

My So-Called (Instagram) Life

Clara Dollar, 2017¹

In this article, the writer describes how maintaining her highly polished social media persona at all times—both online and offline—affected her life and relationships. The writer was a finalist in the Modern Love College Essay Contest, and she was a senior in college when her essay was published in the New York Times.

“You’re like a cartoon character,” he said. “Always wearing the same thing every day.”

He meant it as an intimate observation, the kind you can make only after spending a lot of time getting to know each other. You flip your hair to the right. You only eat ice cream out of mugs. You always wear a black leather jacket. I know you.

And he did know me. Rather, he knew the caricature of me that I had created and meticulously cultivated. The me I broadcast to the world on Instagram and Facebook. The witty, creative me, always detached and never cheesy or needy.

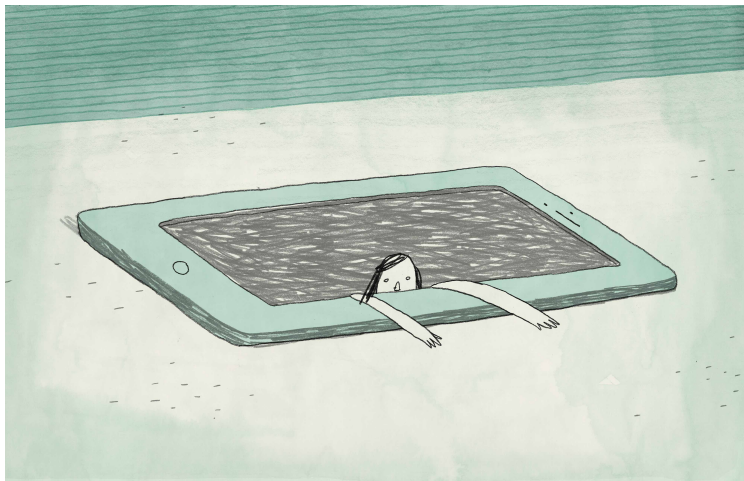


Illustration by Brian Rea for The New York Times

That version of me got her start online as my social media persona, but over time (and I suppose for the sake of consistency), she bled off the screen and overtook my real-life

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personality, too. And once you master what is essentially an onstage performance of yourself, it can be hard to break character.

There was a time when I allowed myself to be more than what could fit onto a 2-by-4-inch screen. When I wasn't so self-conscious about how I was seen. When I embraced my contradictions and desires with less fear of embarrassment or rejection.

There was a time when I swore in front of my friends and said grace in front of my grandmother. When I wore lipstick after seeing "Clueless," and sneakers after seeing "Remember the Titans." When I flipped my hair every way, ate ice cream out of anything, and wore coats of all types and colors.

Since then, I have consolidated that variety—scrubbed it away, really—to emerge as one consistently cool girl: one face, two arms, one black leather jacket.

And so it was a validation of sorts when Joe fell for her, the me in the leather jacket. He was brilliant, the funniest guy in our TV writing program, and my ideal cool counterpart. I could already see us on screen; we made sense.

Best of all, he thought he liked me more than I liked him, and that was perfect too, because it gave me the upper hand. I was above love, above emotional complication, dedicated to higher pursuits.

Periodically Joe would confront me about this imbalance. We would meet at a park on Second Avenue and 10th Street, and he would tell me that I drove him crazy, that he couldn't be as removed as me.

And, of course, the truth was that I wasn't removed at all. Over the many months we were together, as we went from being friends to more than friends, I had fallen for him completely. The singular syllable of his name had started to feel permanently tucked between my molars and was always on my mind.

But I was reluctant to change my character midseason and become someone who was more open and, God forbid, earnest about love. He had fallen for the cool, detached me, so that's who I remained. And he got bored.

That's the way it goes with half-hour TV shows. Consistency can become boring. The will-they-or-won't-they characters have to get together, and at that point the show is closing in on its finale. It's all in the build, and when that becomes tired, the show gets canceled.

Like an allergic reaction to becoming unloved, my Instagram account went into overdrive, all aimed at one audience member: Joe. Through hundreds of screens, I was screaming at him: "I'm here! I'm funny! I'm at that fish taco place I showed you!"

The likes I got from my followers did little to quell my crushing need for Joe's cyberapproval. "Like me again, like me again," became my subconscious mantra.

But he didn't like me, and each time he didn't, the heartache felt like a warm bullet exploding in my gut. I would lie on the couch and clutch my stomach so tightly it was as if I were trying to expel the shrapnel from my throat. I knew no one else could extract it for me because no one knew it was there.

I was embarrassed for the people I saw who pined publicly on Instagram, but I also envied them. They were showered with support, with reassurance. If they were not completely cured, at least the illness seemed to run a shorter course.

Meanwhile, every time I twisted my spine, I felt that warm bullet scraping my insides. I was scared it might fossilize there and become permanently embedded.

In an effort to self-soothe, I wrote letters to Joe—actual, physical letters, pen to notepad—that felt like some ancient ritual, using my whole hand and not just my thumbs. Staring at his cowlick in class, I would write down everything I wanted: for him to critique my writing, to stroke my hair while we watched "Curb Your Enthusiasm" on his ugly futon, to read his plays and believe I was moving ever closer to his core.

Rather than give him any of these letters, I burned them, trying and failing to cremate that side of myself.

Day by day, hour by hour, my Instagram feed became more manic, nasty and petulant. Posts that were once meant as romantic gestures became tiny, pixelated middle fingers.

Joe began to notice, but instead of magically falling back in love with me, he became hurt and angry. I was inexplicably cold to him, posting photos of parties I threw that he wasn't invited to, pictures of me abroad where I hadn't told him I was studying, and pieces of art I made but hadn't shared with him.

In return, he sent me messages of unvarnished honesty: "Why didn't you invite me?" "Why are you being like this?"

Oh, it's just who I am. I am fun, I feel nothing and I have completely forgotten you.

And so it went, and I kept at the beautiful box I was crafting for myself. A shoe box covered in stickers and fake jewels. The kind you would make for a pet parakeet you have to bury. I would dream about Joe at night, and in the morning I would post something silvery and eye catching. It was always just tinfoil, though, not truth. And I prayed no one would notice.

I posted a photo of me standing next to a shirt that said "The World Shook at Adam's bar mitzvah, 1995," with a witty caption about simpler times, before global warming. A girl who follows me, with whom I've spoken only a handful of times, told me it was so "on brand."

My brand, specifically: funny, carefree, unromantic, a realist.

I'm like the chief executive of my own company, so I'm familiar with my branding, but its success doesn't thrill me the way it used to. Instead of feeling validated by her comment, I felt deflated. I barely know this girl, and yet she knows me, knows my "brand," and I am overwhelmed by the desire to tell her that I am fake, that I am heartbroken.

I can't say for certain that being more honest with my friends or broadening my "brand" to include a bit of depth, romanticism and pain would have helped. What I can say is that clinging to continuity has made my skin crawl and itch, as if I super-glued a mask over my face. I thought every day about peeling back that mask, but I couldn't; the girl it represented was everywhere, and I feared that her insides were completely mechanized.

This year, Joe and I are in a class together, and he's unsettled by my presence. I haven't spoken to him in forever.

"What's good, man?" I say with the signature casualness of cartoon me. "It's been a minute."

This is not the me who changed her outfit five times before arriving, who coughed repeatedly until her voice had acquired the perfect amount of rasp, who dug into her pores the night before, trying to rid her body of all signs that he was still buried there, thick and toxic under her skin.

If you spend eight years building a house (no matter how uncomfortable or ugly it may be, no matter how impractical or poorly lit), it becomes nearly impossible to knock it down. That is about how long I put into building my social media presence, into becoming the cool girl I showcase on Instagram and Facebook.

I built her without blueprints, not knowing that she would become a wall with no doors. She has stopped me from online dating, because that would mean I care about romance. She has stopped me from wearing pink, because that would mean I'm too feminine. She has stopped me from being publicly heartbroken, from sobbing on the orange subway seats, from showing up on Joe's doorstep with the letters I wrote, because that would mean I'm not cool.

Most recently, she tried to stop me from writing this essay, from admitting to everyone that I am hurting.

I wrote it anyway, though, and that's a start.