The Dog

riv3r is now online.

I find myself in the center of a field. The grass underneath me is lime green and impeccably cut. The sky is a uniform pale blue dotted with puffy, cartoonish clouds. I'm watching the crowds of people who rapidly appear and disappear, milling around me as speech bubbles pop and fade away above their heads. Orchestral music, a tinny recording with violins and crackling percussion, swells and fades in a loop. I don't notice the music until I realize it has stopped, plunging me in silence.

All the people around me freeze, and my computer starts rattling, heating up beneath my fingers. The computer sighs, and everyone starts moving again.

Charlotte13 says: River!!! Haven't seen you in so long!

Charlotte dances circles around me. I grin and start typing.

riv3r says: OMG hey!! What up!
Charlotte13 says: Not much… my parents r mad at me bc I got a bad grade on my english paper… I hate school
riv3r says: I hate it too. I can't even force myself to go anymore…
Charlotte13 says: What do u mean?

I hesitate. I feel daring.

riv3r says: Idk I've just been skipping class sooo much lately. I just skateboard or something.
riv3r says: I'm dropping out as soon as I can.

I have never skipped class in my life. But in the moment, I am firmly convinced that I have, or River *has. I don't really think about the difference; I am River and I am myself, simultaneously the avatar on the screen and the girl sitting at the computer.*

I'm wearing a short black dress, black sneakers, and a backwards baseball cap on my tousled dark hair. My outfit is pretty good today. It brings out the green in my eyes.

That was wildly different from what I actually looked like. Tearing my eyes away from the bright movements on the screen, I pushed my glasses up on my nose and played with an unraveling thread on the bottom of my shirt – size men's L, stiff cotton, "HONG KONG" written across the chest in cartoonish letters.

My ill-fitting cargo pants, hanging off of my skinny legs, and my scuffed-up white sneakers were purchases I never would have made using my precious online money. As a stringy lock of blonde hair fell into my line of vision, I sighed with frustration, considering for a brief, wild moment to get the kitchen scissors and chop it all off. For months, I had been unsuccessfully lobbying to get a mop top like *A Hard Day's Night*-era John Lennon, but my parents said I would regret it, and every time I went to the hairdresser, I couldn't bring myself to commit. I wasn't rebellious like that.

Outside, a car door slammed, and I looked out to see the headlights on my mother's car glow red in the window. Somehow, hours had passed since I had arrived home from school. My backpack, bloated with crumpled assignments and notes from units we had completed months ago, lay forgotten at my feet, and I was shrouded in darkness except for the blue light of the computer screen.

I winced. I had to log off, fast, or my mom would see I had broken her new rule: 45 minutes on the Internet per day, and not until I was done studying.

riv3r: Ugh sorry I gtg. My friends throwing a party and I have to help him…

I closed out of the browser and angrily opened my math textbook.

Whenever I fought with my parents about how much time I spent on the Internet, they started talking about people who were addicted to video games and spent their lives in their parents' basements. At the time, I thought their worries were ridiculous, but when I think back to my middle school years, I realize how much my online identity consumed my life. I remember my friendship issues and stress about becoming a teenager and growing up, but my diaries describe only River's exciting life and plans for future sessions. My emails and chat logs reveal that I alienated nearly every single friend I had by constantly steering the conversation toward River and my beloved online friends, oblivious to my real-life friends' increasing annoyance.

Shortly after high school began, the website shut down, and though I tried to find a new game to play, nothing was satisfying. Eventually, I was forced to move on, and found a new identity: a different group of friends, a short haircut, and passions for feminism and karate. I barely realized how much I had changed since I was 13. But stumbling onto an embarrassing old email about River made me wonder: what had caused this obsession? Why did I construct a new identity out of lies, and why was I so convinced that my false identity was more interesting, more genuine, and more important than my real one?

When my parents said they were concerned I was becoming too attached to my online life, I insisted it was impossible to be addicted to the computer. Indeed, in the past, Internet addiction was considered a made-up ailment, or a side-effect of a different condition, such as depression, anxiety, or Impulse Control Disorder (Cash, et al). However, we now live in a world with 3174 million Internet users, where the average Internet user spends nearly two hours (118

minutes) a day on social media ("Daily time spent on social networking…"). A growing number of those users display symptoms of Internet addiction. Internet addiction does not yet have a single set of diagnostic criteria, but is commonly understood to mean a compulsion to use the Internet for an excessive amount of time, and thinking about past and future online sessions to an excessive extent ("Computer/Internet Addiction Symptoms, Causes and Effects").

It was too easy to become numb and turn away from my real life when I didn't want to deal with something. It was too easy to forget that my two lives were not equal; one was boring and real and the other, glittering, exciting one was not. I feel some resentment when I think of how my friends treated me in middle school, but I also realize that it was an unhealthy relationship on both sides. My obsession with River made my friends annoyed at me, and I reacted by retreating further into my other life, alienating myself from them even more. Though I stubbornly ignored the situation, there were moments when I was forced to confront the fact that my real-life friendships were shriveling away.

Through the crowds of people in the hallway I saw Beth's long black hair.

"Hey! Wait up!" I pushed through until I reached her. "Excited for Book Club this Friday?" I asked. I was; I hadn't had fun at Book Club in months, but I always thought the next meeting would be different.

"Hey. Beth." Beth stared straight ahead as we weaved through the crowd.

"Beth?" I shook her arm. I wondered if she was joking, and laughed nervously.

"River wouldn't take very kindly to you just ignoring me," I said. I didn't know why I said it. I knew my friends were long past annoyed at my constant references to River.

Beth walked away.

"She's been ignoring you since Monday," Leanne said when I asked her about Beth's behavior. "I guess you didn't notice."

"What? How would I not notice? I talk to her all the time…" I trailed off.

Beth started talking to me again soon after, though I don't remember exactly how long it took. I was too distracted planning a party for all of River's best friends.

A recent study performed by researchers in China found that Internet addiction is often linked to interpersonal problems, problems at school, and anxiety (Tang). The desire to return to the online world can be overpowering. Internet addicts turn to the Internet as an escape or relief from "real" life, and often seek emotional support and connections with strangers online ("Computer/Internet Addiction Symptoms, Causes and Effects").

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"No! No more drawing River!" Leanne whispered as our chorus teacher said something about enunciating words properly at the front of the class.

"This might be my best drawing yet," I mumbled, distracted by an errant hair curl that I had to keep erasing and re-drawing.

"Guess who I just drew." Leanne unveiled a drawing of a creepy-looking old man with a greasy mustache, sitting at a computer with an evil grin. "It's Charlotte," she said.

"Aw, are you a little jealous?"

Leanne hated River's best friend. Maybe it was because Charlotte and I both paid a few dollars a month to buy the coolest clothing and furniture for our avatars, while Leanne's parents refused to pay for online clothes. Or it was because the stories Charlotte shared about her life

were just as ridiculous as mine. While River was a sixteen-year-old skateboarder, guitarist, and

model, Charlotte was thirteen and in juvie because a bunch of boys had been bullying her and

she had beaten them all up, sending them to the hospital.

"And you pretended you actually *believe* that? Man, that's just crazy," Leanne had

scoffed when I'd told her this exciting information.

"Well…" I said. I shrugged. "Yeah. It could, technically, be true."

"It's kind of weird that all your real life friends know so much about your online ones,

but your online friends don't know about your real life," Leanne said after a moment. "I wonder

if they actually think you're dropping out of school and stuff."

"Maybe that one was a little too far," I admitted. "I dunno. River *would* do that, though."

"Well, I think they're probably all perverted old dudes. But as long as you don't give

them your real name or anything, I guess."

I scoffed at that. At the time, I didn't understand why anyone would give an online friend

their personal information. Why would someone *want* their Internet friends to be able to find

them, and see what they were really like? When police officers came to school and talked to us

about Internet safety, they talked about online relationships ending in kidnapping or catfishing.

Their safety tips were not applicable to me.

"There's an old cartoon from the 90's," my dad told me once, trying to make a point,

though I wasn't listening very thoughtfully. "It shows a dog sitting at the computer. And he says,

'on the internet, nobody knows you're a dog.' See, because these people you're talking to could

really be anyone."

That's the great part about it, I wanted to say. But I knew he wouldn't take it well if I did, so I said nothing and waited for the lecture to be over. Secretly, I felt smug that none of my friends or family understood the great possibilities of the Internet. You could be *anyone*. You could be your true self.

Looking back, I feel that my 13-year-old self is as distant and far removed from who I am today as River is. I remember certain moments- I remember feeling giddy happiness when River was at a great party or meeting new friends, boredom sitting at the lunch table every day with my friends, and frustration at my parents for limiting me to a single, meager hour of Internet time a day- but I can't relate to them. I was so focused on creating the simulation of the life I wished I could live that I stopped caring as much about connecting with people in the real world.

Internet addiction is not limited to people who spend hours playing World of Warcraft or checking their Facebook feeds, though cases of addiction may exist in those groups. Anyone can become addicted. The Internet is full of opportunities for making connections and spreading information, but its seductive promise of total anonymity can be dangerous because the escape it offers is always temporary. On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog. Who will you choose to be?

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