you@

Search: jobs mothers ok with

Search: jobs when soul-sucking depression

Even just reopening the last one generated new sidebar reinforcement vids telling her to “GET WELL SOON. 20% OFF ALL THERAPIST SESSIONS. MUST GO.”

She closed all the YouSearch tabs. The next one was a document she’d started for her Numbers midterm, which consisted of the three short answer essay questions on number contemplation and the words “When thinking about numbers.” It was really no wonder why Professor Sankar, with his single hair and baggy tweed jacket, looked so mooney all the time. His talents were truly wasted on teaching Content majors how to think. Sometimes she found herself actually going to class just because he was trying so hard, but then Jamie would sit through a lecture, not understand any of it, and remember that her YouBook knew numbers much better than even Sankar ever would.

It was past midnight at this point, but she felt too compressed in the head to sleep. Jamie pulled out the physical Numbers course packet, which Sankar had insisted on, from where it lay on the carpet, half under her bed, and spread it on her desk. It took her ten minutes to even find

the “Contemplating Numbers” section, and the first half didn’t even have any numbers printed in the text.

Outside, Alicia’s key started scraping in the lock, and Jamie got up to close her door and manually turn off the lights. She read the next paragraph in the textbook six times as Alicia retreated into her room and got ready for bed, then the paragraph after that a couple times. When Alicia’s lights went off, Jamie emerged from her room. Eyeing Alicia’s bottle of YouChug on the counter, she gave it a wide berth and instead grabbed the family pack of FeelGood popcorn from the pantry and shut her door again.

She sat on her bed, scrolling through her YouNiverse feeds and pulling down to refresh for new updates.

**Graham:** you alive?

**Jamie:** just got back. Thanks

**Graham:** no problem

She wanted badly to say something else but didn’t know what. Or maybe, how.

A notification popped up from YouUp, YouNiverse’s dating functionality that she was using on Platonic Mode until YouNiverse acquired a better functioning dating app like AHP. The AHP user base was growing rapidly on its own, but eventually it would cave into a YouNiverse acquisition. All companies did. Hey, You® up? We missed you. Come back, said YouUp. She checked, and upon finding no new matches, increased her location range and spent an hour swiping right on all the bios with the word “I need new friends” and “lonely.”

#

The only class she had with Graham was Rock Appreciation on Thursdays (also Tuesdays, though she preferred to take her poison in weekly doses.) Jamie had actually registered for Rock Appreciation last semester thinking it was Geology—her degree tracker had suggested the course and she’d deferred to its judgment, thinking it was for a science credit—until she’d walked into Beauty to Professor Hidgens singing “Bohemian Rhapsody” acapella. And until Graham, who’d known all along they were both taking Rock Appreciation for FU’s cultural studies core but wanted to see how long it would take her to realize, walked in right behind her.

She nodded at Chloe O’Connell, a quiet Content major who she’d never heard speak. They usually sat next to each other and had partnered for entire projects without talking in person.

Graham was already in his seat in the center left—in his opinion, the least observed area of any classroom by a professor—talking to his friend Marco, a Thinking major. “Hi Jamie,” said Marco, his Colombian accent particularly pronounced in the “Jeh.” Jamie waved. Marco seemed nice enough, but every time he was there she couldn’t shake the thought that he was Graham’s friend and not hers. They only saw each other in the context of Graham, and probably Marco thought she was weird anyway.

“Why did you skip yesterday?” asked Graham.

After the Hall rejection, in a fit of masochism, she’d binged #HOH vids until the day broke and overslept American Studies. She hadn’t seen the point of getting out of bed. “I texted you I wasn’t coming,” said Jamie.

“That wasn’t the question,” he said. “At the very least shouldn’t you just be skipping if you have something better to work on?”

“Well, maybe I was,” said Jamie, oddly stung.

Some girl, a small blonde who’d dyed her tips black and was somehow making it work, was sitting in Jamie’s unassigned-assigned seat next to Graham. Jamie didn’t say anything, just slid into her left with a neutral look as though that would signify her displeasure. “Hi,” she said. “I’m Jamie. What’s your name?” Graham glanced at Jamie, confused.

Black Tips looked up. Her eyes, the lightest shade of green Jamie had ever seen, slightly unnerved her. “Oh, hey? Sorry, do you normally sit here?”

“Yeah, but it’s okay,” said Jamie.

The girl took the hint and moved anyway, now sitting in Chloe’s seat. Chloe, who was waiting in the aisle behind Jamie, said nothing and sat down where she was without a word. “I’m Ainsley?” the girl said. “Sorry again? This is the first time I’ve come to class?” Her inflection rose through every sentence before trailing off, as though she only spoke in questions.

They were five weeks into the semester. “I respect it. If anything, I’ve lost knowledge coming to class and I came in thinking we were literally going to be studying rocks.”

Ainsley laughed. “No, it’s smart to come? He takes participation, right?”

“We haven’t even used our clickers. I’m here for this one,” said Jamie, pointing her right thumb over her shoulder at Graham.

“In what way?”

“What?”

“Is he your boyfriend?”

“No,” said the two of them emphatically, Graham swiveling entirely around. “Excuse me,” said Jamie, taking offense.

“Did you want me to lie?”

“I wanted you to sound less excited about the truth.” To Ainsley, “Just good friends.”

“That’s presumptuous.”

“He’s had a rough few years,” said Jamie. “That’s Graham.”

Ainsley nodded distractedly in his direction, gaze passing over him. “I’ve seen you before?” she said to Jamie. “You were there when Tom came to campus? He said something to you?”

“Oh. Yeah,” said Jamie, arranging her features into neutral. “That was me. Graham was there, too.”

She didn’t turn to acknowledge him. “I applied right after I heard? Got rejected, though?” Ainsley sighed. “What about you?”

Jamie glanced at Graham, who was still watching them, miffed. “When’d you hear back?”

“Like, pretty much immediately after I applied? I must’ve gotten automatically rejected? Though I don’t know for what? I thought they were looking for normal people? What vague fuckin’ criteria anyway?”

“That’s what *Graham*,” Jamie emphasized, almost gesturing to him, “said.”

Ainsley regarded him seriously for the first time. He met her gaze and looked skyward. Jamie frowned. He was rarely so obvious, though Ainsley had been rather pointedly ignoring him. Maybe she wasn’t good with social cues. “But yeah, vague criteria,” said Jamie, because she and Ainsley were really in the same boat, even though Graham didn’t know yet. “Looking for normal people, I mean. That’s literally what they said.”

“Are you familiar with a concept called lying?” asked Graham.

“No,” said Jamie. “Enjoy that paradox.”

He ignored her. “It’s a publicity stunt. They wouldn’t want completely average people to showcase because that would be boring.”

“You barely even watch YouNeek vids,” said Jamie.

“Do I need to?”

Hidgens waved off the lights and projected the vid to The Core Competencies’ new single. The three of them faced forward.

“If I take another survey, will you let me vent for a moment?” she asked Graham suddenly. The vid started to play.

He pursed his lips. “... Yes.”

“I got rejected, too,” she blurted after a minute, between Serena Sapina’s famous voice-cracking belts. She didn’t turn to face him, just watched the singer hop up and down, hands thrashing the air in her YouRide.

“Sorry,” he said after a moment, also still facing forward. Another pause. “Serious question.”

“What.”

”Don’t you get rejected from everything?”

She flicked his YouPen off his lap, not that there was anything to take notes on anyway. Hidgens was all about the experience. Forlornly, Graham watched it roll into the rows in front of him. “Are you actually that upset about it, though? The odds were impossible, practically.”

“I don’t know,” said Jamie. “It was one of those show-your-personality applications. I usually get past those, at least. You know. On the rare occasion people talk to me, they really like me initially—”

“—until they don’t,” Graham said, nodding far too readily.

“—and then I can’t sustain my likeability. But here I got the rejection email, like, right after I sent in the app. I hadn’t even uploaded a pic. Or the supplementary vid. They didn’t even get to the point where they lost interest.”

Graham sighed. “Not everyone inevitably loses interest in you. I’ve known you forever.”

And yet, she thought.

“Hard to find a replacement with an appropriately inappropriate sense of humor,” continued Graham charitably. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you get offended. You just laugh.”

“Aw,” said Ainsley, who Jamie had not realized was listening. “How long have y’all known each other?”

“Elementary school,” said Jamie, slowly. “Like second grade? Or third, depends on when you start counting.”

“This is why you’re failing Numbers,” said Graham. “Everything depends on when you start counting.”

Ainsley ignored the comment. “That’s really cute? How did y’all get close?”

“Constant exposure?” she shrugged. “We both didn’t like talking. Pretty similar people.”

“How so?”

A sight to behold: Graham, looking like he was trying to come up with a way to politely tell Ainsley to fuck off. “Our dads also did the same thing,” he said after a second. “Well, kind of. Mine worked in operations.”

“What’d your dad do?” Ainsley asked her.

“He died in childbirth,” said Jamie. Graham let out a cross between a sneeze and a cough, and some students in the front row swiveled to look at him. A girl giggled and whispered “bless

you.” Graham muttered his thanks. “Close second to ‘We lost him in the Serengeti.’” He said to Jamie.

“He lived a life of many adventures.”

“He worked in telecommunications,” said Graham matter-of-factly.

Ainsley laughed uncertainly and turned to face the front.

#

“Are you skipping the rest of the day?” asked Graham as they exited the Beauty auditorium. It usually took five minutes to leave Rock Appreciation, on account of how many people had to file through a single door, but they’d stayed a couple minutes to retrieve Graham’s YouPen. It had rolled all the way to the stage steps.

“Are you going to shame me for it?”

“I was going to suggest that you come over and we just have Chill Night right now, if you’re still feeling down, but I also don’t want a role in enabling you.”

“I was going to skip Easy Nature anyway.”

“Shameful,” said Graham, scrolling through his YouPhone, probably reading more articles for fun. Neither of them mentioned they had already started in the direction of his apartment. They got on the autowalk running into south campus. He read something that made him snort. “People are insane,” he muttered.

“What about your lab?”

“I already moved it,” he said. She looked away, watching the street signs pass. 35<sup>th</sup>, 36<sup>th</sup>, 37<sup>th</sup>. A new construction site, on the other side of which was Domoro. Graham tugged her to the right and they headed east.

“Oh, I usually turn on 38<sup>th</sup>.”

“I switch it up sometimes,” he said.

#

They took the YouLift up to his studio apartment. Jamie watched the grid of Franklin come into view as they ascended into the sky. “Do you ever feel lonely?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I like living alone.”

“I mean, like, alone in general.”

He regarded her, bemused. “That doesn’t sound like a daylight question. It’s around 11AM. Where’d that come from?”

“Or did you ever feel alone? As a kid?”

“Tom Kabara really hit you hard,” Graham observed. A couple entered the YouLift, and silence fell. The woman, who looked in her early thirties, leaned into the man, tucking her head into the space between his chin and shoulder. “Er, emotionally,” amended Graham. Jamie watched Graham’s eyes linger on the two as they exited a couple floors later. “Doesn’t everyone feel lonely? Lonely in what respect?”

They reached the 19<sup>th</sup> floor, and Graham stepped out first, turning into the left hall. “Not even romantically,” said Jamie, feeling like she was having to pick up each foot and place it in front of the other. “Like, just someone close who understands you.”

“Dating someone was also like being with a best friend, so of course I miss that.” He turned to her. “Why, are you lonely?”

“Do you think that that closeness only comes with dating someone?”

He thought about it as he waved his hand by his door. It slid open. “That’s interesting. Possibly, it would be a lot more difficult to form that kind of emotional connection without intimacy. Why not try it? You’ve never dated.”

“I’m not really... interested, I guess. But I’m also not against it,” said Jamie. “Or, I’m not interested in all of it. I like the part where you’re someone’s number one. Their person, you know? Special.”

“You’re saying you don’t have that?”

Jamie didn’t respond. Graham walked into the kitchen rather than fill the silence. Sometimes it was really irritating that she had to think so much just to talk to him. “Ugh, I’m not a Thinking major.” She heard him click the Preheat button on the oven. “Baking?”

“Yeah. Peanut butter cookies, flourless kind? I ran out.”

“Sure. Thanks. Stress baking a lot, have you?” Graham preferred baking to cooking because the former “required precision and skill.” She always reminded him not to forget elitism. “You okay? Aren’t you applying in January?”

“Yeah, but a lot goes into the apps, and I have to frontload everything so I can leave time for interviews next semester.”

“Kinda worried about you.”

“You should be worried about *you*. Loneliness and all.” She took off her YouSlips and walked into the kitchen. Graham was whisking some honey into a bowl of peanut butter. He poured in a beaten egg. The oven beeped.

She washed her hands and helped him scoop sticky chunks of batter onto aluminum foil. He was wearing the vintage *Hannibal Lecter* apron she’d given him a couple years ago. “I’D LOVE TO HAVE YOU FOR DINNER,” it said in red lettering. “That’s so small on you now. Are you even supposed to wash aprons?”

“I’m not an animal,” he said. She popped a ball of raw batter into her mouth as he lifted the aluminum foil and set it on a pan. “God, don’t do that.” Graham placed the pan into the oven, and she washed her hands.

They washed the rest of the dishes in silence, Jamie squeezing dish soap into utensils and Graham scrubbing them. And then, before she convinced herself to not say it, she turned to him. “It’s been five months. Have you talked to anyone besides Boomer about Dani? The details of it, and how it ended?”

“No,” he said, stepping away from her. “Why?”

“Just a random thought,” she said.

He furrowed his eyebrows. “I’m having trouble connecting how Dani is related to you getting rejected from the Hall.”

“Oh, that. I mean, it sucks. I don’t know what else to say.”

Neither did he, apparently, because that was the end of it.

#

Graham powered on his YouBox. “What vintage toon best distracts from sadness?”

“Something funny in an awful way.”

He put on *Politics in Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century America*. “This is the kind of comforting I do best. Delegating it to something else.”

“How upset would I have to be for you to personally comfort me?” asked Jamie. “Would that upset our equilibrium?”

“That’s an unfair implication,” said Graham. “Do you remember in seventh grade, when Mrs. Cossack gave me a zero because she thought I’d cheated? And you said if there was a lamer reason for failing a test than cheating, it’d have to be failing a test for having *not* cheated?”

Jamie laughed, then wrestled her features into a neutral expression. “Um. Somehow, I do not recall.”

“What about saying ‘join the club and shut up about it?’ when my parents were getting divorced?”

“Would it make you feel any better if I said I only was like that with you?”

“The way you phrase that implies some form of growth.” The oven beeped, and he retrieved the cookies, letting them cool on the counter.

Jamie blew a puff of air from her cheeks. “Well, you thought it was funny both those times. And Mrs. Cossack changed your grade once your mom started screaming, so everything turned out fine and you cried for nothing. And now your parents finally have a healthy relationship with a hundred thousand miles between them.” She spread her arms in a *ta-da!* gesture. “It wasn’t that serious. Nothing’s ever that serious.”

“No, it wasn’t,” said Graham rather pointedly. “So you put yourself out there, applied to Tom Kabara’s YouNeek circlejerk, and got rejected like everyone else. Join the club and shut up about it.”

“When did you learn to use the word ‘circlejerk’?” asked Jamie.

#

Between episodes three and four of *Politics*, Amanda texted her.

**Amanda:** where u and Graham at

**Jamie:** we never lunch w you on TTH, class usually. But skipping today

**Amanda:** wow, TFTINTIWHGA

Incoming YouC from **Amanda**.

“Phoning you in,” said Amanda. “You with your nerd?”

“Screw you,” said Graham to Jamie, who grinned.

Amanda passed her YouPhone around the lunch table, her friends waving through Jamie’s screen. She angled it so Graham could see, but he was watching the YouBox so she turned it back on her. The phone made its way back to Amanda, who stabilized it on the table.

She thought she would’ve been relieved that the group wasn’t talking about Hall of Humanity, but the conversation was about some YouBox show she hadn’t watched.

Conversations always seemed to be about YouBox shows she hadn’t watched.

“What’s HTOHL?” she asked, wondering who could hear her. She tried again. Treyvon’s gaze briefly flitted to her but returned somewhere off cam.

Clearly no one felt like answering, but Amanda explained that “How the Other Half Lives” was a reality show in which rich people tried being homeless for a week and the best at being homeless won half a million dollars, before she, the other girls, and Treyvon started debriefing the finale. The HTOHL enthusiasts didn’t offer her another hand into the conversation, and she felt weird about asking so she didn’t.

Graham started the next episode of *Politics*. She sat, listening to the friend group but not understanding and sipping on her Topo Chico, until someone mentioned a Tom Kabara vid and the topic steered back to the Hall.

“I applied just to see what was up,” said Girl-who-liked-Treyvon, off-cam. “I got rejected, like, immediately. Did you end up trying?” she asked Treyvon.

“Rejected, too,” he said. “Thanks, Emily.”

“Aw, you’re welcome.” She scooted over, snaked her arm behind Amanda’s neck, and patted him on the shoulder. Amanda closed her eyes. “I guess maybe they screened out people with not enough followers?” suggested Emily. “I remember they asked for my social handles before there was even a box for my name.”

“Thanks, Emily,” said Treyvon, this time more emphatically. Emily smiled. “There’s this girl in my Marketing class who had, like, 10K. Her YouNiverse is called Diary of a Nomad or something.” She laughed. “Diary of a Nobody, more like.”

Graham turned from *Politics*, his lip curled. “Do you even like these people?” he mouthed. Jamie flushed. She was more worried about whether they liked *her*.

“Maybe the acceptable ‘small social presence’ for a ‘regular person’ is like 100K.”

“I don’t think it was the orbiter count,” said Possibly-Julia. “Kacy and Luis didn’t get in either.”

“Neither did Heath, and Egg hit 31 mil yesterday. He was pretty down about it, first time he missed his ‘I am egg’ Hurl in, like, two years.”

“Wait, he hasn’t automated that?” asked Graham, turning to Jamie. “He *manually* Hurls ‘I am egg’ every day?”

“Of course he does,” said Possibly-Julia through the YouPhone. “Otherwise, what would be the point?”

#

**MOVING ON TO ROUND 2 OF #HALL OF HUMANITY!!!**

**DATE:** October 5

**ORBITERS:** 26K

SIENNASMILES

Siennators! I have the BEST new for you guys! I applied to Tom’s Hall of Humanity

and I just got the email back saying I'm moving on! It's such an easy application, guys, only takes 30 minutes so you should definitely apply and the turnaround is really quick, I hear!

**spending 30 minutes watering my plants instead of applying to #HOH (and actually getting something out the former)**

**DATE:** October 5

**ORBITERS:** 2K

GREETINSCRETINS, off-screen, tips a watering pot. Water drizzles into the soil bed of an already moist aloe vera plant. This proceeds for thirty uninterrupted minutes as the pot overflows.

**I CAN'T BELIEVE IT!!!!**

**DATE:** October 6

**ORBITERS:** 64K

SIENNASMILES

Oh my God, I'm so excited! Siennators, I'm so sorry, I'll be back soon with regular beauty content but I just couldn't wait! My channel was so small and now there are so many new people... It's crazy. Look at Tom, already out here doing things for me!

**Tips and Tricks for Getting Into #HoH**

**DATE:** October 7

**ORBITERS:** 119K

SIENNASMILES

Hi Siennators, I'm back with a highly requested advice vid on how I advanced to Round 2 of HOH! I'm technically still at that stage but I've been hearing from a lot of fans who got rejected and I don't know if you can apply twice so I *highly* recommend that you watch this vid before you send it in!

SIENNASMILES (CONT'D)

So excited to share that I have a sponsor for this vid! A lot of you have been asking how I keep the light in my eyes and I have to say, it's because I get MelaTree sleep.

If you sign up with my code, you get your  
first sleep free!

Jamie hadn't *wanted* to watch all 39 of SiennaSmiles' vids on 2x speed, but after she did that and also blazed through a value pack of Triple-Double-Stuf Oreos and all the vids in Trending, she entered #HOH into the search bar to find other people who'd advanced. She hadn't thought much of SiennaSmiles, a petite brunette who wore six-inch heels to her 9AM marketing class somewhere in Tennessee and always looked on the verge of asking you to fund her mission trip. Nice enough, but she produced standard-quality small beauty You-ser vids. Was that the kind of "normal" they were looking for?

There was also a gamer girl, RomaHD, who in a 45-minute long vid titled "HALL OF HUMANITY NEWS" mentioned "oh yeah, I'll be doing a phone interview for Hall of Humanity, pretty cool" and went right back to playing Pandemic. 15K orbiters, though her numbers were climbing by the second. There was True Believer, a 21-year-old college dropout who uploaded motivational vids from his parents' penthouse. 30K orbiters. She hadn't heard of any of these You-sers, though they all seemed to have at least tens of thousands of orbiters. Jamie couldn't say whether that was because of any criteria or she was finding the channels after other new viewers.

She returned to Tom's page. It didn't look like he'd released an app update yet, though there was a new vid she hadn't yet seen on her orbits feed. She'd forgotten she'd been expecting the vlog of his visit to FU.

TOM  
Didn't see you there! WHAT'S up, Kabara  
Krew!! How you doin'? I wanna know! How was

your day? Feeling high? Feeling low? Leave a comment down below!

Jamie wrinkled her nose. She hovered her cursor along the play bar, scanning the frames for a change of scenery, preferably one where he wasn't just talking. Tom in the kitchen. Tom in front of his house, the street signs blurred out. Tom getting into a limo. Tom walking into a giant crowd. She clicked there in case it was the FU part.

It was. The shot panned across members of the Franklin University Community, the vid playing in slow motion, capturing the moment of their recognition. He'd edited out the yells to make it sound like he was filming underwater. The sound effect faded out as his security detail shoved members to the side.

The members roared on screen, and Jamie blinked. She hadn't remembered them being nearly as dramatic. There had been an energy, a current of excitement, in the air, sure, but this was some "This is Sparta!"-level rallying cry. Jamie recalled the atmosphere being more like one of those bustling Chinese flea markets her mom had taken her to over the summer, where the vendors would heckle you from the sides. But it wasn't like Jamie been documenting Tom's visit. She'd been too focused on the You-ser at the time.

In the vid, she heard the shout of the RealityReach reporter, then the drawling tone of Powers as he began giving the answer Jamie was about to interrupt, and then...

Nothing. Her shout, her jumping onto Graham's back, her brief exchange with Tom. He always included fan interactions in his vids, and she'd thought he would include hers. He'd certainly put in less interesting moments before. She was almost certain he'd been filming it, but his exclusion of their exchange cast the memory in a sheen of unreality.

#

Jamie didn't frequent YouNite, YouNiverse's anonymous gossip forum, but today was the most active she'd ever seen it. New topics were being created by the minute, mostly requests for the dirt on smaller You-sers who'd uploaded Hall of Humanity vids. The official thread on SiennaSmiles had over 700 replies.

**YouNite**  
**Thread: SIENNASMILES, \*OFFICIAL\***

ANON: anything on Sienna?

ANON: idk, seems nice

ANON: if vanilla were a person... yawn. Next.

ANON: Her last name is Thompson. My friend went to school with her in Tennessee. Said she was a bitch.

ANON: dam... u fbi

ANON: I watch her sometimes! She's not my *favorite* beauty guru but she's not bad, just starting out. She's said some problematic things in the past and preaches a lot about sustainability while accepting fast fashion sponsorships... Hopefully she stops that now that she won't be needing the money

ANON: all fashion is fast fashion

ANON: What kind of problematic things?

**Thread: #HOH Round 2, \*OFFICIAL THREAD\***

ANON: Reply only if you've found someone not mentioned so far!

**Thread: Common themes in #HOH hopefuls?**

ANON: Have y'all noticed anything these people have in common? So far I've got nothing... Do you think it might be random?

ANON: I mean, sure we're on YouNeek but have you heard of any who's not already on there advancing?

ANON: Most of them are women. Maybe he's building a harem.

ANON: Hey guys, check out my YouNeek (my YouNiverse account is Karemg!) I post comedy sketches every week, would love the support!

ANON: ^reported for spam. Go die.

ANON: If you look at their stats, of the ones I've seen, the lowest orbiter count before posting a vid was like ten thousand. So maybe that's filtered?

ANON: would it have been sooo hard for him to release specific criteria? wasting everyone's time

ANON: I looked at his liked vids and there are a few of the people on there

ANON: dumbass he could've liked them after they got in

ANON: No way Tom Kabara's the one choosing these, you think he's got the time to watch everyone's vids?

Starting to feel eye strain, Jamie closed her laptop to stop herself from reading any further into the 23-and-counting pages of replies. She unscrewed her water bottle and took a swig. Her phone pinged with a text.

**Graham:** Do you want to go to Domoro right now? Game night ended and I'm feeling a triple espresso and 0 sleep. I don't

understand this unit and my lab partner keeps ignoring my texts while Hurling that I'm texting her.

**Jamie:** doesn't your lowest exam drop

**Graham:** Tell me you have something better to do than study.

**Jamie:** well I was on YouNite, wanna hear about it

**Graham:** I've suddenly become extremely busy.

**Graham:** Okay, fine. Clearly it's really getting to you. What happened?

**Jamie:** there's this thread on all the people who're advancing in HOH and another one where people are trying to guess the criteria

She watched the three dots of Graham's text bubble, indicating him typing, appear and disappear as he struggled to feign interest. A good friend.

**Graham:** Are there good theories?

**Jamie:** I mean besides orbiter count, which I guess is obvious...

**Jamie:** I've been stalking most of the tagged vid channels and they all seem to be his fans

**Graham:** Doesn't he have more than 50 million orbiters? I don't know if that says anything.

**Jamie:** Someone said that most of the people who've advanced have had vids liked by him before

**Jamie:** but yeah I guess

**Jamie:** I feel this urge to say something in the forum, should I

**Graham:** Don't.

**Jamie:** I'm going to

**Graham:** Is it your hobby to ask my advice just to ignore it?

She opened her YouBook again. The green menu bar and prehistoric website layout of YouNite loaded on-screen.

ANON: there could be something to that. Likes are chronological by the time vids are liked not by the date posted

ANON: oh sht I forgot

ANON: wouldn't that be messed up, if he chose people by their degree of obsession w him

ANON: what a narcissist.

ANON: ^^

ANON: idk, that's so transparent. Easily found out. This thing is sponsored, too, right, I think they'd catch on if he were only choosing his superfans.

ANON: isn't it weird that he has 50 million orbiters and I haven't found a single person on here who likes him

ANON: I mean the demographic is different on here. And we all still watch his vids for some reason

ANON: but just because other people watch him, not bc I like him. Why do we make people like this famous.. I mean I guess HOH would've just made different people famous for no reason but maybe they at least would be likable

ANON: someone on here should make a channel, we'll make them famous instead

ANON: Infiltrate his shrine and overthrow their god? That would be so funny.

ANON: how would that work tho. y wud he accept one of us

ANON: I make aesthetic art on my channel! Check it out~

ANON: how he's motivated to do anything. Public pressure. Guy deals with issues by ignoring them until he can't. How much you

wanna bet his "giveaway winners" are just people who have something on him

ANON: You mean, annoy him into adding someone to the Hall? Sounds like a reach.

ANON: more like someone calls him out on his bs until he buys his silence

ANON: lmao i guess he makes the rules anyway

ANON: well, whoever wants to take one for the team, you have like three months to get 50 million orbiters

ANON: sigh

ANON: im sure u wudn't need to match him, just enough to get noticed... but still yeah i guess the fantasy was nice while it lasted

Jamie opened a new YouNeek tab and signed in with a vintage YouMail account. On the channel were some vintage vids for Spanish projects in middle school. She deleted those.

Jamie Rien, 1 orbiter.

>>YOUNEEK SETTINGS

>>EDIT USERNAME

She deleted her name and typed "Nobody."

ERROR. USERNAME TAKEN.

Username: literally.no.one

ERROR. USERNAME TAKEN.

This was probably why everyone on YouNeek had stupid channel names like BeautyBrainsBrianna or WorthItWerther or SiennaSmiles. Jamie tried to remember ones without real names. GalPerfect. GirlzExplained. Diary of an Nomad.

Username: memoirofanobody

CHANGES SAVED.

ANON: check out memoirofanobody lmao.

ANON: lmao that was quick

ANON: start posting anti-HOH (i.e. good) content and I will

Jamie picked up her phone and navigated to “Photos,” “Recently Deleted,” and “Recover All.”

## Chapter 4

It wasn't that Jamie had expected Memoir of a Nobody to blow up overnight—she wasn't sure what she'd expected at all—but she certainly hadn't thought she would wake up to only 5 views and 1 orbiter after staying up all night editing the vlog. For all she knew, and she wasn't going to check, that one orbiter was herself.

More than 5 people had to have seen her post in YouNite. That forum had millions of hits a day, let alone when its constituents had Hall of Humanity to discuss. Sliding her YouBook back onto her desk and rolling off the bed, Jamie refreshed her YouNiverse page.

### **DAY IN THE LIFE OF A FORK UNIVERSITY STUDENT**

**DATE:** OCTOBER 7

**VIEWS:** 6

**ORBITERS:** 1

It was 2PM, six hours after she'd finished splicing together the vid clips against some basic uncopyrighted background music and uploaded her vlog. Her post in the thread would've gotten long buried by now, so if there was going to be a traffic spike it would have already happened.

### **DAY IN THE LIFE OF A FORK UNIVERSITY STUDENT**

**DATE:** OCTOBER 7

**VIEWS:** 6

**ORBITERS:** 1

The camera shakes as JAMIE makes her way around CHRISTINA'S house. JAMIE'S hand emerges as she stabilizes herself against the staircase. She nearly drops the cam when CHRISTINA grabs her from behind and drags Jamie further into the living room.

CHRISTINA  
(slurring)  
I haven't seen you in for...eee...verrrr... is  
that a vid? Hiiii... I'm Christina.

CHRISTINA passes out onto the couch. JAMIE watches her for a moment and laughs nervously before turning the camera to film people around her. The clip ends right as the edge of a mirror comes into view.

Jamie picked up the Cheez-It box by her bed and emptied the rest of the crumbs directly into her mouth. She shook the box for good measure before setting it down. Realizing that that would have been a good clip for a vid compilation, she cursed.

Her YouBook battery blinked its warning of imminent death, and Jamie reached underneath her table, untangling her mess of cords and plugging the laptop in. The screen brightened immediately, and when her eyes pulsed, she realized she'd forgotten to remove her contacts.

Legs heavy, she staggered the couple feet to the bathroom, switched out her contacts for glasses, and splashed her face with water. In the mirror, her eyes looked dry, tinged pink, the low light cutting a shadow across her expression. On returning to her room, she closed the door a little more loudly than necessary. A couple doors down, Alicia rustled in her bed, also more loudly than necessary, in the non-confrontational language of suitemates.

**Jamie:** sorry don't know if you heard but I didn't mean to slam the door

**Alicia:** no not at all! I didn't even notice

Jamie slumped back into her chair and woke up her YouBook. The screen flickered on. She pressed play, then pause, before leaning down to reach into her backpack.

Pulling out her American Studies notebook, Jamie turned to a new page. She only had to flip once. She hadn't touched the notebook since syllabus day and had only left it in her backpack half in hopes that the one day Ehries would enforce his no YouBook policy and say something useful, she would be prepared. And half because she could never remember to take it out.

"Vid Notes," she scrawled at the top of the page.

1. *More inflection in voice*
2. *Wait three seconds after starting to record so beginning doesn't get cut off*
3. *Closer scene cuts (too much silence that could've been edited out)*
4. *Longer takes*
5. *Look at the cam not the viewfinder*
6. *Stabilize cam*

By the time she got to #23, Jamie figured it'd take less time (and less cringing) to just put more effort into the next vid than analyzing the infinite problems of something so hopeless.

#### 24. *Realness*

After a moment, she crossed out the "Vid Notes." "*HOW TO BE MORE REAL*," she wrote above it in all caps. It even sounded more like a YouNeek title already.

She'd just decided her American Studies could wait until right before the final when her phone began buzzing with an incoming YouC. Her mother had impeccable timing, as always.

The usual greeting: "What are you doing?"

"Studying," said Jamie. Her hand was still on her American Studies notebook. She snapped a pic and sent it to her mom.

"Good. It's close to weekend so you have time. I'll call again."

"Okay," said Jamie, already re-opening YouNeek. She'd minimized the tab—force of habit—as though her mom could sense the presence of distractions over the phone, five hundred miles away. The last time Jamie had tried to call her mom, she'd been stretched across the sofa, so hammered that it'd taken ten minutes to sync her fingers to her brain long enough to dial the number. Thank God she hadn't picked up.

#

It had been twelve hours since she'd posted her first vid and Jamie still had only one follower. SiennaSmiles—Jamie had chosen the college student as a benchmark because three months was not enough time to pick up any marketable skill and fortunately Sienna seemed to have none—was already at 150K. Content was not going to be how she would get noticed quickly. Jamie needed the YouNeek algorithm.

Based on the top vids in Trending and in Sienna's orbit feed, asking strangers personal questions was in. Food challenges. A ton of milking #HOH. Animated analysis vids.

"Storytimes," or 45-minute long vids of You-sers attacking each other's character or psychoanalyzing what went wrong in their childhoods. Sienna had just uploaded "PART ONE OF WHERE I CAME FROM: THE SACRIFICE," starting the timeline at the point her grandmother cut dairy out of her life.

She flipped to the next page in the notebook and wrote “*TRAUMA BRAINSTORM*” at the top. Her YouPhone buzzed. Graham had sent her his latest survey.

**Jamie:** you really said we’re gonna suffer together huh

**Graham:** Do you think this is hazing for Brains?

**Jamie** liked this message.

**Jamie:** oh also are we doing something tonight?

**Graham:** Didn’t we reschedule it to yesterday?

**Jamie:** right

**Jamie:** do you have something though

**Graham:** Yeah, sorry. We moved Game Night. Next week?

Maybe Graham had rescheduled because he’d double-booked. Yesterday must’ve been convenient for him, then. She imagined Marco and Klaus, his friends, finishing their peanut butter cookies.

#

It’s a Saturday afternoon on the Franklin campus. JAMIE’s face peers into her phone.

JAMIE

Uh... hi.

JAMIE fumbles with the cam. She turns in a circle to capture a 360-degree view of her surroundings. She’s standing outside the FU student center by the tables with striped umbrella covers.

JAMIE

Today’s trauma: It’s a beautiful Sunday morning, and I’m spending it on campus interviewing the people whose opinion no one

asks for, members of the Franklin University Community. That's our president's inclusive term for "students." "Members." I started using the phrase because it was funny but now it's stuck. So maybe he was onto something.

JAMIE catches sight of PASSERBY #1, a girl who is stealing curious glances at JAMIE, who is holding her phone high in the air. JAMIE calls out to her, getting louder every time she trips over a word.

JAMIE

(to PASSERBY #1)

I'm interviewing members of the Franklin University Community. Casual, not for anything school. Just for kicks. Wanna be in it?

PASSERBY #1

Oh, maybe. What kind of interview?

JAMIE

Hang on. I have no mic budget, so I'm going to stand really close to you. Is that okay?

PASSERBY #1

Uh—

Holding the cam gives her courage. JAMIE closes the distance. The two girls are now less than a foot apart. JAMIE smiles, realizing that the more uncomfortable she can make someone else feels, the more at ease she becomes.

JAMIE

Great! First question, what's a secret you've never told anyone?

PASSERBY #1

(looking over her shoulder)

Uh, I don't know. I don't know you like that.

JAMIE

Sorry, too personal? What about "what are you up to right now?"

PASSERBY #1  
Is this... a weird way... of asking me out?

JAMIE  
(losing confidence)  
What? No! God. Sorry. Uh, I have to... go to  
class.

Wincing—it was a Saturday—Jamie put her phone to sleep, mumbled another apology, and started the ten-minute walk toward the complete opposite side of campus in hopes of recovering her ability to look people in the eye. She solicited three more members of the Franklin University Community, who didn't spare her a glance but quickened their pace.

Frustration mounting with each head shake, Jamie debated heading back and scrapping the vid. Then, around Thinking, a girl with skin the shade of coffee creamer and a complexion two shades darker approached Jamie.

PASSERBY #2  
Is this going online? Like, YouNeek?

JAMIE  
Yeah, but if you'd like I can blur you out—

PASSERBY #2  
No! I'd love to be in it. I just asked  
because I'm on YouNeek. Gina Marquez. I do  
beauty tutes. At-gina-mia on YouPic.

PASSERBY #2 adjusts Jamie's hand with the phone for a higher angle and beams, waving.

JAMIE  
(flustered)  
Uh, okay. I'm doing a casual interview, so.  
I guess I'll jump into the questions?

PASSERBY #2  
Shoot!

JAMIE

What's on your mind right now?

PASSERBY #2

Like, anything? That's kinda broad.

JAMIE

Aren't you a Thinking major? Try that.

JAMIE winces, wondering if Realness, for her, entails being an asshole. Maybe the rule is it's okay as long as she's funny.

PASSERBY #2

(embarrassed)

Uh—

JAMIE

Or, what're you outside Thinking for? We could talk about that.

PASSERBY #2 looks at JAMIE, back at the ticking seconds of the phone recording her, and then back at JAMIE.

JAMIE

You don't have to talk about that if you don't want to. I can keep looking—

PASSERBY #2

Um, I'm just waiting for office hours. With Paul—I mean Professor Geiger.

JAMIE

What for?

PASSERBY #2

(looking over her shoulder)

I don't... I just didn't do well on the last exam. It's a Thinking class. I'm a major. I... Um. Sorry. I keep stuttering. Sorry. I was just gonna ask him some questions. I swear I'm not stupid, I know Thinking is supposed to be easy, but he just goes so fast and I had to miss class a couple times and I'm super behind. Honestly it's really overwhelming.

JAMIE

Uh, I'm sorry. Sounds rough. Thanks.

Jamie stopped recording. The girl, whose voice was starting to crackle, sounded like she was on the verge of a breakdown, and not the interesting kind. Jamie blinked, surprised at the judgment.

"Actually, you mentioned blurring out my face earlier," said the girl. "Is that still possible? To, like, keep me anonymous?"

"I may or may not have the technical skills for that," admitted Jamie, "but if not I won't include the bit."

"Thanks," said the girl as she walked into Thinking.

#

PASSERBY #3 is in the middle of crossing You®, toward Numbers.

JAMIE

Hey, what's the weirdest thing that's happened to you recently?

PASSERBY #3 glances in every direction, confirming someone is actually asking him a question as he crosses a street. JAMIE is the only one looking directly at him.

PASSERBY #3

Sorry... uh. I'm blanking.

PASSERBY #4 walks up to JAMIE from her left.

PASSERBY #4

I mean, I went to a party last night. It's been kind of a slow week. But the party was really lit. There was a lot of beer. We got wasted. This girl made out with, like, three guys and her BF dumped her on the spot. So messy.

JAMIE

Are you a freshman?

PASSERBY #4

How did you know?

JAMIE

No reason. Thanks for talking!

JAMIE continues walking and swivels the cam to the right.

JAMIE

Hey! I'm filming a vid for fun, just been asking people a question: what's the weirdest thing that's happened to you recently?

PASSERSBY #5 and #6, two guys dressed in the same outfit of T-shirts and basketball shorts, are sitting on the steps of the gym.

PASSERBY #5

I mean, my life's kind of boring.

JAMIE

If you don't talk about yourself, who else is gonna talk about you?

PASSERBY #6

(to PASSERBY #5)

You could talk about class?

PASSERBY #6

We're Content majors.

JAMIE doesn't recognize either of them.

PASSERBY #5

Oh, yeah, like yesterday's? That was kinda funny. I mean, we do these current events and someone said his grandpa died. Except he'd already used that as an excuse to get out of the interview project two weeks ago so it was really awkward when Steinhardt started cross-examining him.

PASSENGER #6

Big word, dude. And, yeah, like, the next current event was about this serial penguin thief. Wild.

JAMIE

Like from the zoo?

PASSENGER #5

Yeah, Franklin Zoo, I guess. He's like, Franklin-famous. All over the local news.

JAMIE

Is he trying to ransom them or something?

PASSERBY #6

Maybe? But I don't know if he made any demands.

PASSERBY #5

When you think about it... What is he doing with those penguins? Sick stuff. Anyway, the other current event was on a Florida man, so, you know.

JAMIE

You know what, actually. I do.

### **ASKING 30 STUDENTS HOW THEY'VE BEEN**

**DATE:** October 8

**VIEWS:** 140

**ORBITERS:** 3

#

"So things are kind of snowballing," she said to Boomer as she settled into her chair.

He stretched his arms behind him, cracking the joints. She wondered how many days straight he'd been sitting behind his desk. "You are referring to initiating conversations?"

"No," she wanted to say, "my whopping three orbiters." But she hadn't yet mentioned YouNeek, which would be a pain to explain. Instead, she nodded. "I said something funny in

class after we spoke last week. Well, maybe no one else thought it was funny. Maybe I need to work on the delivery.”

“Was it just the once?”

She recalled Tom Kabara’s surprised expression when she’d introduced herself on Graham’s back. And all the people, Ainsley and Amanda and her friends, she’d met as a consequence of shouting the first thought that’d entered her head, as he’d suggested. “I mean, I talked to, like, five times my usual number of people. But it was all kind of momentum from this one thing, I think.”

“How have you felt about it?”

“It feels a little unreal,” she admitted. “Like, I had so much trouble with it before that I’m not sure it’ll last.” She thought of the YouC with Amanda’s group, which had ended with them forgetting that Jamie was there. For five minutes, Jamie had watched members of the Franklin University Community glide in and out of Amanda’s YouPhone frame before she’d hung up the call. “The panic doesn’t really go away. I was interviewing strangers this weekend because I thought I was getting better and it was actually the same kind of hell. Felt like I’d reverted.”

He didn’t prompt with another question, so she continued. “But some interviews were okay. It seems easier when I catch myself off guard because then I don’t have to psych myself up. And when I catch people off guard, I guess. Then it’s like we’re both uncomfortable and things are fair.”

“Did you feel good about yourself after the interviews?” asked Boomer. “What were they for, incidentally?”

She paused. “Just a personal project,” she said.

#

**PART TWO OF WHERE I CAME FROM: THE RISK HE TOOK**

**VIEWS:** 589K

**ORBITERS:** 221K

SIENNASMILES

So that's how Grandpa met Grandma in the condiments aisle. And he was allergic to peanut butter the whole time.

#

**THE MOST BORING ORIGIN STORY**

JAMIE

Uh... hi. I figured I might do an intro vid. Inspired by what's the rage with other You-sers. My origin story, all that.

JAMIE leans forward and sets the cam further away on the ground. She sits, cross-legged, her back against a black trash can.

JAMIE

You may be wondering why I'm sitting against a trash can, and to that I say, the lighting is good and also I live here.

JAMIE (CONT'D)

Oh wait, I guess you already know I have an apartment from my first vid. But nah. Beds are overdone. Tables are too formal. And I don't trust sofas. What do they think they are, uncomfortable beds?

JAMIE pulls out a green notebook and flips to a dog-eared page.

JAMIE

I thought I might make this a storytime, you know. And so I was brainstorming some past trauma I could talk about until I remembered I'm not an interesting person.

JAMIE turns the notebook toward the camera. She has written "Trauma Brainstorm" and "1. Am student. 2. Am privileged. 3. No Dad."

JAMIE

Not that you asked, but if you did wonder what happened to my dad, basically he sailed too far west and fell off the end of the earth. Obviously took some time for me to recover, but it helps that he went out historically.

JAMIE

Anyway, my storytime goes thus: I was born, probably. Sometime after that, I started this channel. This morning I tried to want to do actual work and didn't manage either. Then I tried to make content off other interesting people but found their lives also weren't that interesting. The most exciting thing I've done in the past year was throw a rager and that was way over my excitement threshold and also like five months ago.

JAMIE (CONT'D)

So I'm feeling kind of defeated. That's it for the storytime. Because I'm a normal person and this is how average people who aren't anyone live.

### **THE MOST BORING ORIGIN STORY**

**DATE:** October 11

**VIEWS:** 250

**ORBITERS:** 6

**Deepspaceixtynine:** at least you're honest. Kind of anti-HOH if that's the angel you're going for, pretty funny in an ironic, not-try-hard sort of subversion

**Sarah's Story:** Hey! Check out my channel! I make vid!

#

**Join my anti-#HOH party, who needs antiprom**

**DATE:** October 13

JAMIE

Uh, hi. Today's trauma is that I woke up this morning. Also, back at the trash can because that vid got like 100 more views than my others and maybe that's the secret

sauce. Also, one of my three comments yesterday mentioned I could go somewhere with anti-HOH content, and what can I say other than I do it for the people.

JAMIE (CONT'D)

I mean, let me know the specifics of what you want me to talk about, but overall I think it's a scam. Who let Tom Kabara define who's normal anyway? And he's definitely not choosing normal people if most of them have YouNeek presences. Does anyone know people who aren't already on YouNeek that've advanced?

**VIEWS:** 498  
**ORBITERS:** 10

#

“You know what, I may be feeling a bit better,” Jamie told Boomer during their next session.

“Physically? Mentally?” he asked, getting to the bottom of his notepad and flipping it over.

“Mentally. Physically, I am deteriorating,” she said. A beat. “Um, but not in an alcoholic way. I’m still not drinking,” she clarified.

Boomer didn’t write anything down and she wondered why.

“Also, will I ever get to read the notes you write?” she asked. “Or is the notebook just a prop to show you’ve been actively listening and really you’ve been just doodling the whole time?”

Boomer held his notepad closer to himself. “Why do you ask?”

“If you were taking notes, and not hurting my feelings,” said Jamie, “I guess I’d want to be more careful about how I phrase things in case they sound bad.”

“That’s a good rule of thumb when considering saying anything, I would think.” He wrote a word down. “Please elaborate on your physical and mental state.”

“I started making YouNeek vids,” said Jamie. “Mostly short bits, nothing that involved. Except the shorter the vids get, the more time I spend making them, for some reason, and I fucked up my sleep schedule, probably. Every morning it’s like I got run over by a train and every night when it’s time, I just don’t feel like sleeping anymore.”

“What do you talk about in your videos?”

“Talk some thoughts into existence. Like how you suggested journaling, I guess.”

“Well, journaling is a private exercise,” said Boomer. “Do people watch these videos?”

“It’s anonymous, sort of,” said Jamie. “There are only like 10 people in my orbit.”

Boomer wrote down. “Why do you think you like creating videos?”

“I like being Real. I just talk honestly.”

“You don’t create these videos because you want to be famous?”

“No.” She frowned. “Of course not. Why would you think that? Isn’t that a pretty sweeping assumption?”

“Why do you have to post them publicly?”

“I mean, I don’t want to be speaking into the *void*. Ideally, someone listens. But it’s normal to want an audience.”

“You don’t care about increasing your orbiter count?”

“No,” she said. “I mean, it would be nice, but that’s not the point.” She watched him write. “It’s normal. Ask anyone else and they’d care, too. Why do you look skeptical?”

“I am neither approving nor disapproving,” said Boomer.

“Posting vids makes me feel like I’m getting somewhere. I enjoy the activity itself,” she insisted. “I think they’re making me feel better,” she said again, and they sat in silence for a moment. She listened to the uneven beat of his ceiling fan. “At what point will I know to stop seeing you?”

“We will come to an understanding,” said Boomer.

“Would you miss me?” asked Jamie to make him uncomfortable.

“There is no right answer to that question,” said Boomer.

“I’ll miss how utterly impossible you are to provoke,” said Jamie.

“Hm,” said Boomer noncommittally. “Tell me a little more about your videos.”

#

**how not to get into #HOH**

**DATE:** October 23

JAMIE

Have a personality beyond “I like Tom Kabara.”

The vid ends.

**VIEWS:** 1.2K

**ORBITERS:** 59

**Miriamm\_:** ur like the anti-SiennaSmiles

**memoirofanobody** liked this comment.

**memoirofanobody:** it’s bc the username  
JamieDoesnotendorsehappiness was already taken

#

**How not to get into #HOH (part 2)**

**DATE:** October 26

JAMIE

Be a normal boring person instead of a  
famous boring person.

**Miriamm\_**: ur underrated & real

When her next vid got more views but didn't increase her orbiter count, Jamie thought of Miriamm\_. Famous people always had that story of that one person who believed in them, usually a teacher or best friend or mother, and wouldn't it be funny if hers was some random twelve-year-old in Mississippi.

#

"I saw you'd entered my YouNiverse orbit," said Jamie when Graham rounded the corner in Neuroscience. She leaned back into the red cushions, closing her strained eyes. She'd spent all weekend and most of her classes editing vids and jotting notes for future shots. Probably she could've just stayed home but something about showing up to class without paying attention felt like a moral step up. Also, if she hadn't had to walk to campus, she really would've been staring at screens for a day straight.

She yawned. "Did you see it in your Recommended or...?"

"You told me the YouNiverse name," said Graham.

"Oh." She yawned again.

"Have you been sleeping?"

"Are you saying I look tired?"

"Not at first but I guess I am now." Jamie opened her eyes just to narrow them at him. "Keep making your bad decisions as long as you drop dead *after* coming to my seminar," he said. "I still can't believe they're letting me lead it as an undergrad." He extended his hand, and, when she didn't grab it, yanked her upright. "Get up. I'm hungry."

She made a mental note to check when that was. Had she agreed to show, or had he just assumed? Jamie barely felt like she had enough time for vids. “Deli?” She swung her backpack over her shoulder. It sagged with the weight of her YouBook, the Numbers textbooks that she used in place of a tripod, and Alicia’s YouPad, which she’d been using to play back vid clips as she edited on a different device.

“Sure.”

They reached the autowalk toward Main. “With Amanda and them?”

“If you want.”

“I’m tired, honestly. We can get the food and hide.”

“Yes, I see you’ve been busy. I watched the recent videos.”

“The short ones?”

“Yes, the ones on the Hall? They seem different, which I guess is good.” Passing You®, they hopped off the autowalk. Deli-Shus was one building to the right. “They seem a bit low effort, though,” he added as they slunk into the side entrance.

Jamie checked the deli for any of Amanda’s friends while scanning the hummus wrap. “When you can’t do, just claim you weren’t trying. I’m going anti-You-ser. No fancy editing or promos or selling myself or coming up with anything original, just subverting other people’s stuff. Mostly SiennaSmiles’.”

“Who?”

She waved dismissively. “Just some random college You-ser who I can’t figure out why is famous now.”

“So, every You-ser?” Graham looked toward the ceiling, and she followed his gaze to a gaping hole in one of the tiles. One of Tom’s first vids had featured a rat scurrying in the deli’s

bathroom—maybe it was still hanging around, unaware of its fame. “She made the Hall, didn’t she?”

“She didn’t get rejected,” said Jamie reluctantly. “Ongoing process.”

“What’re you trying to do,” said Graham, like he didn’t even have the energy to phrase it as a question. “You already got rejected.”

“There are people who thought of another way to get in. Like a wildcard. Or fan favorite. If enough people say something, I mean.”

“Public pressure?”

“Sometimes he does that for giveaways, gives out extra merch if people pimp their trauma in the comments and a lot of people keep tagging him.”

“Somehow he doesn’t strike me as the type to be particularly receptive to being bullied into action.”

“You don’t know Tom Kabara.”

“Neither do any of you.” They settled into a corner booth. “So, say by some grace of God you manage a force-add into the Hall. You get a lot of orbiters. Then what?”

“It’s not about the number,” she said. “I’m just trying to make a point.”

“Really. What’s the point?”

“Pave the way for better You-ser content? So the platform feels less fake?”

“The current platform seemed good enough for you to obsess over,” he said. Graham tore open the plastic wrap around his chicken salad sourdough and brought the sandwich to his mouth. “I take it you will not be monetizing your videos?”

Jamie opened her mouth, then closed it. She opened it again. Paused. “Just eat your sandwich,” said Jamie. “Weren’t you hungry?”

#

JAMIE and GRAHAM sit in the corner booth of the DELI.

JAMIE

Uh... hi. Today's trauma: I'm here with my long-suffering friend Graham who's not really about YouNeek so this is mainly trauma for him. Today we're doing a review vid.

GRAHAM

(looking around confusedly)  
Of... sandwiches?

JAMIE

Nope, we're reviewing men. On a dating app.

GRAHAM

That sounds like a lot of release forms.

JAMIE

I don't think people show faces in this kind of vid. Mostly they just read aloud some conversations.

GRAHAM

How far is this review going, anyway? Do you also go on a date with them? Am I there with you? And we sit across him like we're judges and it's an interview? Because that's pretty cruel... and I guess good entertainment.

GRAHAM (CONT'D)

My answer is no, by the way. In case that wasn't clear.

GRAHAM (CONT'D)

Also, how will you screen-record us swiping if you're using the camera to film right now?

JAMIE covers the screen with her hand. The scene cuts to JAMIE and GRAHAM sitting outside on the lawn, having switched to using GRAHAM'S phone.

GRAHAM

See, what would you do without me?

JAMIE

Less editing, probably. Anyway, I'm downloading YouUp.

GRAHAM

I mean, are you sure? You did delete it for a reason.

JAMIE

Thank you, Graham, for revealing more about me than I was comfortable with.

GRAHAM

This video is revealing more about me than I'm comfortable with. I'm on camera. You see my face.

JAMIE

You're right. This vid is also revealing more about you than I'm comfortable with.

GRAHAM

I am your *guest*.

JAMIE

Smoke break.

JAMIE's hand covers the screen, signaling another scene change. Now the two are sitting on one of the benches outside FRANKLIN LIBRARY, which looks deserted.

JAMIE

We're back! I've got A Hopeless Place loaded. Decided against YouUp.

GRAHAM

A what?

JAMIE

That's the name. Like "we found love in 'a hopeless place.'" From that vintage song. AHP is newer than the other ones.

JAMIE

(to cam)

As Graham mentioned earlier, I've used YouUp before and wanted a clean slate for the vid. Anyway, what's different about AHP is that everyone on it is realistic and agrees that love isn't real. On your profile you put your photos, a bio, a couple hobbies, and your worst characteristics so people can decide if those are deal breakers in the long run.

GRAHAM

Jesus.

JAMIE

Probably not here. Anyway, here we go. I'm loading in some photos I chose.

The vid cuts to an in-app recording. JAMIE drops in three photos. The first picture is a headshot against the trees near the NEUROSCIENCE BUILDING. The second is of her in the air, mid-bungee jump and face contorted in sheer terror. In the third picture, Jamie is lying face down in the snow.

In the text box for her bio, JAMIE enters "two truths one lie."

GRAHAM:

Ha. Nice. Hobbies: YouNeek, writing, antagonizing me. Or maybe don't include a man's name. Or say I'm your brother. Your worst characteristics... Loud. Grating. Can't read the room. Doesn't know where the line is.

JAMIE

Cheated on a big exam when I didn't need the points but just wanted people to think I was smarter than I was.

GRAHAM is silent.

JAMIE

Oh wait, that was you. Whoops.

GRAHAM's hand reaches over to block the screen this time. The next clip starts with him removing his hand again to a different backdrop. JAMIE and GRAHAM are inside THE NEUROSCIENCE BUILDING.

GRAHAM

We've been at this for a bit. So far I've learned that on this app if you like someone you keep them on your roster, or something like that, and if you don't like someone, instead of swiping left, you... drag their picture into a trash can. It's called discarding. So far I've also learned that this app is messed up and that Jamie has no filter and no standards.

JAMIE

(distractedly)

It doesn't pretend to be anything other than what it is. It's refreshing.

GRAHAM

What was wrong with Edgar? You didn't even read his bio.

JAMIE

I used to read the bios. They're all disappointing. Anyway, his name's Edgar and he's 22, so that's already irresponsible.

#

**Regular girl attempts 10 bowls of pasta challenge**

**DATE:** October 31

**VIEWS:** 822

**ORBITERS:** 71

The scene begins with JAMIE reclining in a red booth. She has one plate in front of her.

JAMIE

(quietly burping)

I'm full.

The vid ends.

"Can I have ten to-go boxes, please?" asked Jamie, wanting to disappear into the booth of Ma Mia. The waiter looked at her, sitting alone with nine and a half plates of pasta, with

unspoken disappointment. Her face burned. She almost regretted not asking Graham. He would definitely not have agreed to come, but if he had, maybe he would have been a social buffer.

At least she was set for the next week (two days) of stress-eating pasta carbonara while watching her stagnating view count. What was she doing wrong?

#

**SIENNASMILES**  
**ORBITERS: 544K**

#

**Regular morning routine of someone who isn't a psychopath**

**DATE:** November 3

**VIEWS:** 846

**ORBITERS:** 73

The vid opens to a close-up of JAMIE's groggy face. An alarm, the sound of an emergency government warning, is blaring in the background. She yawns and stretches in bed before rubbing the crust out of her eyelids.

JAMIE:

This was not a You-ser morning. Meaning I woke up like this, meaning I didn't actually get up earlier, set up a cam, make myself look more presentable, and pretend to wake up again. The morning is a time of vulnerability for everyone. That and on the toilet. Stop lying.

JAMIE films the clock on her nightstand. It reads 12:08PM.

JAMIE:

I'm a senior so my first class is at 9 and my first alarm was at 9. I've been snoozing this one for 8 minutes. The sound used to scare Alicia all the time but now she just doesn't care about government warnings. And she's used to it.

The vid cuts to a shot of the ceiling fan, as the phone has been set on the bed. In the background is JAMIE quietly screaming as

she knocks something off the table in her rush to prepare her things.

The next cut has JAMIE at the fridge, removing a container of hummus.

JAMIE

I like to wake up early to start the day  
right with the balanced breakfast I deserve.  
Your body is a temple and how you treat it  
reflects how you respect yourself.

JAMIE spoons some hummus out from the container and licks it straight off the spoon.

#

**Exercising with Graham and by that I mean  
stalling in the gym**

**DATE:** November 6

**VIEWS:** 900

**ORBITERS:** 77

GRAHAM

Jesus, Jamie, do you even want to hang out  
with me when you're not filming?

JAMIE

I'm never not filming, so no.

JAMIE turns to the weight rack and remembers something.

JAMIE

Oh, also, you know that in-person study you  
linked me? Does the Neuro department let  
people film them?

GRAHAM

Just do your set.

JAMIE

Is that how you're training me?

GRAHAM holds out a weight and she reaches for it.

GRAHAM

Stand up and take it properly or you'll hurt yourself.

JAMIE

Then I could use it for the thumbnail.

GRAHAM

The what?

JAMIE

The preview image for the vid.

JAMIE grabs the weight from GRAHAM and pitches sideways, wincing. She drops the weight.

JAMIE

Ow. I think I crushed my finger. Did you get it?

GRAHAM

You're insane. All of you.

**MitsukiChaos** on "**Exercising with Graham and by that I mean stalling in the gym**": lmao you have such an athletic build I thought you'd know it all in the gym

**memoirofanobody** and 32 others liked this comment.

**memoirofanobody**: Nobody is more surprised than I am that I'm not more competent than I am.

**libraqueeeen**: Graham looks like a kpop star! Cutie!

**memoirofanobody** and 20 others liked this comment.

**memoirofanobody**: Lol I can't wait to hold this over his head.

**HJT292**: r you dating?

**memoirofanobody**: No

**gamercisco** on "**regular girl attempting 10 bowls of pasta challenge**": as expected haha but at least you're honest. You have a nice smile.

**memoirofanobody** liked this comment.

**memoirofanobody**: Thank you!

**AmBrielle** on "**DAY IN THE LIFE OF A FORK UNIVERSITY STUDENT**": omg when you see it

**LanceVance:** Wait, can you explain what I'm supposed to be seeing?

Jamie wanted to ask but also wanted to seem like she'd done whatever "it" was on purpose. She'd just wait for someone to give him a timestamp.

**HJT292** on "the most boring origin story": feet pictures

**HJT292** on "Regular morning routine of someone who isn't a psychopath": feet pictures

**HJT292** on "DAY IN THE LIFE OF A FORK UNIVERSITY STUDENT": feet pictures. Pleez?

#

**SIENNASMILES**  
**ORBITERS:** 667K

#

**YouNite**  
**Thread: November thread for #HOH discussion**

ANON: hey i'm the one doing anti-HOH vids at memoirfanobody, please join the movement

ANON: Oh, I remember you! Gunning for anti-SiennaSmiles?

ANON: ur still going? Kinda a long shot, doesn't it start january? I mean gud on u tho

ANON: ^^^reported for spam. self-promoters can go die

## Chapter 5

“Most of the commenters are pretty nice and supportive,” said Jamie to the top of Boomer’s head. She wondered if she should say something about the bald spot. Maybe he couldn’t do anything about it, but if it were Jamie, she’d want to know. Maybe Boomer had no one else in his life to keep him grounded. “I hear that’s how it is until you hit a million orbiters. So, good for now.”

“Shall we revisit the topic of your more long-standing relationships?”

“Mom and Graham? Lots of non-conversations, still, but nothing’s changed.”

“And your father? What happened to him?”

“Why do you ask?”

“You seem to have been avoiding a straight answer,” said Boomer. As she opened her mouth to question that, he elaborated: “In our first session, you said his friends jumped off a cliff so he did, too.”

“That was a good one,” said Jamie. “Do you mind if I reuse it?”

“I... do not think that would be productive.”

“He actually was training to become a magician but accidentally disappeared himself. It’s a dangerous trade.”

“Jamie.”

“Or why not let’s talk about my alcoholism. You know, what I came in for?”

“Jamie.”

“You have a bald spot *riiiight* there,” she said, pointing.

#

In Rock Appreciation, Graham plucked her phone from her fingers, shoved it into her backpack, and tugged on her “KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON” keychain to zip the backpack closed. “Enough,” he said. “You’re addicted to A Hopeless Place.”

“I’m not,” said Jamie. “And before you tell me that sounds like something an addict would say, just know I’m going to reply with ‘anything would sound like something an addict would say.’”

She reached down to unzip her backpack, but Graham yanked it under his seat. “Sometimes I feel like I’m not a necessary part of conversations with you,” he said.

Jamie ignored him. “They walk among us.”

He shot her one of his “See?” looks. “You have a problem.”

“Oh, so many.”

“That was the third time I’d seen Edgar’s face on your phone, and when *I* am recognizing people from *your* AHP, you know you have exhausted all the men on this campus. Give it a rest.”

“I’m gonna post another vid on it. With another spin. It’s research,” said Jamie, her right leg trying to hook the backpack toward herself. Her ‘Boots and Graham’s unbranded, dusty white sneakers rammed into each other repeatedly in what must’ve looked to the people behind them like the most violent game of footsie. Jamie’s mom had always said ‘Boots made Jamie look like she was wearing black bricks on her feet, to which Jamie would now say, “exactly.” “Give,” she hissed.

Graham sighed as Jamie reached down and used her hands to wrestle the bag from between their feet. “I refuse to do the video with you.”

“What vid?” asked Ainsley, to the left of Jamie.

They both turned to look at her. Even her smile looked like a question. Graham sighed again, resigning himself to face Hidgens.

“Buzzkill,” said Jamie, trying to meet Ainsley’s eyes for intervals longer than two seconds. The shade of light green almost hurt to look at, and she eyed Ainsley’s neatly cropped band tee. The Buy-Ins. “It’s fine. Wanna do the vid with me instead? We’ll make it a party.”

“Like a real party?” asked Ainsley.

“A rager,” said Jamie, watching for Graham’s reaction. His mouth tightened slightly, though he did tend to purse his lips when concentrating anyway.

“Does he not like parties?”

“Oh, it’s not actually a real party. I just meant we’d have fun without him doing the vid. It just rubs him the wrong way when I talk about the last one because I was... messy.” The last time she’d talked to a stranger about it had been at Christina’s party, but Ainsley seemed like the partying type. Jamie searched her expression for any sign of approval.

She didn’t seem turned off, at least. “What’s the vid on?”

“AHP,” said Jamie. “The app. You heard of it?”

When Hidgens finally set them free, Graham was the first person of the hundred people taking Rock Appreciation to pluck his legs from the cramped auditorium seating and make his way to the exit. “Have fun, he said over his shoulder to Jamie.

“You’re not coming to lunch?”

“Do y’all get lunch at this time?” asked Ainsley, widening her eyes and unnerving Jamie. As if eye contact wasn’t already difficult enough. “Ooh, can I crash the party?”

“Have fun,” repeated Graham to Jamie.

#

**Self-sabotaging on a hopeless place**

**DATE:** November 14

**VIEWS:** 899

**ORBITERS:** 78

JAMIE and AINSLEY are sitting against a dark blue dumpster. The angle is slightly upward, as the vid is being recorded from a device set on the ground.

JAMIE

Uh... hi. Today's trauma: talking to your classmates in college.

AINSLEY

(beaming)

Agree, though remember that's how you make friends? Put yourself out there?

JAMIE

Uh... Right. Anyway. This is Ainsley. We... uh, I know her from my class last period. She's subbing for Graham in the vid today. Apparently she's more familiar with A Hopeless Place, too. Do you have it up?

AINSLEY

Oh, oops, hang on? I gotta change some settings?

JAMIE covers the cam.

"What settings?" asked Jamie, craning her neck to see Ainsley's phone. "Or do you want to use my AHP? I can screen-record and you film from your phone? Or you could just email me the clips instead."

"The preferences?" Ainsley navigated to her profile and checked WOMEN as well on PREFERRED SEX.

"Oh, you're bi?"

Ainsley glanced at her. "Oh, who can say?" she said. "But that's how you scope out the competition. It gives you more options?"

“Were you wanting to say that to the cam?”

She waved her hand dismissively. “Keep it mysterious?” said Ainsley.

AINSLEY

Ainsley’s sexual preference is mysterious so she’s checked all the boxes? And discarded no one?

JAMIE

You have a knack for suspense.

AINSLEY

Thank you? Ooh, look, it’s a mirror selfie? Those are popular, right?

JAMIE

The challenge today is to be as weird as possible to people without them discarding you. Or catching on. So, weird within reason.

AINSLEY covers the screen. Clip ends.

“Should we maybe brainstorm first?” she asked.

“I mean, I was thinking on the spot so it’s more natural.”

“But how would you know if that’d be interesting?”

“Um, I kind of just hope for the best. I mean, there’s a good chance my life won’t get interesting either but I’m still here. Waiting for the day.”

She nodded. “Sure, okay? Whatever you prefer?”

AINSLEY

What should I say to Thomas? His flaws are short-temperedness, introversion, and hates feeling trapped?

JAMIE

Ask him if he wants to go on a road trip with you.

AINSLEY  
He said "depends, where to?"

JAMIE  
South America.

AINSLEY  
"That's far?" From both of us, I guess?

JAMIE  
"I want to get to know you better, Todd. And you won't even need to pack, I have a lot of menswear."

AINSLEY  
"Would you wanna just come over and chill?"

JAMIE  
Tommy, I'm very hot. I don't know how to do that.

AINSLEY  
"We could watch a movie even? Whatever you want? I don't think I have time for a road trip but sure we can get to know each other better in other ways?"

JAMIE  
Actually, I'm a very flawed person. Are you sure?

AINSLEY  
"Positive? I like you a lot? You seem really cool? What about tonight?"

JAMIE  
Are you sure?

AINSLEY  
"Yes?"

JAMIE  
I'm saving myself until marriage.

The chat ends.

#

**DAY IN THE LIFE OF A FORK UNIVERSITY STUDENT**

**VIEWS:** 1.2K

**ORBITERS:** 92

**Gorgia** on "DAY IN THE LIFE OF A FORK UNIVERSITY STUDENT": dude  
**@Tom Kabara** it's your hometown

**Olix202:** everyone tag **@Tom Kabara** so he sees it

**\_BeeB:** **@Tom Kabara** I know you get a million tags at any  
given second but wait til you see it!!

**bearGrillz:** see wut

**pingu** on "how not to get into #HOH": were you rejected to HOH or  
something

**3 likes.**

**Yesu!\_** on "how not to get into #HOH": is this the anti-HOH  
movement lol i'm on board, sick of tom's face at this p

**bvlvkn:** she has less than 100 orbiters lol... doomed from the  
start but idc

**ladiladi:** AHOH?

**vruml1:** Dregs of Humanity. DOH.

**JelahAna:** Failures of Humanity. FOH.

**KristnSlug:** omggggggg foh like fuck outta here

**memoirofanobody** liked this comment.

**SadenXX:** fall of humanity, how about

**memoirofanobody** liked this comment.

**memoirofanobody:** **@Tom Kabara** it's official  
<3

**pingu** on "how not to get into #HOH": were you rejected to HOH or  
something

**pingu:** answer

**GusWat:** ^

**memoirofanobody:** no

#

"That was fun?" said Ainsley, following Jamie around Nature's southwest entrance. "Did  
you want to do another vid?"

"Oh, sorry, I have class," said Jamie.

“Me too, I guess?”

“Haven’t gone in a while, though.” She couldn’t remember the last time she’d shown up to Easy Nature, but some sacrifices had to be made in the constant quest for vid content.

“Since... What’s today’s date? Time no longer has meaning for me.”

The building doors slid open, and Ainsley walked through, ahead of Jamie. A blast of cool air fanned the black tips of Ainsley’s hair across her shoulders. They passed the “Meaning of Life,” the building’s abstract art installation of a 100-square foot black wall, which dyed the ends briefly invisible. “The 14<sup>th</sup>?”

Jamie heard Graham’s “Jesus” in her head and stopped. “Oh, shit. Graham’s birthday’s in, like, a week.” That had good content potential.

“Were you going to plan something?”

“Oh, no, it’s more like we give each other gag gifts. But I usually plan a lot further in advance.” Jamie punched the YouLift. “I guess I’ll just work on it in class. Where’s yours?”

“I’m just wandering,” said Ainsley, waving her hand as though shooping the thought of education. “I don’t think Graham likes me?” she said.

Jamie wondered how to respond without lying to her. “He takes some getting used to.”

“Oh, it’s fine?” Ainsley shrugged, seeming genuinely unbothered. The YouLift opened, and Jamie stepped out. “I’ll see you?”

Jamie waved and turned toward Easy Nature. Whoever had designed the course must have had in mind a seminar structure, because the classroom YouDesks had been assembled into an oval. The designer somehow had not foreseen, however, that, because so many members of the Franklin University Community would be taking the class, the oval would include 150 desks.

Since it was impossible to hear anything said more than six desks away, Easy Nature was essentially an in-person conference call.

It worked for her purposes, though. She hooked in her buds and logged onto YouLearn, where Professor Indica would send out class announcements, before opening her vid editor and starting a new project for Graham.

The best idea she'd thought of in the YouLift had been editing one-word clips of his favorite vintage toons into some increasingly insulting message. She still hadn't been able to come up with a less tortuous idea and was running out of time, so she started downloading as many toon transcripts as she could find.

Mid-descent into insanity (read: listening to the seventh and eighth toon simultaneously on 2x speed,) waiting for the word "Graham" or "gram" or even "grand," her YouPhone pinged.

**Graham:** hey you're coming right

**Graham:** hey

Even the sight of his name, which was seemingly impossible to find a clip of, was triggering. Obviously she would be there for his birthday if she was every year. Did she *need* to RSVP? What else was she suffering for right now?

**Jamie:** yes OBVIOUSLY, chill

**Graham:** okay

Jamie sighed and looked up to find at least fifty pairs of eyes trained on her. As the blood began to rush to her forehead, on instinct, she set her phone to "Record." The ringing in her

ears subsided slightly. She swiftly paused the toons running in the background and increased the volume on YouLearn.

“—phone policy?” Indica was saying.

Of course she’d been watching vintage toons the whole class so far and only gotten on the radar for five seconds on her YouPhone.

“Sorry, Professor,” she said, wondering if the shakiness in her voice was less apparent for others. “I forgot to silence it.”

“We’d love to hear about your personal life, since it was exciting enough to derail our discussion,” said Professor Indica. “You want to attend to private matters, fine. But if you’re in class, you share it with the class. You’re free to leave, otherwise.”

Jamie thought that was unduly harsh, but perhaps Indica did this to everyone in the classes she’d skipped. “Um, it won’t happen again.”

“Please share,” said Indica, unrelenting.

“It wasn’t anything,” said Jamie, “I mean, I think the expectations are now really high, and it’ll be a letdown.”

Indica waited.

“Um. Okay. My friend Graham just asked if I was coming.”

Some guy snickered. “Coming.” A couple eye rolls, laughs.

“First warning,” said Indica, before launching into what sounded like a discussion on birds.

The gazes left her all at once, and she pulled up the toons she’d paused. One, ironically, was a scene of some blond child disrupting his math class by screaming and pretending to not know where it was coming from, like everyone else.

A YouLearn notification pinged. Checking her notifs, Jamie found her classroom etiquette score on YouLearn had dropped by ten points for “classroom disruption.”

Jamie eyed her recording phone, thought about what she was going to do, and decided not to think about it. She located an audio track of a bird screech, dialed up her YouBook volume, disconnected her buds, and pressed play.

The class jolted, heads turning around the room. Jamie smiled as she rewound the track.

**Disrupting the class: challenge accepted**

**DATE:** November 17

**VIEWS:** 880

**ORBITERS:** 94

#

**DAY IN THE LIFE OF A FORK UNIVERSITY STUDENT**

**VIEWS:** 1.9K

**ORBITERS:** 110

#

“I’m making Graham something for his birthday,” said Jamie in Boomer’s office. “It’s a compilation vid.”

“That sounds thoughtful,” said Boomer. “Does he enjoy watching videos like you do?”

She nodded. Not YouNeek vids, per se, but vintage toons.

They sat in silence, both probably thinking about Graham.

“Sometimes I feel like I don’t know where I stand with him,” she said after a moment.

“Have I mentioned this yet?”

Boomer motioned for her to go on anyway.

“I don’t know, sometimes things are normal. Other times, it feels weirdly tense, like he’s putting up with me. But he’s never said why and we both just act like nothing’s up. I’m always

confiding in him and he doesn't really tell me things. I guess he has, like, med school to worry about and I'm sure he's stressed. And I guess it's okay because I have YouNeek to occupy my time now."

"When did you start feeling this way?"

"Last semester, maybe? And then the whole ER thing happened, so I thought things would get better." She thought about last semester, when Graham had practically cut-and-replaced her with Dani. He'd respond to Jamie's messages sometimes after days, and when they had hung out it'd been always on her suggestion. Dani used to feature in his every sentence. But there was none of that anymore.

"What do you think it is?" asked Boomer, who definitely knew what it was. Graham had certainly confided in *him*.

"No idea," said Jamie.

#

#### **SURPRISING GRAHAM FOR HIS BIRTHDAY**

**DATE:** November 22

**VIEWS:** 890

**ORBITERS:** 112

GRAHAM, JAMIE, MARCO, KLAUS, and ADA are at GRAHAM'S APARTMENT, celebrating. The cam, set by GRAHAM's YouBox, shows MARCO, a short Puerto Rican with one earring, KLAUS, one shade off of albino, and ADA, brunette with a pixie cut, sitting on one end of the couch. JAMIE sits on the other, holding out her YouBook to GRAHAM, off-cam.

JAMIE

Happy birthday, dude.

GRAHAM comes into the frame holding jelly buns, seating himself between JAMIE and his other friends.

GRAHAM

Your laptop? Oh, you shouldn't have.

JAMIE

Dumbass. I can't buy your affection if I  
only own things of worth.

GRAHAM takes the laptop and recognizes the toon on screen. He  
looks up, wide-eyed, before playing the vid and smiling when he  
realizes it's a compilation message.

"I wanted to" "create" "something" "special" "for a" "person"  
"who means a lot to" me."

GRAHAM  
(suspiciously)

Aw.

"So" "I thought" "you'd" "be good" "practice."

JAMIE tries not to smile, and GRAHAM snorts.

GRAHAM  
There it is.

MARCO and REUBEN exchange looks. GRAHAM places the YouBook on  
his coffee table so they can all see the screen as the vid  
continues for a few minutes.

"In conclusion" "Gram" "sucks" "ass." "Happy birthday" "you"  
"fur" "king" "nerd."

ADA appears unsure. GRAHAM starts to laugh.

GRAHAM  
It's horrible. I hate it. Thank you.

JAMIE  
(to cam)  
There you have it, folks. My validation, on  
record.

GRAHAM  
(smile dropping slightly)  
You were filming? For how long?

JAMIE  
Just your reaction to the vid. That's fine,  
right?

GRAHAM  
(looking at the cam)  
Uh, yeah. It's fine.

#

Their Chill Night that week, Jamie tossed her YouPhone behind her and flopped back against the legs of Graham's green corduroy couch. "AHP isn't any different. The more you swipe, the more all these guys start to blend into each other."

"Hm," said Graham distractedly. He sat at his kitchen table, his eyes darting between *Explain the Brain* on his YouBook and Jamie, whom he clearly wanted to ignore if not for his innate manners.

"Overexposure, do you think?" she asked.

"Are you recording right now?"

"Not filming, no, just screen-recording in case I find something interesting. You wanna be in the vid?"

"No."

Jamie frowned. "Why not? The people want to get to know you better."

"Why would I care what the people want?"

"Why wouldn't you?"

"Do they care about what I want?"

"They would if you were in more vids."

Graham gave a long-suffering exhale. "You aren't going to irritate me into doing another video with you. I'm studying, and so should you. Do you even do homework anymore?"

Jamie swiped through another convo with Greg-24-Assistant Train Conductor. Insecurity, ego, infidelity. Blond hair, brown eyes like the last twenty guys. Maybe she liked that. She

couldn't say for sure. She hadn't been able to decide whether listing that he'd cheated on past girlfriends in Weaknesses was a plus or a minus, so she'd put him on her roster. In their chat she'd asked about the girlfriends and he asked if she liked sandwiches and would like to try El Cazuela. "Maybe I should switch up my bio," she said. "I'm reaching guys who think tacos count as sandwiches."

"Neuroscience is the study of the brain," said Graham. Then, "Oh, I thought we were talking in parallel about things irrelevant to the other person."

"Why're you so snippy?"

He made to throw up his hands but instead nearly knocked over his mug of his home-brewed apple cider. "The bio isn't the problem, whatever it is," he said. "You're not interested in anyone and you're just swiping because you're bored and want content."

"We know this," said Jamie calmly. "What about a bio like 'Dad left me due to irreconcilable differences. I liked pineapple on pizza and he liked his other family.'"

Graham pressed his lips together.

"I'm thinking maybe the conversations will be more interesting if I come across a little unhinged from the get-go." She reached for his phone to open the Cam app. "Or, we could talk about what you said earlier. Why do you think I'm uninterested in anyone?"

Graham snatched his phone away. "Stop."

"Jesus. Fine." She raised both her hands. "Did you spike your apple cider or something?"

He drew his mug closer to himself.

"I don't actually have a drinking problem, Graham," she said. "I haven't had anything for months. Or wanted to, really. Turned me off alc forever. Honest."

He slid his mug back to the center of the table.

“Also, you of all people should know what drinking does to the brain,” she continued.

“Are you okay? Can I help with anything?”

The level of his shoulders lowered. “Yes. No, it’s fine. Sorry, I’m a little stressed.”

“Are things going okay with Boomer?”

“Yes,” he said, his gaze inching back toward his laptop.

“You need to work, sorry,” she said. “I just, we haven’t been really talking about that. I wanted to ask.”

He looked back at her. “Thanks, it’s been fine. I hope he’s helped you, too.” Graham tapped his laptop’s touchpad to wake it up.

She waited.

“Have you been talking to him about Dani?”

Graham shut his laptop—not slamming it closed, but using far more force than necessary—with a click. She flinched. “Jamie. For the—can—would you *stop* bringing her up?”

“Sorry. I just... You said you were over it, and I assumed... well, that you’d know best. I mean. It’s been five months. Which is fine, I mean. I didn’t know.”

“I *am* over it,” said Graham. “It just doesn’t help that you’re constantly mentioning her when I already have too much else to think about. You can keep taking the easy way out and drop out and do YouNeek full time, but I’m going to med school. I have a GPA, I have apps, I’ll have interviews. I have practically a second job.”

It dawned on her. “Oh, shit, I forgot to ask, when’s the seminar again?”

He looked at her. “This morning.”

Jamie’s stomach lurched. Oh. “Fuck, I’m sorry, I really just... Lately, it’s been...”

“What do you have going on? YouNeek?”

“Well, yes—”

“It’s fine,” said Graham, not looking at her.

“Sorry,” said Jamie.

“I sent you an YouMail.”

“I haven’t been checking YouMail—”

“You’re on your YouBook 24-7, and I texted you about it, too.”

“No, I didn’t—” She paused. “Oh, God, last Thursday? I thought you were referring to your birthday.”

He rubbed his temples. “Sorry, I’m stressed. Can we talk after I finish this exam?”

“... Sure,” said Jamie. There was always another exam. After a moment’s hesitation, she hoisted herself up to sit on the couch. Her phone pinged with new matches from AHP. Yamen-22-Student. Jealousy and “poor for now.” Gabe-25-Analyst. Low self-worth, shy, unconfident. Dominic-23-Analyst. Arrogance, jealousy.

**Dominic-23-Analyst:** you’re funny

She accepted the conversation starter and left Graham to *Explain the Brain*.

#

**Ainsley:** hey its ainsley frm rck apprtm got ur nmbr frm the campus directry

Jamie was more surprised that Ainsley didn’t also text in questions than she was that Ainsley hadn’t just messaged her through YouNiverse.

**Jamie:** hey!

**Ainsley:** I was on yr channel and our vid is the most viewed by a LOT

**Self-sabotaging on a hopeless place**

**VIEWS:** 2.1K

**ORBITERS:** 120

**Jamie:** haha they must really like you

**Jamie:** obviously I don't want to question it but like we didn't really do anything special

**Ainsley:** ouch

**Jamie:** content-wise lol

**Jamie:** I don't really get the YouNeek algorithm I guess.. the vids I try hard on, no one watches, and the vids I randomly upload do well. Which is good but idk how to keep doing it

**Ainsley:** maybe ask thm in the nxt one

Jamie re-watched the vid, from when she and Ainsley sat against the Brains dumpster and then moved to the one outside Nature to appropriately react to Haris-21-Student. Haris had a perfect nose but shoplifted avocados from the campus YouShop.

Otherwise, nothing special. She scrolled to the comments.

**Feetish:** feet pls

**ChildishGabbyno:** from the Philippines!!

**Jungsook69:** loooool I want graham back. But this made me die, keep doing the series

**Miriamm\_:** great content as always Jamie!

**Sawee24:** aw Ainsley is so positive n cheerful! Love her energy

**memoirofanobody:** just curious, where's everyone coming from?

She waited for a couple minutes. Even in the comment section of her own vids, she was getting ignored.

**Jamie:** you wanna hang out tomorrow?

**Ainsley:** anthr vid?

**Jamie:** plans were just to exhaust myself from all the work I don't get done, but we could do that too

**Ainsley:** thght u'd nvr ask!! Ofc

**Jamie:** haha why

**Ainsley:** i jst thnk ur rly cool

**Ainsley:** domoro??

**Jamie:** why not

## Chapter 6

Jamie barreled into Minds thirty minutes earlier than usual—which would’ve been exactly 8AM for her appointment with Boomer—mashing the elevator button while trying to balance her recording phone and her YouBook, which was open to a tab showing her steadily climbing YouNiverse orbiter count. She’d gone to sleep at a little over a hundred and was now verging on a thousand. She had to leave some time to find the appropriate trash can by which she could film her live reaction.

891.

The closest trash can to her ideal dimensions—large enough to slouch against but able to fit entirely in the frame so orbiters could identify it as her trash can shtick—was actually a bright blue recycling bin, which would have to do. No one with any agency would choose to spend a morning walled in by Minds concrete, so the building was at this time more devoid of life than usual.

925 at 7:46. She would likely hit one thousand while talking to Boomer.

944 at 7:50.

967.

988.

989.

988.

“*What the fuck,*” muttered Jamie as she gathered her setup and headed into Boomer’s office. She knocked and opened the door right as he inhaled to say “Come in.”

The tower of papers that'd been on the coffee table last time had been removed. "Love the new look. Hey, Boomer, is it okay if I have some things open? I've been waiting for a bit. I'm almost at 1K."

Boomer's gaze flitted from her, to her open laptop with the beeping counter, and back to her. "Do you need a minute?"

JAMIE (O.S.)  
Yeah, thanks so much.

The cam shows a small, poorly lit office the size of a supply closet. JAMIE scuffles around, placing her laptop on her knees and switching to the front-facing cam.

JAMIE  
Uh, hi. Today's trauma, watching the slow, agonizing climb of my orbiter count. Are you seeing this, too? Some people watching and then leaving right before 1K? Some people just want to watch the YouUniverse burn.

JAMIE (CONT'D)  
Oh, yeah, I'm here with Boomer. Boomer, say hi!

The camera pans to BOOMER, a lanky blonde with a slightly receding hairline. BOOMER looks uncomfortable.

BOOMER  
(unsurely)  
Hi. Jamie, are you—

JAMIE  
997. 998. Still 998. Still 999—oh my God! 1,001! *Hell* yes.

BOOMER  
Congratulations. Are you sure you want to be filming—

JAMIE

Thanks. Thank you, everyone. I couldn't have done it without you. Literally. I can't join my own orbit. So you've been absolutely essential to my meteoric success.

JAMIE (CONT'D)

Genuinely, though, thanks. I gotta talk to Boomer now, though. See ya!

The vid ends.

"Do you talk to them about therapy?" asked Boomer, tucking in his legs to swivel his chair toward her.

"I mean, I could," Jamie said. "But I haven't. Am I allowed to film in here?"

It was the first time she had ever seen him look taken aback by something she had said. "Policy-wise?" he clarified, his features reverting to neutral. "I am not sure, but usually someone will have to violate an unspoken rule before the center will codify it into official policy."

Jamie cocked her head to the left. "What else would be stopping me, other than policy?"

Nothing in his expression had changed, but she could sense his dismay. "I am supposed to ask the questions around here," said Boomer, "but, among other things, placing value on your own privacy."

"You're not allowed to be funnier than I am," said Jamie. "It's against the rules."

Boomer didn't react. In sessions, he normally sat back and let her talk, but somehow now it felt like there was a distance to this silence. Even her therapist had expected better of her, apparently. Smile wilting, Jamie pocketed her YouPhone and slid her hands between her thighs for warmth. Her spine felt taut.

"Well, if this is gonna be self-directed..." she trailed off, waiting for him to interject. Nothing. "I've actually been feeling good. Happy, even. I think I might be okay now. So, like, feel free to not take notes. I wouldn't want to waste your time if I don't come back after break."

“How long has this feeling lasted?”

“Not that long,” she admitted. “But it feels like a shift. Like, you know. How you take for granted having a clear air passage until you get a stuffy nose. And then your nostrils finally clear and it’s great and then you get used to it and forget. It’s good but not like an I’ll-crash-later kind of good, you know?”

Boomer flipped to a new page in his yellow pad.

“You don’t seem that impressed,” she said. “I mean, I’m also not drinking. Haven’t done it once since the summer or wanted to at all. So that’s not a problem anymore. Is that more promising?”

“I never thought you were addicted to alcohol,” he said.

#

**SIENNASMILES**  
**ORBITERS: 1.2M**

#

After American Studies, instead of leaving the ETC block and heading straight to Neuroscience to meet Graham by the statue, Jamie remained in Vintage. Ainsley had mentioned she also had a 9 AM there, and Jamie had suggested meeting up before lunch. She hadn’t seen Amanda and her friends since she’d YouC’d them last time. It’d been a month of nothing from their end.

It was now 10:50, and there was still no sign of Ainsley. Navigating to her messages, Jamie started to text Graham that she’d be late, then deleted the message before sending it. If he’d been waiting, he would have texted.

Other than her orbiter count, nothing much had changed, she supposed.

“Good morning?”

Jamie looked up and smiled. “Hey, what’s up?”

“Nothing?” Ainsley’s kimono cardigan fluttered around her ankles as she closed the distance from the stairwell to the bench where Jamie was sitting. “What’s today’s vid?”

“I mean, I hadn’t thought of one. We can just hang out, eat lunch. Brunch.”

Ainsley blinked, then shrugged. “Okay, downstairs?”

They walked to the cafe on the building’s ground level. The ETCafe was the most basic place for food—people didn’t eat there unless they were in between classes. The only good menu item was the tuna sandwich.

“How does it feel?” asked Ainsley, in line.

“Wouldn’t everyone like to know,” remarked Jamie under her breath, thinking of Boomer.

“Who else’s asking?”

“My therapist,” said Jamie, surprised at her ease. Not that there should’ve been anything to be ashamed of, but Ainsley didn’t seem like she would judge. “Haven’t been seeing him for that long, but still.”

Ainsley ordered the strawberry fields salad and stepped aside. “Did you start going after that party? The one that Graham was pissed about?”

Jamie blinked and ordered the same thing. They moved toward the cubes. “Yeah.”

“Okay?” Ainsley withdrew her salad, a tightly packed container of spinach greens and one cut-up strawberry. “So how does it feel having more orbiters?”

“Now? Like nothing, honestly. Maybe a little better.”

There weren’t any tables, so after Jamie picked up her order, Ainsley led the way to a windowsill. They set down their salads and hopped up. “Well, you look different, anyway.”

Jamie looked out at the Vintage lawn, which looked especially green after the overnight rain, and, further in the distance, the little dots of members of the Franklin University Community crossing paths on autowalks. She looked back at Ainsley and smiled.

#

Jamie was sitting on the garden swing outside Numbers when her mom called. “Hi, Mom.”

“Hello?” A close-up of her mom’s chapped lips as she spoke into the wrong side of her phone. Jamie tried not to laugh.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, Jamie. Are you in class now?”

“No,” said Jamie, who should have been. She’d skipped Numbers to watch her orbiter count, which was nearing 1.5K. Today was the review day for the take-home midterm, which might have been helpful if she’d done any of it. Sarkar cold-called students on review days so there wouldn’t be any free riders. This was why she’d tried her best to avoid competent professors for the past four years. “Why’d you call me if you thought I had class?”

“I must forgot,” said her mom. “Besides, I call you all the time and you don’t pick up. So I have to call all the time in case.”

Jamie sighed. “Mom. I don’t pick up all the time *because* you call so often.”

“Sarah mom say her daughter have trouble find job with data science. Too competitive. What about you go to med school?”

Her mother had the unique ability to decimate any of her good moods. “Mom. I’m a senior. Even if I’d ever wanted to be a doctor, I’d have to have started that track two years ago, unless you want me to never graduate.”

“Money job still good then. Sarah mom also say tax law good.”

Jamie sighed loudly.

“I know you don’t want hear,” said her mom. “But you have nothing you want to do.

Maybe Money track boring job, but for me and you, we are not special talent people. Not geniuses. We need to make money and live, somehow. Most of us not stars.”

“People are seeing me,” she wanted to say. The words rushed up her throat but held themselves, suspended, behind her teeth. “It’ll be okay,” she said instead. “Don’t worry. I’ll talk to you another time, okay? I need to work.”

A little over an hour later, she reached 1,523.

#

**Ainsley:** omg yr vid got like 300K views now

**Jamie:** Jesus do you think AHP is a YouNeek Trending topic and that’s why

**Ainsley:** no not our vid. Your other vid. Your first vlog

**Jamie:** oh. Wtf

**DAY IN THE LIFE OF A FORK UNIVERSITY STUDENT**

**VIEWS:** 203K

**ORBITERS:** 2K

**Goldiee:** when you see it

**Horaclee\_:** #FOH #FOH #FOH

**memoirofanobody:** This is pre-FOH probably but I appreciate it

**Menan:** fetus Jamie! #FOH

**Ajugar:** oh my god lmao imagine being this lucky

**Milly Kratz:** when you read like 100 comments commenting "when you see it" and you still don't see whatever it is

**Milly Kratz:** Update I see it nvm

**memoirofanobody** likes this.

**memoirofanobody:** when you read all the comments on your own vid commenting "when you see it" and you don't know what it is either

**WaterCernet:** I guess we know jamie doesn't rewatch her vids nobody tell her hahah love you tho

#

Ainsley didn't show up to Rock Appreciation, having decided to ditch. Neither Jamie nor Graham mentioned not meeting up the day before. She figured he'd worked straight through lunch and possibly hadn't even noticed. "It's killing me," said Jamie to Graham in Rock Appreciation. Ainsley had apparently decided to ditch the rest of the day. "You seem like you were good at 'Where's Wally' as a kid. You can help me figure out what they're seeing."

"I assume you mean 'Where's Waldo.'"

"They were training a nation of children to narc on a harmless guy who just didn't want to be found and me misremembering his *name* is the bigger issue? Some of us can only aspire to your level of vintage snob."

"Fair," said Graham. "However, I don't even know what I'm looking for."

"Neither did anyone else, and *they* all see it. It's probably obvious." Jamie pulled up her first vlog, clicked play and shoved it in front of them. She watched herself awkwardly avoid eye contact with the camera in the first clip of her bedroom and wanted to pause the vid right there. This was why she didn't make a habit of rewatching vids. They started feeling put-on the more you watched.

She exhaled as vid-Jamie did impressions of her mother. Then, an abrupt transition to the shaky footage taken outside Mien Noodles. Nothing attention-grabbing had happened so far, which was probably why the vid had been received with so little fanfare at first.

On-screen, she and Graham were arguing about her “becoming a YouNeek star.” The vid stabilized slightly as she panned across the buildings.

“Wait.” Graham—in real life—reached out a finger to pause the vid, and at first she thought he’d had enough of watching himself talk, too. “I see it,” he said.

“What?”

He faced her, expression smug.

*“What do you see?”*

“That would spoil the—”

“Graham, if you don’t tell me right now I will adjust everything in your apartment so all the lines are just a little crooked.”

Graham shook his head. “That’s diabolical.” He rewound the clip a couple seconds back and pressed play. She watched the people waiting outside Chipotle. The door to FORTUNE COOKIES swung open and shut. Three guys struggled with their dog in the bushes.

“I still don’t see it. Did I accidentally film a drug deal or something?”

Graham sighed. “You may be beyond hope. Jamie, that’s not a dog. Do you see it now?”

She rewound the clip again.

“What do you see?”

“A small... black... blob.”

The look he gave her was the clearest expression of “you idiot” that she’d ever seen. “It’s a penguin.” He put it on .25 speed. “Look how it’s wobbling left to right, and if you look there, at that shape, you can see it has wings.”

“So... I filmed a penguin.” Jamie paused. “I mean, cool, but am I missing something?”

“If you had been actually been paying attention to anything except making your videos and ignoring your finals the past few weeks to read the news—”

“—Ah, well, you know I can’t read—”

“—then you would be informed. You didn’t hear *anything* about the penguin thief? It was breaking news. We live in Franklin, Texas. What else happens here?”

“Of course I heard about it,” said Jamie, vaguely recalling that someone had mentioned it when she’d interviewed people. It might have been in one of her early vids, but, again, she had been going out of her way to not rewatch vintage vids.

She angled her laptop screen away so Graham couldn’t see her searching up penguin thief news when she’d promised she’d be productive with him in class. Though Graham looked too engrossed in *Explain the Brain* to notice anyway.

There was an article on YouKnow’s “What’s Happening???” section. A couple days ago, it must have been on the home page. Either Jamie had missed it because she would navigate straight to YouNeek, or she was first-rate unobservant. Before national news, it must’ve been on the local sites only (she’d thought) Graham read.

**Caught on Vid: Middle school penguin thieves in Fork, Texas**

**YouKnow, November 27:** It's not every day you accidentally bust a penguin hustling operation. When Tasha Kohlman, Franklin resident of thirty years and mother of two, happened across a vid her middle-school daughter was watching, she was floored.

"I thought Macy was just watching videos all the time," said Kohlman. "And then there she was, telling me she saw this real-life vid of some boys she knew from school with a poor penguin near the Franklin campus."

Six minors, students at the local Franklin MS, will be serving community service sentences for the theft. The accidental vid is embedded below, with the penguin thieves appearing from here to here.

The Franklin Zoo could not be reached for comment. Their official statement does not outline how the minors were able to remove the penguin to a location 50 miles away. One of the minors told our reporter they kept the penguin in their backyard for two days for no other reason than "it seemed kinda fun," before his parent blocked his YouNiverse messaging functionality, which we definitely respect but which also makes it difficult for us to do our jobs.

"I suppose people would say I need to pay more attention to my daughter," said Kohlman when asked what she took from this bizarre tale. "But, listen. I'm on the PTA. I pay for her soccer lessons. I let her do the sleepovers. I respect her perspective. She thinks I'm a great mom. When you're a mother, people think everything becomes a lesson in parenting."

Jamie's vid was linked and credited to *memoirofanobody*. Maybe they'd reached out for her permission to include it and she'd missed the YouMail in her separate inbox. Or maybe that practice was just a courtesy. She opened both YouMails to find messages from national outlets, referencing the "explosion" on YouHurl, a platform she didn't frequent.

In the replies, someone had made Franklin, TX into a meme, screenshotting the frame of the penguin thieves wrestling with the penguins in the bushes. "When she from the streets." "Franklin, Texas hicks discovering a new breed of chicken." "Franklin, Texas hicks learning they're memes." "Franklin, Texas hicks learning what memes are." "Franklin, Texas hicks discovering spoons." "Franklin, Texas hicks fighting to date their one sister."

Someone else had linked her vid in the replies, which was probably the source of her traffic. The viewer spike had been completely un-attributable to any of the work she had done. She figured she deserved the lucky accidents as much as the next famous-for-nothing person, but they still felt a little hollow.

#

**Dominic-23-Analyst:** so what do you like to do for fun?

**Jamie-21-Student:** Chat on AHP

**Dominic-23-Analyst:** When you're not in AHP that is

**Jamie-21-Student:** I'm always in a hopeless place

**Dominic-23-Analyst:** funny

#

**Greg-22-Grocer:** how do you feel about kids?

**Jamie-21-Student:** at least take me out to dinner first man

**Greg-22-Grocer:** i'm kinda broke

**Greg-22-Grocer:** how do you feel about kids?

**Jamie-21-Student:** I don't think I would want to subject them to the trauma of being brought into this world

**Jamie-21-Student:** and it's like, the question isn't if but how you'll screw them up

**Jamie-21-Student:** did I lose you?

**Jamie-21-Student:** Kids have adorable baby shoes that make it all worthwhile

**Greg-22-Grocer:** im looking to find my end game i dont think we would work

#

### **3 hours of me not studying for finals**

**DATE:** December 1

**VIEWS:** 1.7K

**ORBITERS:** 2.6K

JAMIE sits outside at a coffee shop, drinking a black coffee and staring off into the distance. Her laptop is not even turned on. She picks up her phone and swipes on AHP for half an hour.

JAMIE

Uh... hi. Today's trauma is my inability to focus on a singular task. Finals season approaches, and honestly it was a lot to ask of me just to show up to class. I guess I'm

banking on another last-minute touchdown by stalking every classmate's name on YouQuiz til I find someone with terms to cram. Or find the quiz banks with a semester's worth of answers again.

The next clip is of JAMIE sitting upright in bed, closed notebook beside her. She opens the notebook, which is blank. She goes to her desk and starts editing a vid. The rest of the vid proceeds to show JAMIE on the lawn, in the library, in her room again, at Graham's, and in several hallways and lounges doing none of her work.

#

"You really got away with posting *three* hours worth of you doing absolutely nothing," said Graham when he showed up at her door for Chill Night. "That's even more low effort than I had the imaginative capacity for."

"I make the impossible possible," said Jamie. "And I'm rebranding 'low effort' to 'realness,' thank you very much."

"Sure." He balled up the wrapper of his mega chocolate chip cookie and tossed it toward the trash bin. The ball bounced off his kitchen counter and missed.

"Good shot," said Jamie.

"Aren't you worried that someone will see this?"

"That's the whole point."

"No," said Graham. "I mean the part where you said you've cheated before."

"I don't think anyone really considers finding quiz banks cheating. It's like those assignments that are 'individual' but you know everyone works together anyway."

"Yes, but the difference there is that the rest of us don't talk about it on record."

"Maybe I'm being vulnerable. Disclosing weaknesses is what you do when you open up to people. They like you better."

"Spare us the B&S of R&R, please."

“It’s my major,” she said.

“You always said it was BS,” he shrugged. “Don’t stop now that you’re deciding it might be useful.”

“If only these viewers knew how horribly you treat me,” said Jamie, scrolling through her comments. “Unfortunately they’re obsessed with you.”

Graham grabbed her YouPhone and angled it toward himself to read.

**BigGreen:** we want graham  
121 likes.

**Maria Shara:** lmao idk why but I want him in vids too. Miss his  
not doing anything

**Tony11:** lol I get it, they’re like foils. His boring balances  
out her crazy

**Whollycow:** use me as a “get graham in the next vid” button  
100 likes.

“No,” said Graham, looking bewildered, to her phone. He’d finally learned to look into the cam instead of solely at her. “I refuse to encourage your spiraling.”

“You’re in popular demand.”

“No.”

“You won’t even have to do anything.”

“No.”

“Please?”

“No.”

“Why’re you so against just sitting there and acting like we usually do?”

“No.”

“You’re not even listening.”

“Right.”

“See, this is what you—oh, fuck.”

He watched as the napkin Jamie threw at his face floated limply onto the table, a foot in front of her. “Riveting footage.”

“Will you be less cranky if you take an hour to do some work first?”

“What would be the point of a ‘chill night’ if I just sit here working?”

“Do you not need to?”

“I mean, yes, of *course* I need to, but you guilted me into coming.”

“I didn’t force you to do anything. You know I don’t have that kind of upper body strength.”

Graham only looked more annoyed. “What would you do while I was working, anyway? Watching you slack off makes *me* feel like I’m slacking off.”

“I’ll work, too,” said Jamie.

He laughed, a bitter, incredulous sound. “You? Work? You *never* work.”

“Yes I do,” said Jamie, frowning.

“You take the easy way out of everything,” said Graham, “and you finally might need to do something about it. I haven’t seen you do anything class-related when you *do* show up to Rock Appreciation, and you certainly never do homework because you’re always making videos.”

“That’s a kind of work, too.”

“You think that becoming a famous You-ser would get you a real job?”

“And why not?” asked Jamie, defensive. “OctoPie dropped out of high school and she’s making bank. Hell, Mina Kim dropped out of *middle school*.”

“You were *smart*,” said Graham, loudly. He never raised his voice, so even the slightest change in volume was jarring. “You could be better.”

“I was never ‘smart,’” said Jamie, scoffing. “‘And ‘smart’ only matters if you’re the smartest, anyway.’”

“It’s always all or nothing with you, isn’t it. ER or bust.”

Her head felt like it was warming. “Okay, so why can *you* keep bringing up things I don’t want to talk about and when I mention Dani once you can get all hissy?”

“Because. You. Might. Have. Died.” Graham stood up, grabbed her arms from where she was leaning against the sofa’s legs, and pulled her onto the sofa. Jamie immediately tried to slide back down, but he held her shoulders in place. “You were *right here*, in case you forgot.”

Jamie stilled, seeing the Graham leaning in front of her but also the one who had knelt beside her that night, turning her on her side and rubbing circles into her back and calling for help. Her vision had been swimming so badly by then she hadn’t even been able to see, had just known his presence, her tether from slipping away deeper into the cushions.

That night sometimes felt like she’d dreamed it, the way events so seamlessly blended into each other. The first couple shots of Alicia’s YouChug and she’d been so euphoric, so scared to lose that contentment, and had taken another drink, and then her face was wet, her T-shirt sticky, and her fingers started drawing pictures on her cheeks. Then her head was resting against the sofa arm and slurring, slurring about her dad and feeling alone and the way the Big Bang might’ve decided everything she’d ever thought of and would ever do, which morphed into “Jamie, please say something” again and again, resounding clearly in her head, which she’d

pretended not to hear and felt a different kind of nice. She'd squinted at the blinding ceiling light in her apartment, her consciousness spinning with the fan. Then, the excruciating whiteness of the ER.

Graham was still going. "You can keep calling it a 'rager' so you have a party story that makes you seem cool, but in case you forgot, there was *no one else there* until I found you here, *alone*, binge drinking. It's serious. I made you see someone because I care that you get better, but you don't even care about you, so why is any of this," he gestured to her, "my job?"

"It's not your job," said Jamie, finally. The words came out louder than she'd intended. She felt calmer than she sounded. Maybe it was the ringing ears.

Graham drew back.

"We never talk about these things," said Jamie.

"We could have."

"You never told me any specifics after Dani broke up with you," she pointed out.

"You never asked for any specifics."

"I didn't want to push. I shouldn't have had to."

Graham's lips tightened.

"See," she said, feeling small.

As though his legs had suddenly unfrozen, Graham started toward the dining table where he'd left his bag. She watched her friend, in slow motion, slip his YouBook into the hole-riddled canvas bag he'd been using for two years in lieu of a backpack. "It was you," he said.

"What?"

“Dani broke up with me because of you. I told her we were just friends, but you were being even needier than usual, and she thought...” he stilled, hand on the doorknob. “She wasn’t comfortable. You were... a little much.”

Jamie just hadn’t wanted to be replaced. “Have you,” asked Jamie, “been resenting me all this time since then? Instead of just... telling me?”

“I’m heading out,” he said, not looking at her. She watched as he, shoulders tensed, closed the door behind him.

#

YouFeel Direct Messages  
July 10- 5 months ago

**Marc Rien:** Dear Jamie, I am working for a project that has me going between Texas and California (San Francisco) for the next year. Please let me know when you could meet for lunch or dinner. I can drive to campus or take you somewhere nice.

Seen 5 months ago

#

**SUBJECT:** Do you have any time?  
marcrien@tacktech.com -> jrien@fu.edu  
**DATE:** August 3

Dear Jamie,

Do you have any time? How is Mommy?

Love,

Daddy

#

**SUBJECT:** Re: Do you have any time?

jrien@fu.edu -> marcrien@tacktech.com

**DATE:** December 4, 3:39 AM

Hi Dad,

Sorry, I've been busy. Mom's great. Are you still in San Francisco?

Best,

Jamie

#

**SUBJECT:** Thank you

jrien@fu.edu -> boomervujicic@fu.edu

**DATE:** December 4, 4:41 AM

Hi Boomer,

Thanks so much for talking to me this sem. I think I'm going to cancel my appointments from now on. It'll be winter break anyway, and things should be good after that.

Best,

Jamie

#

JAMIE

I know y'all want Graham. I hear you. But unfortunately he's not available. I don't know, either, he saw my vids and went into witness protection. Gotham City needs him. And we would like to respect his privacy at this time.

**ORBITERS: 10.2K**

#

**Jamie's YouNiverse Feed**

2 sec ago, **Tom Kabara** shared "**DAY IN THE LIFE OF A FORK UNIVERSITY STUDENT**":

YO I CAN'T BELIEVE THE PENGUIN THIEVES WENT TO MY SCHOOL! LOL guys, one thing I always say: never forget where you came from!!

Want my reaction vid?? Comment down below.  
You happy? You sad? Let it out. Let me know~

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## Biography

Nicole Sun—we can only assume—had a life up until writing this biography but unfortunately she no longer recalls.

Eventually, after dinner, she managed to come up with this: from 2016-20, she attended the University of Texas at Austin with majors in Business Honors, Plan II Honors, and Management, as well as a certificate in fiction writing. She founded a literary platform, Prolitfic, was a member of the Texas Orange Jackets, and continues to author an illustrated humor blog at [nicolesundays.com](http://nicolesundays.com). After graduating on Zoom, she expects to work as a Venture For America fellow, to finish her novel, and to age.