

“ILY”

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From “You Don't Look Like Your Picture: Stories of Love in the Digital Age”

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It was the Autumn of Petraeus and fuckers everywhere were scared. If the head of the CIA couldn't get away with it, how could we mere civilians hope to? He from whom we expected more, who should have been able to circumvent any means of detection, had fallen like the lowliest of perpetrators. So using unsent emails was not foolproof. So creating fake email addresses was not reliable. Was anything in this world still safe?

We who had particular reason to follow the story combed the newspapers for any detail that would aid and abet our own affairs, even though outwardly we avoided showing any interest for fear of sparking any spousal discussion. Only when forced did we offer bland answers, such as *I'm a little behind on the news*, or *God, not another one*, in order to throw off suspicion. Because how could we admit that we had become consumed by the question of why the general had not relied on text alone; why had he not bought dummy computers, purchased pay per use phones in strangers' names? In the private spaces inside our heads, we had to wonder: did this mean that we were more cunning than Petraeus himself? Or had he considered these methods and deemed them more dangerous than the ones he chose? And if he had fallen, did this mean that we would as well?

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“TWY.”

It showed up on Nora's screen as she was yelling at her fifteen-year-old daughter Eliza about homework.

“I'm not going to ask you again,” Nora said, knowing that she would in fact ask again and again.

“How can you make me get off my phone when you're always on yours?” Eliza said.

“w E,” Nora typed.

“DYWM?” Her phone beeped back at her. The first time he wrote IWY she had startled at the brazenness of it, then began texting it to him throughout the day.

“Since when do you know how to *text*?” Eliza snorted. The sweetness of having a daughter had vanished seemingly overnight; Eliza had morphed into an unrecognizable being that, for reasons unknown, she was still required to care for.

Nora typed her response, one she used so often that even autocorrect accepted its admission into the lexicon: “TWYSM.”

It started, as these things did, on Facebook. The fact that she was on Facebook—that she checked every day even if she rarely posted—was vaguely embarrassing, like women her age who squeezed themselves into outfits intended for their daughters. She created the account with the help of Eliza, who mocked her fifty-year-old mother for being on Facebook and of course refused her friend request.

His name, George Bennett, was suggested to her after she connected to other old friends from the town in Maryland where they’d both grown up. At first she resisted sending a friend request to someone she’d once had a terrible crush on—to do so seemed girlish and obvious, yet reckless at the same time. She hadn’t seen him in ages, yet in her mind he remained a fantasy she took out from time to time, on nights when she felt small and alone. Recently though, when she was home visiting, her mother had innocently mentioned that she’d run into George while he was in town visiting his family. “Remember how much you used to like him?” her mother who remembered little now said. Nora pretended not to be affected by this news, but she spent the rest of her visit with her eyes peeled for any unlikely sight of him. As soon as she got home, she was unable to hold herself back.

From the pictures he’d posted, she could see that his hair had grayed and thinned and he had the beginning of a paunch, but he was still attractive, with bright green eyes and the same impish smile as though he were quietly daring her to do something. He lived in Potomac, not far from where they’d both grown up, and was a professor of political science, though in her mind he was still the twenty-two year old who taught tennis at her parents’ club, and she the fifteen year old with long brown hair and wide dark eyes, shy and full of romantic longing. Everyone, including her, knew that she was too young for him, so her crush was considered sweet, even by her parents who took him out to dinner at the end of each summer to thank him for how good he was to their daughter.

Every summer she gazed longingly at him, but had he returned her interest, she would hardly have known what to do. Fifteen years old—was any year more horrible in the

life of a girl? Eliza, the same age she was that summer, had hair long like hers had been, but jet-black and blown fiercely straight. Eliza dressed more like a prostitute than a school girl, but Nora allowed it because the other mothers did and her daughter would not stand for being told no.

During her sophomore and junior years, she'd written to George twice a week, long letters on pink stationery. She imagined that he carried the letters between the pages of his textbooks, in the back pocket of his jeans. He responded on pages torn from a spiral notebook, short, messily scrawled letters that arrived in her mailbox just often enough to assure her that he was glad to hear from her. She had seen him each summer until she too was in college, but by then he had a girlfriend, and her crush had waned, seeming like a part of her childhood that needed to be packed up and put away.

"So tell me," George messaged her a few minutes after accepting the friend request, "what have you been up to for the past thirty years?"

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The constant drumbeat of news forced us to re-examine our ways. But no matter how meticulous we were, we could not find a way around the cell phone. How did they do it before cell phones? we marveled. Did they really write letters as those aficionados of the written word like to claim? Sent to the house when anyone could bring in the mail? Did they rent PO boxes for such purposes, swinging by the town post office every day on their way home from work? Even worse, did they call the house? The *house*? Only the beginners among us did that, and then only if mistakes were made. Without such advancements, would we be attaching love letters to rocks and sending them hurling through windows, hoping no one would notice the shattering of glass, the crashing of projectiles? How many of us would turn back due to the sheer difficulty of the mission? Would we be driving slowly by the house, early in the morning or late at night when we would not be spotted, or, for the daring or desperate among us, at dinner time when there was the reckless wish to be caught?

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In an email, she summed up her life: college, marriage, work, Eliza, more work, more marriage. "I am a sonographer for a local obstetrician, she wrote. Jon is a lawyer at a firm in

Boston. My daughter is beautiful and spirited and keeps me on my toes! We will celebrate our nineteenth wedding anniversary this summer.” She hated how she sounded but hit send nonetheless. They had switched from Facebook to email, and several times each day she checked her inbox, awaiting a message from him. Until now she hadn’t understood those who complained that the Internet was too slow—this phenomenon that would have seemed miraculous a few years before.

“My sons are the age I was when I knew you,” he wrote.

“What about tennis?” she asked.

“On weekends when I have the time.”

“Are you happily married?” she asked.

“I am married. That much I can say.”

One admission, and the tone changed. In the next email, George told her that at his wedding he knew he was not as in love as he should have been. He had been pleasant but disinterested, and apparently the feeling was now mutual. He buried himself in his work, teaching and doing research. “It is not a bad thing, to love your work,” he wrote. “It has saved me from much unhappiness.”

“And what about you?” he asked at the end of a long email that sounded like a carefully composed treatise. “I wouldn’t say I am unhappy in my marriage, only that I never shake the feeling of being alone,” she wrote. “Tell me more,” he had written, so she had. “I feel like I could disappear and Jon and Eliza would notice only when they ran out of clean laundry.” By email, it was possible to write whatever you wanted, to believe that your words went only into the air; there was greater privacy than when you sat with a friend and poured yourself out, then worried you’d said too much. “I spent most of a decade waiting for Jon to come home from work. By now, it’s reasonable to say I’ve stopped wanting him to come home.”

“Do you remember my letters?” she wrote, hoping she sounded sufficiently light-hearted: the wise, mature woman looking back at the foibles of the young silly self.

“I still have them,” he said and told her that they were in his attic along with his tennis trophies and high school yearbook, artifacts that had survived mainly because they were unknown to his wife, who would surely have thrown them away if she knew he had something that once made him happy.

“Oh please don’t look at them.”

“I plan to re-read every single one.”

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Here was the essential security issue: When you delete a text, is it really gone? We studied our phones to see if there was a way to retrieve those messages. We googled the question, then when we worried someone might come across the terms of our search, we tried frantically to delete that. A few of us had called AT&T, concocting elaborate reasons for needing to know, as though we were government-cleared nuclear scientists or operatives in the Department of Homeland Security, texting amongst ourselves the nation's secrets. The more blatant, or at least the ones who believed that phone center operators were bound by the confidentiality clauses of doctors or therapists, asked outright: Is this a safe means of communication? Can we rely on you, American Telephone and Telegraph, to keep secret our affairs?

At lunchtime in office complexes in Indiana or India, the people hired to answer AT&T's calls sat around discussing what had been asked of them that day. The ones who had fielded the most interesting calls were given center stage. "He called to ask me if texts disappear once he deletes them. He says to me, this man, he is having an affair and wants to make sure that no one can retrieve the contents of the texts once they are deleted," she said and paused there to allow those around her to sigh and shake their heads in dismay at the terrible things that other people did. "I thought to tell him this is not a good thing to be doing, but who am I to say this to him. So I told him yes, he is safe. There is a record of who you have texted but the messages themselves disappear," she concluded and everyone laughed. Did anything in this world really disappear?

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"How embarrassed should I be?" Nora said when his text informed her that he had stayed up until the middle of the night reading.

"Reading them brought me back to a different era of my life. I remembered how much I looked forward to getting your letters. You told me the details of each of your

classes, you gave me the names of each of your friends. You made a list of questions I needed to answer about what I wanted to happen in my life.”

They’d switched to text, because it delivered a quicker response during the day when they were both at work, she in one of the exam rooms, surveying shadows of light and dark in the growing fetuses. She went in looking first for abnormalities, assuming a problem until proven otherwise. Once, after a bad week in which she found three miscarriages, her co-workers had joked that she was killing the babies. Usually, she joined in the office banter but now she longed to confess to her colleagues, ask them if straying in her heart was the same as straying with the other parts of herself, or to confide in the women whose bellies she peered inside, as though she had penetrated the depths of the ocean, able to observe the sea creatures that swam without knowing they were being watched. She wished to peer into the chambers of their hearts as well, to know if any of these women were as loyal and treasonous as she.

“How obvious was it that I had a huge crush?” she texted as soon as she had a free moment.

“I’m afraid that might have been the only time I was ever loved,” he replied.

A patient was waiting for her on the table, her belly thick with gel. Nora had been caught speechless by the declaration and hadn’t known how to respond, but that was the beauty of text: you didn’t have to respond until you knew how.

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Even the CIA had not yet solved this problem: where were you supposed to go? There were no undisclosed locations, no demilitarized zones or underground compounds where you could cease to exist in the world for an hour or a day. No matter how advanced our technological capabilities had become, this problem did not change—though in trying to sort out this operational issue, we felt as though we’d stepped onto a quaint movie set. It was foolish, we knew, to try for when the spouse was not at home; equally foolhardy to attempt a hotel for which you needed to officially register as though you were arriving to vote. You couldn’t ask friends for the use of their houses—who had such trustworthy friends, who could be sure that a so-called ally was not an informer? We scrolled through the options, wondering why someone (us perhaps) did not open a safe house for such purposes. We came

to the conclusion that the safest option was to hide in plain sight. There was no choice but to accept the fact that privacy was an illusion. Everywhere you went, you left a trail.

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“N?” he texted

“Hi!”

This was the agreed upon sign that the coast was clear. Were it not a good time to receive a text from a former crush whom she now was in contact with twenty times a day, she would have responded with a perfunctory “Hey.” He told her that each time he texted her initial, he waited, hoping for that all-clear signal. How many feelings, they had wondered, could they hide inside so few letters—so much longing compressed, waiting to spring forth. “Each time I see that “Hi” on my screen, I feel like you are right here with me,” he’d written to her once. “I am,” she’d texted in response.

“IMU,” her screen said.

“Crazy! Haven’t seen u in decades. How can IMYSM?” she responded.

Every day a flurry of texts. She tried to hide her preoccupation with her phone, but while driving to work, scanning a patient, making dinner, dealing with Eliza, he was at the front of her mind. When neither Jon nor Eliza were around, she removed the hot pink case designed to protect her phone from any danger and held the sleek white metal in her hand. When she thought about George, she looked knowingly at the phone, as though expecting it to smile back. Yet even as she kept her phone on her at all times, sleeping with it tucked under her pillow, she told herself she was not someone who would ever do this. Had she heard a story about someone like herself, she would have wondered how such a person could live with herself.

They traded confessions. That she looked at her husband, saw a tight, small man, and tried to remember why she had married him. She had once even gone back to the diary she kept in those years, to see if she could shed light on this mystery. His wife, he said, had made it clear she had no feelings for him anymore, which had come as something of a relief. They

lived in one house yet barely interacted. Once a year, on his birthday, she gave him sex as a gift—and this, he suspected, was only because she hated to spend any money on him.

At almost 11 at night, she was falling asleep, phone in hand. Jon was still at work—when they were younger, he claimed he needed to stay late in order to get ahead, but even at this stage in his career he'd found other reasons to always be in his office. In years past, she'd expended so much effort to imagine why—a porn habit or an online gambling addiction—until she'd finally come to the conclusion that he simply preferred to be there rather than here.

Nora dozed and didn't respond to something George wrote.

"R u there?" his text beeped a second time, rousing her.

"Sleepy."

"Want to say gnite? Can txt u in am."

"Feel like you are here with me," she confessed.

"There is a beautiful lake near campus where I like to a walk. Maybe one day you will go w me?"

It was 438.46 miles from her house to his—this she knew because she had mapped the route she might take. Far enough away that the constant texting seemed safe, not so far that it was impossible that one day they would each drive 217.23 miles to meet in the middle.

"I wish."

"Drive!" he wrote.

She heard the downstairs door open, then the tread of footsteps. "Gnite," she texted quickly, code for the end of a conversation.

Jon came into the room, his day written in gray exhaustion across his face. He undressed before her as he had countless times, but this time she forced herself to watch: his back to her, he carefully undid each button of his dress shirt. His white undershirt was stretched and pilled, gray in places, yellowed under the arms. This too he took off, and there was his pale back, which had always inexplicably made her feel sad, as did the spackle of freckles, the few dark moles.

"Why are you still awake?"

"No reason," she said, sure there was a quiver in her voice.

"How's Eliza?" he asked as they exchanged the facts of the day.

"The usual. Why? Does she not seem okay to you?"

“She seems fifteen,” he said, shrugging off her worry, and she tried to agree. Even as a little girl, Eliza was a wide-eyed watcher who kept her own confidence. Like Jon, she had always thought, who was a self-contained, self-sufficient unit.

As he lay in bed next to her, she had the urge to force him into a conversation, or simply to hand him her phone and say, read. That would unfurl all the words that had been inexplicably held back; they would pour from his mouth, with the exuberance of someone who just discovered the capacity for speech. She would say: I am caught up in something I don’t know how to name. However improbably, he would feel sympathy for what she had wandered into so unwittingly.

They lay in bed next to each other but no part of them touched. Since she began texting George, she’d been unable to touch her husband—even their routine half-asleep obligatory sex felt like a betrayal though she wasn’t sure which of them she would be betraying. She waited for Jon to notice that she had stopped initiating. A few times she was sure she caught him looking at her with a worried expression, but if he was wondering anything in particular, he made no mention of it.

“N”—the phone beeped once more, breaking the agreed-upon code. Jon stirred and rolled, but didn’t wake fully.

“Can’t txt,” she wrote, guilt flushing her face as she held the phone close to her.

“1 thing?”

“OK,” she wrote.

“Can’t stop thinking about you. Not in twenty years have I felt this way.”

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It would be a tactical error to be fooled by our bravado. Those trails, digital or real, had us lying awake in fear. We worried about any look we received that appeared unusually probing. We were flooded with anxiety at questions such as *where were you?* and *who was that?* Our worry was less about being caught in the act—this too seemed like a relic from quaint, almost innocent days, when a husband came home unexpectedly early from work, when a wife found a lipstick stain, in an unfamiliar shade of pink, on a dress shirt collar. Now these days we knew that our phones were the most likely means of getting caught. This was the way of the world, was it not? That which facilitated our mission would also be the thing to doom it.

All it took now was a slip of the hand—one moment in which we left the phone in an unsecured location, one instant in which we hit send, then realized it was to the wrong person; one time when we intended to sign out of our Gmail, only to become distracted and forget, so that there, written plainly on the screen, our every secret and desire.

And yet the irony was inescapable: Even as we knew all this, we continued to assure ourselves that we would not be caught; our entire lives were stacked on the fact that we would get away with this. No matter what our future plans, this part of the story could stay buried forever. Here perhaps we were most like our celebrity counterparts, our politicians, our leaders, all of whom believed they alone would defy the odds, get away with their secrets unscathed.

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“20 yrs,” he wrote to her as she was driving to work, neglecting the coded openings they had so diligently crafted in the beginning. There was little reason to think that Jon suspected her of anything. After weeks in which their outer routines had been entirely unaffected by the upheaval in their emotional lives, such measures seemed like overkill, the wishful fantasy of those who imagined they were being watched at all.

“Not 30?”

“Ok, 30!”

“Not true. You didn’t like me then. Only I liked u,” she texted while she was walking into her office, setting down her bag.

“Making up for it now.”

She had laughed, surprised that he couldn’t hear the sound of her voice. They’d never called one another, neither of them wanting to shatter the intimacy they’d established in words.

“Laughing,” she wrote.

“LOL!”

“Don’t write that! E mocks me if I use.”

“At least she talks to you.”

“Do yours?”

“Only when they need money.”

“She barely talks. Mostly she rolls eyes.”

“Will u send me pic of u?” he asked.

“?”

“Want to see what u look like when u laugh.”

“Bad idea?”

“Why?”

“What r we doing?” she asked, though to do so was to risk piercing the lovely bubbled world in which she now swam. She thought of the babies she scanned, for whom the rest of the world was nicely unknown. When a doctor did an Amniocentesis, she held the probe as he guided the needle into the sac, disturbing a sealed world. It made sense to her that some of these babies were lost as a result, unable to tolerate such an intrusion.

“Pls. Want to see u.”

How did you even text a picture? She would need to ask, though this wasn’t something she could ask Eliza. If she knew about George, she would probably find it hilarious: Mom Sexts!! Her daughter would proclaim with glee.

One picture—what harm could there be? Well, plenty. He would see that she had failed to lose weight, had failed to take up yoga or running, had failed to appear like a mother who could be mistaken for a daughter. The photo she’d like to send was one she’d come across recently in an old album, hoping to find an image of him. Taken during one of those summers, her smile was filled only with hope, her face turned up toward the sun in near worship, as though she believed she could drink in all that light.

“Don’t look like did then—and even then you did not want me.”

“Not true, u were 2 young.”

“Even later,” she said.

“Didn’t think of you that way. Wish I had,” he wrote.

“Now too late,” she said in order to quell the growing fear she felt about what she was doing. As soon as she hit send, she wished she could pull back the definitiveness of her words and turn them into a question that remained tantalizingly open for both of them.

“Is it??” he answered.

On those same nights when we lay helplessly awake, here was the question we couldn't help ponder. If detected, was it better to issue a vehement denial or to come clean and throw ourselves upon the mercy of the court? Once we were in the position of having to issue a denial, was it ever believed? The forms of torture would be innumerable: the endless searching looks, the need to verify each of our words, the presumption that we were lying even when we were not. We evaded, eluded, avoided, denied, but there was no relief. The worst punishments came from inside. For those of us in this line of work, every word, every act really was a lie. To wash the dishes, make dinner, this was a lie. Even to be asleep quietly in bed, this was a lie. For how long could we withstand these internal forms of torture, where we no longer knew how to think of ourselves, where we no longer had only one self.

We were not immune to the pain we caused or to the debilitating waves of guilt. We acted coldly, mercilessly for the safety of the mission, to hold together our delicate lives, but we carried the hurt in our bodies every moment, every day. Thoughts ran wildly through our mind: *am I really doing this?* and *how did I arrive here?* and *where will this go?* By night, we resolved to end it, or leave, but we woke to mornings where we did nothing but remain in this dangling pose because every option seemed like an impossibility. We avoided meeting their eyes; we avoided conversations in which we might be entangled too deeply. We had no choice but to stay on the edges. We had little room for more—inside ourselves we bore the weight of multiple lives, each hidden away.

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“Love the pic. Looked at it all day.”

She had sent a picture of herself taken a few months before at a barbecue, her face turned up toward the sky, flooded with light that made her appear deceptively joyful, an accidental approximation of that long ago image. She'd looked at the picture countless times before sending it, enlarging it with her fingers to better assess what it revealed about her.

“One sec,” she wrote. Another text was coming in at the same time, which made her wary that, with a slip of the hand, she would accidentally send her daughter a text meant for George.

“Sleeping at Hannah's house,” Eliza had written.

“Again?”

“Yes again.”

“Ok w her mom?”

Was Hannah’s mother even home? Were any of the parents around or required to be? Eliza’s friends all seemed to live in enormous houses where no one was ever at home.

“Barely know my daughter. She looks for any reason to not be with me,” she texted.

“1 kid left. He’s going to be a senior in high school. With just 2 of us home, will be harder to hide.”

“3 more years for us,” she wrote.

“And how will that be when she is gone?”

“Don’t know. Don’t know anything right now.”

Once the fantasy had started to take shape, it mattered less that she had a life already beset with obligation. She would get into her car and, after making sure no one was following her, she would head south until she reached that halfway spot. She googled hotels near that spot, browsing rooms and rates and amenities, then made sure to hit “clear history” so no one would know where, at least in her mind, she had been. She devised various stories she would use to get away for the weekend, all of which would be airtight and readily believed.

“Drive,” George wrote.

“!!”

“NNNNNNNNNNNNNNN.” He had filled her screen.

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This fear, it made us act strangely, made us look over our shoulders so that we appeared suspicious, worthy of the surveillance measures we feared. Worried that we were being followed, we routinely drove several blocks out of our way, even when we really were going to the grocery store or the gym as we claimed. We swung by our local gas station and asked the man working there to check our cars for GPS devices that might be recording our every move. We could not let a moment pass without knowing the exact whereabouts of all our cellular devices. We vehemently refused our phones permission to turn on location services,

yet even so, felt sure sometimes that the phones had been hacked, turned into double agents that betrayed us.

Even then, we could not feel secure. In the past our predecessors only had to elude the eye of a spouse, a neighbor, or for the religious among us, the eye of God. It was one thing to fool these amateurs but never before, was there the need to evade the NSA, which surely did exist, all-knowing, all-seeing. We held forth about civil liberties and privacy rights but inside we were bathed in fear: Were we known to the powers above? Were we on the emotional equivalent of no-fly lists? When we were out to dinner with our spouses or attending back-to-school nights or participating in family outings, were people watching us, aware that we were not who we appeared to be? We understood better now what it was to be Petraeus, Clinton, all of them, fleetingly grateful for our own invisibility. As we watched their parades across the cameras, we asked ourselves, was this really about power and hubris and lust, or was it possible that they acted as we did, from loneliness, from pain, from a wish for love?

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When the sleepover finally ended and Nora drove to pick her up, Eliza came into the front seat and barely said hello, as though Nora were merely the cab driver arriving for a fare. Instead of feeling the slight, she took refuge in her mind. That morning she had broached the question: Could they really meet? It was one thing to text “drive!!!”, another to plan the day in which they would each actually get into their cars. “Don’t you want to see if what we have is real?” she’d asked. “Don’t you think it’s already real?” he asked her. She mulled over whether in fact this was true; from a distance it was easy to see what you wished to be there. She debated whether she preferred to meet and discover that she could not live without him, then endure the upheaval that such knowledge would create. Or, would she rather bear the disappointment that George had existed in words alone, then return to her life, which would remain safely, sadly, intact.

“Did you have fun?” she asked Eliza, who grunted in response.

“Who else was there?” This question too was left unanswered, as Eliza rummaged through her backpack and discovered that she’d left her makeup bag. Nora pulled back up the driveway and Eliza ran into the house. On the seat of the car, she’d left her phone—an

iPhone in a magenta case that she'd once decorated with flowered stickers that were now peeling and faded. The phone lay shockingly vulnerable, as though she'd left unguarded the contents of her heart.

Nora picked it up: how easy it was to enter someone else's mind. It was wrong, but how else did you gain access?

First, the texts—weeks' worth of conversation which she read as quickly as she could, the messages, senders, and responses all jumbling. But she made out enough. How old is he??? Hannah asking. And a promise not to tell, and an email asking how bad of an idea is this???? Slut, Whore, all of these appearing in texts, though, to her shock, Eliza didn't seem to mind being called these terrible words. All of it, she surmised, about a text exchange with a boy whose name she didn't recognize, filled with what they wanted to do with one another, the word fuck appearing so many times that the letters appeared like sharpened weapons. She blushed to see it in writing, as though it were not the word she was seeing but the act itself.

Worry raced in her body. References to things she'd never heard of, with names like Tinder and Chat Roulette. Her daughter and her friends spoke another language; all she could do was try to decipher it. With Eliza coming out of the house, she quickly closed the phone and returned it to the spot it had been. Eliza got into the car and snatched the phone, as though she knew instinctively what had happened in her absence.

Nora gave her daughter a long, appraising look. "Are you okay?"

"Why would I not be?" she said without looking up from the phone.

She tried to think of something she might say but she had no line to reel her daughter in from her preoccupation. She had a moment's shock at how beautiful Eliza was, even the small pout of defiance on her face suddenly so ravishing that it made her want to cry. She reached her arm out to stroke her daughter's face, but she pulled away as though she'd been struck. Instead of making her seem older, the words she'd seen only made Eliza appear smaller, a child caught impersonating an adult.

"Look at me, Eliza. Are you okay?"

Her daughter hit send before she did what was asked. She looked up, gave her a withering look that then collapsed into an expression Nora could only decipher as fear.

"Are *you* okay, mom?" she asked.

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Who was hired, we wondered, to compile, tabulate, graph, and analyze all that data the government was collecting; who were the transcribers privy to the nation's most sensitive secrets? In Midwestern silos, or underground compounds in the Mojave desert, a team given the highest of security clearance would sit in computer banks, working feverishly. Here, at last, we would be equal, the rich and poor, the famous and the insignificant; everyone's cryptic proclamations of love, every explicit email or hurried whisper of desire would be typed out. Here, posted on a company bulletin board, along with the password for accessing the computer databases and the code to the bathroom, all the acronyms we came up with, those coded ways of saying I love you, I want you, meet me here, tomorrow, today. They would laugh at our efforts to outsmart them. They would post their favorites in the staff lounge. Each worker would be required to meet monthly quotas, be asked to present a bi-annual report. Here, all the times we claimed to be at the gym, all the times we feigned a late business dinner or unexpected traffic. To look at these transcripts would make it seem that no one ever went where they said they did; that the grocery store didn't exist as anything but a likely alibi. There would not be enough room to contain all the information, all that is gleaned. Even if every forest were desiccated, there would not be sufficient paper. Every gigabyte of memory would be full.

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They were out to dinner, each of them simultaneously placing their phones face up on the table, as if laying out their weapons.

"It's just kidding around," Eliza said, in response to their inquisition.

"It's dangerous."

"Nothing is that dangerous."

Nora had called Jon late that night when he was still in the office, closing the door of the bedroom so that Eliza, who never seemed to go to sleep, wouldn't overhear. She'd tried him first at the office but he didn't pick up, so she called him on his cell and told him what she had seen on Eliza's phone. "Where are you anyway?" she asked. "On my way home," he said, too quickly, and the old question, which she had long ago stopped trying to answer, reared again. In the midst of her worry about Eliza, another crater had opened inside her.

Inside her own pain, she'd thought for the first time of George's wife too: what did she use to fill the gaping hole inside herself—where, in turn, did she seek her solace?

"You spied on me," Eliza was saying.

"How else are we supposed to know what you're doing?"

"You're not. That's the point."

"You don't talk to us," she said, softening, hoping this would achieve the same effect in her daughter.

"No one in our family *talks*."

They would block sites, install controls, confiscate her phone if need be, as though any of that would be enough to hold her in. Nora's own phone beeped before she had a chance to silence it. Each of them was visibly startled, as though this were no longer a sound that punctuated every conversation. There was, for a moment on Eliza's face, the curl of uncertainty as Nora jumped and reached for her phone.

"ILY," the message read, appearing on the screen for a few seconds, boldly foolishly laid out before checking to see if the coast was clear.

She didn't know if she'd grabbed the phone fast enough, didn't know if she was imagining the suspicion spreading across each of their faces. If someone were to see ILY, could you claim it was merely an autocorrect? What could you claim someone had been trying to write?

"Who's texting *you*?" Eliza asked.

"Just a friend," she fumbled, hoping they could not see that her fingers were trembling. She expected Eliza to lay further into her, but instead she shifted her infuriated gaze to her father.

"And what about you, dad? Who's texting you all the time? I should take away both of your phones too."

Jon swallowed hard as though trying to digest a tough bite of his dinner, and Nora looked away, not daring to meet his eye. But there was no safe place to look, not at the phone on her lap, not at Eliza staring at the two of them in horror.

"Tell me why," she asked Eliza, trying to regain her composure, trying to return to the subject at hand.

"Why? Because it's fun."

"Come on. More than that. I really want to know."

As Eliza leveled her gaze at her, Jon sat helplessly by. Absence had always been the safest route, and now he looked searchingly back and forth at them, as though waiting to be dismissed from the table. She wanted to get up and run from the table as well, from both of them, from herself. All she could do was look helplessly at Eliza, as though somehow she might be the one who knew what to do.

“We all do it, Hannah, everyone. We meet strangers. We chat with them. Sometimes we hook up but that’s not really the point. It’s more fun than being with people we know. Anyone can be anyone.”

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And then what will they do with all that data? Take it, and when they finish building the 9/11 Memorial in New York, perhaps they’ll build a great museum of the inner life. Here, on display, what people really think, feel, say. We’ll pay our ten dollars admission and walk through the troves of deleted text messages, the halls of emails that have been anxiously erased yet never disappear, and with our audio guides, we’ll hear the sound recordings of unedited calls and voicemails.

People will come, as they do to Ellis Island, to learn about their family history and about themselves. Some will come to gape and preach, and they will leave shaking their heads in dismay; they will come back only to boycott, with placards proclaiming their righteousness.

But the rest of us, those who wander through the halls, we will know that we have arrived at the innermost chambers of the heart, the secret hideaways in our minds. We will follow the winding maze of hallways in which the museum is laid out, getting lost along the way. There will be no map, no floor plan to this museum, no pretense that any of us knows the best way to go. Instead, as we wander, the facades of contentment will fall and we will discover, here, how many of us there are. We will see in a gallery, case studies, one after another: glass-domed displays labeled David and Paula and Bill and Jon and Linda and Holly and Rebecca and Mark and Elliot and Nora and Nina and George and Scott. And along with their names, and ours, every combination and permutation of stories: yours, theirs, and our own.

Here, we will find the feeling that growing larger was a vast space inside us where no one entered though we lay awake all night, waiting; we will walk through an exhibit of computer screens glowing hopefully, late into the night; arrays of green lights on Facebook illuminated like lights left waiting for someone to come home, a lantern kept burning just in case. Here, we will find diagrams of boredom and restlessness, towering piles of exhaustion and anger and resentment; here too, the pull of pleasure and desire, the shock of being reminded that we in fact possessed bodies ready to be roused from too-early slumbers. Here too, a display of messages from those on the other side, texts asking repeatedly: *where r u? why r u so late? when will u be home?*; a room too with no words but dark lighting and piped in only the sound of pained sobbing.

Here, all the times we looked at a spouse and knew they were not really there—or if they were, then we were not. Here, the moments we wondered how we had arrived in this night where we lay awake searching for the way out. Here, on display, encased in glass, admissions from our husbands and wives, our parents and best friends of what happens upon discovering that a marriage didn't necessarily cure loneliness, nor did it tame the heart as promised; that all it had done was chain us in, those wild rumbling longings left intact. Here, the sinking feeling that we had arrived at the end of all that would ever happen to us. Another gallery, at the end of a long hall, where the doors slammed shut and locked behind us, yet to our great surprise, through a keyhole, we glimpsed a glimmer of light. Here, in a glass display, the shock of a moment in which life seemed to start anew and every cell inside us stood at attention; our bodies awake for the first time—ever, it seemed.

This surveillance, we realized, would both incriminate us and exonerate us.

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The text was still unanswered. ILY: a dare, an invitation, a plea. Those letters, if she could take them apart, what solid edifices would she find behind them? In the car on the way home, she quietly took out her phone. In the dark, with the sound switched off, she opened her text messages. Delete all, she instructed, hating that she would lose this record of all they had written to one another. But how crafty you could be when needed: she was no longer an amateur who had wandered accidentally into some foreign world, but a skilled participant joining the ranks.

Back in their bedroom, she watched Jon carefully. Their familiarity had given way to wariness. The words waiting to be said: Where are you? And what of us? Were they strangers or spouses and who could be sure of the difference anymore. She tried to adapt a pose of innocence so that he could not see the contents of her head. But how did you hide the changes so small that you did not even know what they were? She could erase the texts from her screen, but nothing could erase them from her mind.

She waited for him to say something, but he fiddled nervously with his phone, mumbled good night, and quickly turned off the light. In bed, she lay awake next to his sleeping form and realized. He had not asked because he had not wanted to be asked where he was in return. This, their all-too-effective policy of mutual deterrence. She stared at the ceiling, imagining that the shadows formed mazes from which she futilely sought a way out. How many before her, she wondered, had felt exactly as she did; how many others right now were in this same position?

The possibilities opened before her. She could send no response to his text, now or ever: tuck George away into the part of her mind where fantasy reigned. Throw her phone out the window, let her screen go dark, shut down the account. And then wait for the pain and loneliness to pass, put her body, her mind back to sleep.

She stayed awake. On her bedside table, the cellphone sat, watching, waiting. When she was sure Jon was asleep, she took out her phone, the glow of it illuminating one small part of their room. She wrote one word, "Hi," so simple yet with it came the thought, terrifying and exhilarating and apparently already known to so many around her: Your life didn't have to happen in the place that you lived.