

Where Everybody Knows Your Name

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“YOU’VE GOT A GREAT GOOGLE”

That’s when I know the date’s over. When I realize that he’s already seen the clips on YouTube and read that blog posting about my cat’s near-death experience. When he looks at me like he knows me just because he figured out how to spell my name correctly. I can see it in his eyes. He’s a little excited and a little intimidated; he’s got something to prove. He has a clear idea of who I am; he expects me to be creative and witty, but somehow I looked a little thinner and a lot more fun on my Facebook page.

This isn’t going anywhere but I stick around anyway. Order a second drink. Answer questions bashfully. I don’t know if I’m embarrassed to be recognized or embarrassed to realize again that this—this moment suspended between intimacy and ego—is, of course, what I always wanted.

Fame blinks, a beacon on a faraway horizon. I’ve been swimming toward it for as long as I can remember, throwing weighted ropes of Time and sharp hooks of Effort in the direction of recognition, and I have been slowly, steadily pulling myself along with a throat full of salt water and stars in my eyes. But this place where I’ve arrived, it doesn’t look the way I thought it would. The way Christmas morning can be disappointing. Or the way a dress fits better in the store. I keep my eye on the prize and then, once I hold it in my hands and look at it closely, I realize how cheaply it’s made.

Now that I have a finger-grip on that beacon and have achieved some of the recognition I’ve yearned for over the course of my career—well, it’s nice. Really nice. It’s nice to have access to tasty projects and brilliant collaborators. It’s nice to be respected and to relax my compulsion to prove my worth at every turn. But somehow I thought it would be more than nice. I thought it would be easier. To pay my rent. To take a day off. To find Love and to quietly grow a connection with someone. Instead I’m a little weighed down—by this embarrassment of riches. This strangle of success. This solitude of friends.

Sometimes I go home at night and everything in my apartment is so quiet and so still that I fall asleep watching television so the loneliness doesn’t swallow me.

SEASONS CHANGE BUT DVDS ARE FOREVER

But who needs people anyway when you have Netflix? Why bother to nurture actual relationships when you can have a shiny circle of friends on demand?

DVD television has become my vice—surpassing cigarettes, pizza and drunk dialing ex-boyfriends. A good night’s sleep is less essential than finding out how McNulte is going to unravel Baltimore’s drug underworld on *The Wire* or how Admiral Adama will navigate *Battlestar Galactica* back to Earth. I’d rather spend the evening with Carrie Bradshaw and Mr. Big than muddle my way through

another lousy house party. The last time I had a good cry, Claire was racing down the highway toward the final credits of *Six Feet Under*.

It feels good to have these stories at my whim, to invest in these characters and their heartbreaking flaws. Several times over the last two months, I've woken up spooning my laptop with an episode menu and catchy soundtrack looping quietly on the screen.

As it turns out, I am an accomplice. I flee with the masses in our great escape from reality into a world that's better scripted and scored. I fully participate in this part of our culture, the part that celebrates fame, that spit-shines real life until it glows with romance and serendipity. I have chosen personalities over people time and again because real life is too muddled and mundane; the suspense is relentless while the plot moves too slow. I want constant revelation and a dependably wild climax. I want to know that this particular episode will end within the hour. I want it all to be so good; I want every story to unfold perfectly.

So, I can't really blame date-boy when he looks at me through rose-pixeled glasses. I like to look at people in two dimensions too.

MAYBE ANDY WARHOL IS RESPONSIBLE

We are living in a golden age of celebrity. As a culture, we devour tabloids and track the tiniest details of movie stars—their illnesses, their families, their trips to the grocery store. We coo over Angelina and Brad's baby pictures, and we feel real horror and genuine concern about Britney's mental instability. We find friendship and imagined common ground with reality television stars. Celebrity is a language we all speak and recognize. And admire. Everyone desires and deserves their 15 minutes, right?

But scratch at the surface of celebrity's golden sheen and it comes off on your fingers like a fine dusting of toxic paint. We grow suspicious that Obama is more personality than presidential, but then we cannot stop gawking at the disastrous details of Sarah Palin's personal life. As a culture we are compulsive—mesmerized and overcome, staring at the sun of fame until it burns an image onto our retinas.

Once we know the shape of that image and have agreed on its definition, our summaries are set in stone. Angelina and Brad are doting parents. Britney's crazy and doesn't wear panties. Obama's an academic that doesn't punch a bully back. Palin is a prom queen who's never cracked a *Newsweek*. We live inside a closed system, reflecting and recognizing our own values and pleasures in celebrities. We depend on them to live up to their sound bytes and snarl at their attempts to transcend into three complicated dimensions. Why should they bother? They're famous. Is there anything better than that?

A YOUNG GIRL APPROACHED ME ON THE STREET AND ASKED ME FOR MY AUTOGRAPH TWO WEEKS AGO

My friend Aaron barely swallowed his guffaw as I nervously searched through my bag for a good pen. The idea that people know who I am and might draw some sort of expectation about my

behavior and qualifications sends me into a panic. And yet I've been hard at work for the last several years cultivating just that—notoriety, the tiniest tint of celebrity, maybe some respect.

The whys and because of this seem obvious to me. As an actor, public validation is the scale by which I measure my goods. As an overachieving eldest child, nothing gives me a bigger buzz than a solid public accolade. As an artist, I want access. As a woman, I want to be desired. As a citizen, I want power and voice. As an agoraphobe, I want a shiny, strong persona to hide behind at hipster parties. Like a director friend of mine reiterates, "It's always nice to get your picture in the paper."

So when I have a rough day or my blind date turns out to be a bad listener with a pointy tongue, I go home and Google myself. I update my Myspace page. I field emails from people I've barely met who want advice or to get coffee or to have me read their new screenplays. I marvel at the shallow encounters I dance through with folks who act like they really know me, really know who I am, because they've seen my face under lights a few times. It's amazing. And flattering. And odd.

It occurs to me that these are the friendships I'm good at. I don't have much genius for birthdays, baby showers or lunch dates, but I kick ass at warm handshakes and enthusiastic small talk. I am worlds more comfortable projecting my identity through a website and projecting my voice on a stage than I am actually connecting to people or nurturing balanced relationships. I am more comfortable responding to an audience than holding someone's hand.

Accolades come in handy. They are proof. When private strategies fail, emotions chafe my eyelids and relationships grow thin and strained, there is something about the reviews, the blogs, the magazine articles. There is something about these pieces of paper covered in words that can't be taken back. Evidence that something once was worth the trouble, that someone noticed, that I am not invisible after all.

Recognition breeds confidence. If I am quiet and forgiving of all my seismic faults for a moment, I can feel a cool breeze at my back nudging me forward. There's a chance that the work I put out in the world might actually be affecting someone and I respond with dutiful momentum.

DISAPPEAR RESURFACE DISAPPEAR

The day before I turned 18, a bunch of us went to see an outdoor Phish concert in upstate New York. Halfway through the first set, I wandered away from the blanket we'd staked on the lawn and lost sight of my friends. I went to check out the bathroom situation and to walk the perimeter of the stadium and to dance like a house on fire in the company of strangers. I'd find a sweet spot in the crowd with just enough room to really move and just enough folks already dancing to make me feel inconspicuous. I'd make friends without speaking to them and then I'd disappear when the song was over. I felt like a ghost, certainly anonymous and maybe a little mysterious.

This disappearing act has become a bit of a habit. In a culture of celebrity, anonymity is a tonic and a balance. A precious place to hide in the moments when you want to feel what's on the inside.

I SEE LONDON I SEE FRANCE

I got my first headshots taken in third grade. I had missed a lot of school that year for auditions and my social growth was notably stunted. There were the popular girls with Keds in every color who hung out by the swing-set during recess. And there was the new girl Lynn who everyone agreed was definitely the prettiest girl in Mrs. Biehler's class. And there was David Park who sat in front of me. I'd memorized the back of his neck and spent most of the day hoping he'd turn around and ask to borrow my eraser. I always kept an extra eraser in the back of my desk and spent recess in the library.

One day I brought my modeling portfolio to school and set it up in the back of the room. I watched eagerly as all my classmates fingered the clear plastic sleeves preserving pictures of me smiling for the camera, wearing a cowboy hat, tap dancing at the Little Miss New York State beauty contest, curtsying in pink ruffles, winking behind a pair of Mickey Mouse sunglasses and, of course, smiling brightly through the glossy finish of my most recent headshots.

Nobody sat with me at lunch that day. And Jamie R. started to make fun of me because you could see my underwear through the gold sequined leotard I wore for my last dance competition. David Park didn't even look at my pictures; they seemed to make him uncomfortable.

WHAT A LOVELY BOX YOU'VE BUILT FOR YOURSELF

It took me a really long time to learn that you don't make friends by showing off. It took me a long time to learn that it's just better to be quiet sometimes. Recognition breeds confidence, but it also breeds contempt.

I try not to notice when I feel a gaggle of local actresses look me up and down at an opening night party and then turn their backs when I move in their direction. Sometimes one of them will welcome me with a thinly veiled insult, served up with a snarky smile. I try to take these moments with a grain of salt and a splash of bitters. There are a handful of people in this town who really, really don't like me. I don't blame them. I've been super-lucky and not always graceful about it.

It's also taken me a while to realize that, while notoriety can clear a path to some lovely opportunities, if you start to believe your own press, you're doomed. And stuck. Kind of hard to take artistic risks if you need to keep up your reputation. Difficult to try something new if you're afraid of getting a bad review. Impossible to grow if you're also determined to maintain.

Only recently have I decided to loosen my white-knuckled grip on the beacon of fame and to turn toward a quieter shore. I am seeking a new creative challenge that isn't balanced on other people's acceptance of my work. Setting my sights on making time—to cradle new impulses and to care more gently for my friends. I want to pay less attention to my Google hits and keep better track of their birthdays. Be a person. Not just a performer.