In Memoriam

I’m not sure how I came across her Facebook page. I think I was scrolling through my ticker feed in part of my never-ending quest for mindless entertainment when I happened to click on a post that one of my friends from high school had commented on. At first it seemed like just a regular birthday post: “Happy birthday Cara,” somebody had written—another teenaged girl, by the looks of it (by which I mean I clicked on her profile and went through every one of her 23 profile pictures). But then the second sentence came: “Rest easy up there.”

With a sense of foreboding, I scrolled through Cara’s timeline, reading the posts other friends had left. “I cannot believe it's been 5 years already,” one well-wisher wrote. “Happy 21st Birthday, Cara!” Another commented, “Have a drink with the big guy for me.” One post had more likes than all the others: “Happy birthday Cara! I miss you more and more each day… Thanks for watching over me and I hope I see you in heaven someday.” It was from her sister. In a rare act of respect from the collective conscious of the internet, nobody had commented.

The rest of Cara’s timeline was littered with birthday wishes and photos, so that it took a few minutes of scrolling to find what I was looking for—the first post of its kind, dated October 26th, 2008: “happy brithday cara. we all love you, R.I.P.” She had died on her birthday.

I returned to the top of her page, where I took stock of our mutual friends (three, none of whom I had spoken to recently) and her profile picture (a sunny photo by a lake somewhere, her bangs parted by the wind). Suddenly, with a shock of recognition, I realized that I had known this girl—or known of her, rather. I had been a freshman in high school when she died, in the middle of my first season on the cross country team. She was my sister’s age, a runner for a rival school, cornsilk-blonde and weightless across the finish line. I had sized her up (unrealistically) as competition, though I had never spoken to her and didn’t know her name.

I remember my mother’s gasp when she unfolded the paper that afternoon, the way her hand flew to her mouth. “Oh, how awful,” she said, more to herself than to me. I knew better than to ask, but once she had left, I opened up the paper to see a face I was startled to recognize, the familiar blue-and-white jersey unmistakable. A few wisps of hair had escaped from the barrette pinning back her bangs; a freckle was nestled in the crease of her dimple.

Now, years later, the same face was smiling back at me from a Facebook page, washed out by overexposure, off-center, a little crooked in its frame. I returned to her wall posts—many of them, heartbreakingly, read “Get better soon!” (She had died suddenly of a brain aneurysm, after a week of inexplicable illness.) Her page, arrested in those golden years before anybody cared how many likes your profile picture had, was the picture of adolescence: I smiled when I saw the wall posts about biology homework, the album titled “January!!” In 2008, she had attended Homecoming and a Quidditch Club Meeting. How funny—we had gone to the same summer camp. The events on her timeline included No Pants Day, Hug-A-Short-Person Day, “I think you’re cute” Day, Awesome Day. She looked younger than I had remembered, or had realized.

For someone who spends as much time on Facebook as I do, it’s hard not to imagine how Cara’s profile page might have looked under different circumstances. Would she have been in this profile picture of her friend’s, dressed up like the rest of them in a Dracula-style cape and plastic fangs? Or this one, where they’re all in sundresses, holding sparklers between their teeth? Would she have put up baby pictures, posted art as her cover photo, captioned things ironically and sans punctuation? Would I have come to her profile through chain-stalking filtered photos of my friends larking on the beach over spring break, rather than these *in memoriam* birthday posts to her deserted page?

If I was being totally honest, though, her page wasn’t deserted—postings from friends had continued steadily throughout the five years following her death, though volume decreased as time wore on. They were all people she had known—wishing her a happy birthday, saying they missed her, saying they loved her, that they were thinking of her earlier today. What were all these people doing, posting on her wall? Didn’t they realize she couldn’t read any of it? Unlike a prayer, that private act of conversation, a wall post is public, meant for eyes other than the person on the receiving end. It didn’t make sense to me, why they would need to post for all the world to see—after all, if they had something truly meaningful to say, wouldn’t they say it in private?

As I scrolled through the wall posts that made up Cara’s timeline, though, I started to feel not quite so sure. For so many of us, Facebook is how we keep people in our lives—friends from high school, distant relatives, people we met at concerts and don’t really know but keep around for the annual album of outrageous Coachella photos. We “like” photos to show that we’re still following our old friends’ misadventures, that we approve of their new relationships, that we think their brothers are really good-looking and have you mentioned I’m back for spring break?

When we post on someone’s wall, though, we aren’t just looking for a response from the person in question—that’s what messaging and texting are for. We realize, when we post, that other people will see it, and that they might respond as well, and that even if they don’t their opinion of us will have been shaped in some small way by that post. Thus, every wall post—precisely because it is a premeditated act, because we know that it will be observed by anyone else surfing Facebook at 4 a.m.—is a reminder of our identity. The thing is, it’s as much a reminder to ourselves as it is to other people.

Facebook gives us a way to shape our personal narratives—and it is satisfying, in a way, to scroll down the timeline and see the years peel away, to see myself stumble through high school pep rallies and middle school dances with my cohort of childhood friends. It’s like flipping through a photo album, but with the accompanying conversations intact. It’s a reminder of who I am and how I came to be this person.

So maybe those people are posting on Cara’s wall in part because it makes them feel as though she’s still with them—but maybe it’s also an assertion of the self, in a way, or at least a way of making sense of who they are. Reading through these posts, many of them sound like confessionals—agonized, honest, sincere. “I’ve been thinking about you quite a bit recently,” one says. “You’ve had a pretty big impact on my life. I almost wish you didn’t, but I guess we all have to make the best of it down here… I don’t really know what I believe in yet, but I kind of do hope to see you on ‘the other side,’ my love.”