

going on a retreat in western Canada to “detox from my e-mail.” When I run into her three months later, there has been no retreat. She has found a doctor who diagnosed her rash as eczema. She explains that it can be brought on by stress, so surely e-mail had its role to play. But there is a pill she can take and a cream she can apply. And if she does all of this, she can stay online. It is easier to fix the eczema than to disconnect.

For many people, the metaphor of addiction feels like the only possible way to describe what is going on. I will have more to say about this later. For now, it must be given its due. Adam, whose only current passion is playing Civilization, says, “I’ve never taken opiates, but I imagine it’s an electronic version of that. I guess television’s that way too, but this is an opiate, or a numbing kind of thing. And you can find yourself satisfied in doing that.”

At first Adam describes Civilization as enhancing. “There are diplomatic wins, conquests, victories.” But he moves quickly to a language of compulsion. His achievements in the game—from instituting universal suffrage to building cultural wonders—seem dosed, dispensed like a drug designed to keep him hooked. Game success is fed to him in a way that “makes it hard to stop playing.” He says,

You just gotta keep having more popcorn, more potato chips. So what keeps the taste going? Well, I gotta achieve these little various things. . . . One city is building another riflement . . . or you want universal suffrage. But, once you get universal suffrage, there’s like . . . [makes a booming noise] “Universal suffrage has been built in Washington,” and they show this great bronzed image. . . . You get this reward of this image that you normally don’t see. It’s a very comforting kind of thing, this repetitive sort of thing.

In Adam’s story we see the comfort of retreat that Schüll describes, where one feels a sense of adventure in a zone of predictable action. Simulation offers the warmth of a technological cocoon. And once we feel humane because we are good friends to bots, perhaps it is not so surprising that we confide in online strangers, even about the most personal matters. On confessional sites our expectations of each other are reduced, but people are warmed by their electronic hearth. Just as simulation makes it possible to do things you can’t accomplish in the real—become a guitar virtuoso or live like a benevolent prince—online confession gives you permission *not* to do things you *should* do in the real, like apologize and make amends.

CHAPTER 12

true confessions

I regularly read online confessional sites for six months. One afternoon of reading brings me to “The only reason I haven’t killed myself yet is because my mother would kill herself. . . . I’m in love with a boy I’ve never met but we IM each other every day and talk about what we’ll do or where we’ll live when we’re married. . . . My bulimia has made me better at giving blowjobs.”

On most confessional sites, people log on anonymously and post a confession, sometimes referred to as a secret. On some sites, the transaction ends there. On most, the world is asked to respond. The world may be kind or ignore you. Or the world may be harsh. On PostSecret, a site where confessions are sent as illustrated postcards before being scanned and put on the site, a woman creates an image depicting a reed-thin model and writes, “If, in order to look like this, I would have to have my foot amputated . . . I would cut it off in a second.” A year later I come back to the PostSecret site and its troubled minds: “My mother had an affair with the first boy I slept with.” “Divorcing you was a mistake.” “I used to be dependent on him. Now I’m dependent on the drugs he sold me when we broke up.”

On PostSecret there are exchanges between postcard writers and those who respond to them with an e-mail. The message “I wonder if white people know how lucky they are to be white” evokes “I wonder if straight people know how lucky they are to be straight” and “I wonder if any white/non-white, straight/not

straight people know how lucky they are not to be autistic." The postcard that says, "I am having neck surgery tomorrow and I hope I die," brings forth "I hope that feeling dies and your surgery gives you another reason to live. You're in my prayers."²

These writers hold a mirror up to our complex times. There are important things to learn or be reminded of: Relationships we complain about nevertheless keep us connected to life. Advertising exerts a deadly tyranny. People reach out to strangers in kindness. Loneliness is so great that marriage to someone we have only met on a website can seem our best hope. On the electronic frontier, we forge connections that bring us back to earlier times and earlier technologies. We fall in love with twenty-first-century pen pals. Often their appeal is that we don't know who they "really" are. So they might be perfect.

In the world of PostSecret, the ability to be tentative, to speak in half-thoughts, gives permission to speak. Nancy, twenty-two, sends cards to PostSecret nearly once a month.³ She says, "I don't have enough discipline to keep a diary. I don't think I'm important enough to do that. But I'm able to send my postcard." For a postcard, her simplest formulation is formulation enough. It is nice to think that the cards could be her start toward feeling worthy of more.

That the Internet is a place to simplify and heighten experience is very much on my mind as I read confessional sites. Market incentives are, after all, at work; each story competes with others. Exaggeration might increase readership. And since all confessions are anonymous, who will ever know? But if people are not truthful here, these confessions are fiction. Or perhaps, online confessions are a new genre altogether. When people create avatars, they are not themselves but express important truths about themselves. Online confession, another Internet performance zone, also occupies an intermediate space. Here, statements may not be true, but true enough for writers to feel unburdened and for readers to feel part of a community.

PostSecret holds annual picnics at which people can meet each other and see the actual paper postcards that were mailed to the site. At the first picnic, a young man explains how the site consoles him. He clearly means to say that it "offers the assumption of acceptance." But he makes a slip and says that the site "offers the pretense of acceptance." Both are true. His slip captures the site for me. Sometimes acceptance is there. Sometimes it is not. But it all works as a new fantasy—someone is listening.

Some people dash off their postcards, but others use the making of the postcard as an opportunity to take stock. Crafting a postcard demands a pause. That

pause is PostSecret's great strength. Louisa, thirty-two, a mother of two, says, "You know what's on your mind, but here, you get to see what is *most* on your mind." On other sites, posting seems more impulsive. But on all of them, a confession that once might have been made within the bounds of friendship, family, or church now takes place with no bounds or bonds at all. It goes out to whoever is on the site. When confessions happen in real physical space, there is talk and negotiation.

Confessing to a friend might bring disapproval. But disapproval, while hard to take, can be part of an ongoing and sustaining relationship. It can mean that someone cares enough to consider your actions and talk to you about their feelings. And if a face-to-face confession meets criticism, we have some basis for evaluating its source. None of this happens in an online confession to strangers. One says one's piece, and the opinions of others come as a barrage of anonymous reactions. It is hard, say those who post, to pay attention only to the kind ones.

VENTING

When I talk to people about online confession, I hear many of the same comments that come up during conversations about robot companionship: "It can do no harm." "People are lonely. This gives them someplace to turn." "It helps get things off your chest." On the face of it, there are crucial differences between talking to human readers on a confessional site and to a machine that can have no idea of what a confession is. That the two contexts provoke similar reactions points to their similarities. Confessing to a website and talking to a robot deemed "therapeutic" both emphasize getting something "out." Each act makes the same claim: bad feelings become less toxic when released. Each takes as its premise the notion that you can deal with feelings without dealing directly with a person.⁴ In each, something that is less than conversation begins to seem like conversation. Venting feelings comes to feel like sharing them.

There is a danger that we will come to see this reduction in our expectations as a new norm. There is the possibility that chatting with anonymous humans can make online bots and agents look like good company. And there is the possibility that the company of online bots makes anonymous humans look good. We ask less of people and more of technology.

Older people—say over thirty-five—talk about online confession as a substitute for things they want and don't have (like a trusted pastor or friend). Younger people are more likely to take online confession on its own terms. It's new; it's

interesting. Some read confessional sites simply to see what's there. Some say they take comfort in learning that others have the same troubles that they do. Some say they do it for fun. And, of course, some use the sites for their own confessions, describing them with no intended irony, as a way to speak in private. Most Internet sites keep track of who has visited them. Online confessional sites make a point of saying that they do not. Sixteen-year-old Darren says, "Confession sites offer anonymity if you just want to get a secret out there."

Darren's family is from Vietnam. They are Catholic, very strict and religious. His father checks his homework every night and personally supervises extra lessons if he sees things slipping. His parents make his significant decisions for him, using what he calls their "rational rule." He says they will choose his college by "measuring its cost relative to what different options will mean for my future career." Darren adds with some edge to his voice, "I will be surprised if the 'rational' choice for my career is not engineering." In all of this, Darren acquiesces. He does not express displeasure with his family culture, but he has looked for a place outside its bounds where "I can just shout my own feelings."

Several of Darren's Vietnamese friends use confessional sites; that is where he learned about them. Darren explains that when he and his friends confess, they all make up false screen names. He says, "We put our secrets up, and we just want to show it to a stranger, not a friend but a stranger. You want to express your emotion. You write it down and write it on the website and you just want a stranger who doesn't know you to look at it. Not your friends." Darren also thinks that a robotic confidant sounds like a good idea. That the robot would lack emotion does not bother him at all. In fact, he sees its lack of emotion as potentially "a good thing." Unlike his family, the robot would be "nonjudgmental." Darren's reaction to the idea of talking to a computer program: "I could get out some pure feelings."

In Darren's community, he has no place to take what he calls his "irrational positions." He says that it would be shaming to share them, even with his friends. This is where a future robot would be helpful and the Internet is helpful now. I never find out what Darren's "irrational positions" are, but Sheryl, thirty-two, a nurse in western Massachusetts, is willing to say what she has shared online. There have been "inappropriate" romantic encounters with coworkers and she has taken two vacations with some of the money set aside for her parents' retirement. She says that regarding both situations—the money and the men—online confession was a solace: "The most important thing is that after you make

your confession, you read the others. You know you are not alone. A lot of other people have done almost the same things you did."

Sheryl's online confessions do not lead her to talk to those she has wronged or to try to make amends. She goes online to feel better, not to make things right. She thinks that most people use confessional sites this way. She says, "Many posts begin with 'I could never tell my husband, but . . . I could never tell my mother, but . . .'" I ask her if online confession makes it easier *not* to apologize. Her answer is immediate: "Oh, I definitely think so. This is my way to make my peace . . . and move on." I am taken aback because I did not expect such a ready response. But Sheryl has already given this thought. She refers to the Twelve Steps, a program to combat addiction. She explains steps eight and nine: "Step eight says to make a 'list of all persons we had harmed, and become willing to make amends to them all.' Step nine says to make 'direct amends to such people.'" Sheryl then points out that step nine exempts you from taking these actions if amends "would injure those or others." Sheryl is going with the exemption. She is ready to confess, not apologize.

The distinction between confession and apology comes up regularly in conversations about online communication and social-networking sites. There is a lot of apologizing on Facebook, for example, but I am often told that these apologies don't count. They are more like confessions because a real apology has to deal more directly with the person you have wronged. Maria, the thirty-three-year-old financial analyst who said that the intensity of Second Life could be exhausting, does not like it when people try "to make things right" by e-mail. She thinks apologies must be made in person. "But," she continues, "people don't do that any more. . . . When people confess on the computer, they think they have done their job and now it is up to others to respond. But I think if you have hurt me, why should it be my job to come tell you that it is all right?" Recall sixteen-year-old Audrey's derisive account of an online apology: "It's cheap. It's easy. All you have to do is type 'I'm sorry.'" That pretty much describes how eighteen-year-old Larry handles things: "I don't apologize to people any more. I just put my excuses on as my status [referring to Facebook]. The people who are affected know who I mean." Sydney, twenty-three, a first-year law student, takes exception: "Saying you are sorry as your status . . . that is not an apology. That is saying 'I'm sorry' to Facebook."

The elements of an apology are meant to lay the psychological groundwork for healing—and this means healing both for the person who has been offended

and for the person who has offended. First, you have to know you have offended, you have to acknowledge the offense to the injured party, and you have to ask what you can do to make things right.

Technology makes it easy to blur the line between confession and apology, easy to lose sight of what an apology is, not only because online spaces offer themselves as “cheap” alternatives to confronting other people but because we may come to the challenge of an apology already feeling disconnected from other people. In that state, we forget that what we do affects others.

Young people, bruised by online skirmishes, can be the most articulate about looking back to the best practices of the past in the pursuit of a classic apology. Two sophomore girls at Silver Academy make the point that there is too much online apology going around. For one, “Texting an apology is really impersonal. You can’t hear their voice. They could be sarcastic, and you wouldn’t know.” The other agrees: “It’s harder to say ‘Sorry’ than text it, and if you’re the one receiving the apology, you know it’s hard for the person to say ‘Sorry.’ But that is what helps you forgive the person—that they’re saying it in person, that they actually have the guts to actually want to apologize.” In essence, both young women are saying that forgiveness follows from the experience of empathy. You see someone is unhappy for having hurt you. You feel sure that you are standing together with them. When we live a large part of our personal lives online, these complex empathetic transactions become more elusive. We get used to getting less.

THE CRUELTY OF STRANGERS

Harriet, thirty-two, posts to online confessional sites when she feels depressed, maybe two or three times a month. She prefers sites on which her readers can leave comments. She says, “It makes me feel in contact.” Otherwise, she says, “it’s like putting a post in a glass bottle and putting it in the ocean.” At first she claims that “critical comments” about her posts don’t bother her. But only a few minutes later, when we talk about specifics, Harriet admits that, somewhat to her surprise, they can hurt a lot. Her worst experience came after confessing that she had been seduced by her uncle as a teenager. “My aunt never found out. She recently died. He’s dead too. There is no one I can tell now who it would matter to. So I went online, just to tell. People were really critical, and it hurt. I thought there would be some, like, religious people who wouldn’t like it. But really I got a lot of dis-

approval.” Harriet begins by saying, “Who cares what strangers think?” She ends up describing a human vulnerability: if you share something intimate with a stranger, you invest in that person’s opinion. Anonymity does not protect us from emotional investment. In talking about online confessions, people say they are satisfied if they get their feelings out, but they still imagine an ideal narrative: they are telling their stories to people who care. Some online confessions reach sympathetic ears, but the ideal narrative is just that, an ideal.

When Roberta, thirty-eight, types her online confessions, she describes being in a state of mind that is close to dissociative. When reality is too painful (for example, the reality of abuse), people may feel that they have left their bodies and are watching themselves from above. Leaving the self is a way not to feel something intolerable. So, Roberta types her confessions but sometimes doesn’t remember the details of doing so. Then she leaves the site and returns to read comments. They are not always supportive, and the dissociative state returns. She says,

When I was about fourteen, I began an affair with my mother’s boyfriend. He lived with us since I was ten. . . . When I confessed online, I found that I didn’t even know I was typing. . . . Later that day, I checked back and there were some very positive comments but there were some that said I had completely betrayed my mom. . . . I should tell her. Others said I shouldn’t tell her but that I was a bitch. I didn’t faint or anything. But I . . . found myself in the kitchen and I don’t remember how I got there.

We build technologies that leave us vulnerable in new ways. In this case, we share our burdens with unseen readers who may use us for their own purposes. Are those who respond standing with us, or are they our judges, “grading” each confession before moving on to the next? With some exceptions, when we make ourselves vulnerable, we expect to be nurtured.⁵ This is why people will sometimes, often prematurely, tell their “sad stories” to others they hardly know. They hope to be repaid in intimacy. The online setting increases the number of people to whom one applies for a caring response. But it also opens one up to the cruelty of strangers. And by detaching words from the person uttering them, it can encourage a coarsening of response. Ever since e-mail first became popular, people have complained about online “flaming.” People say outrageous things, even when they are not anonymous. These days, on social networks, we see fights

that escalate for no apparent reason except that there is no physical presence to exert a modulating force.

When Audrey described an Internet fight in her school, we saw how flaming works: "Someone says a cross word. Someone calls someone else a name. Large numbers of people take sides. . . . They had a fight for a weekend. Twenty or thirty interchanges a day." In her opinion, by the end of the weekend, nothing had been resolved. Nothing had been learned about how to deal with other people. "No one could even say, really, what the fight was about." But people who were friends no longer spoke to each other. Freed from the face-to-face, some people develop an Internet-specific road rage. Online, Audrey knows, it is easier to be a bully.

Yet teenagers, knowing this, are frequent visitors to online confessional sites. Brandi, eighteen, compares them to Facebook and MySpace, her other online places. Through her eyes, it becomes clear that what they have in common is that people form a relationship to the site as well as to those on it. "Online," says Brandi, "I get the private out of my system. . . . I put my unhappiness onto the site."

With such displacement of feeling, it is not surprising that the online world becomes fraught with emotion. On confessional sites, people who disagree about a particular confession begin to "scream" at each other. They displace their strong investments in some issue—abortion, child abuse, euthanasia—in fights with strangers. They put their "unhappiness onto the site" because, often, they are most angry at others for what they dislike in themselves.⁶

Jonas, forty-two, admits to being "addicted" to a range of confessional sites, some religious, most of them not. He interrupts his work by "dipping in" to one or another of them during the day. Divorced, Jonas is preoccupied by the idea that he is becoming estranged from his son, who is choosing to spend more time with his mother. Jonas doesn't think there is anything in particular to blame; he and his son haven't had a fight. "I'm just seeing him less and less." But with this issue on his mind, he tells me that he became enraged by a particular online confession by a woman named Lesley, who is concerned about her nineteen-year-old son. Lesley and her son had a falling-out during his junior year of high school, and it was never repaired. Shortly after graduation, the son joined the army and was sent to Iraq. Lesley worries that she drove her son away. Jonas says, "I attacked Lesley for being a bad mother. . . . I said she was close to responsible if her son dies."

It seems apparent that instead of exploring his feelings about his own son, Jonas had lashed out at Lesley. Of course, this kind of thing happens between friends. It happens in families. But it is endemic on the Internet. There is no barrier to displacement, no barrier to rage. Online confessionals, with their ethic of "getting the private out," as Brandi put it, reassure users with the promise that they do not need to talk to someone in person—expression alone is helpful. And, of course, it sometimes may be. I think of the authors on PostSecret who might feel better when they make postcards that say "Divorcing you was a mistake" and "Celebrating the last year you abused me. They don't make cards like that." But confessional sites are often taken as therapy and they are not. For beyond self-expression, therapy seeks new ways to approach old conflicts. And thinking of Jonas and Leslie, therapy works because it helps us see when we project feelings onto others that we might understand as our own.

It is useful to think of a symptom as something you "love to hate" because it offers relief even as it takes you away from addressing an underlying problem. To me, online confessional sites can be like symptoms—a shot of feeling good that can divert attention from what a person really needs. One high school senior tells me that she visits online confessional sites at least twice a week. Most recently, she has been writing descriptions of sleeping with her best friend's boyfriend. When I ask her what she does after she writes her confessions, she says that she stays alone in her room, smoking. She thinks that she has unburdened herself and now wants to be alone. Or perhaps the confession has left her depleted.

Like a conversation with a robot, online confession appeals because someone silent wants to speak. But if we use these sites to relieve our anxieties by getting them "out there," we are not necessarily closer to understanding what stands behind them. And we have not used our emotional resources to build sustaining relationships that might help. We cannot blame technology for this state of affairs. It is people who are disappointing each other. Technology merely enables us to create a mythology in which this does not matter.

SEEKING COMMUNITIES

In what framework does confessing to online strangers make sense? It does not connect us with people who want to know us; rather, it exposes us to those who, like Jonas, may use our troubles to relieve them from looking at their own. It does nothing to improve our practical situations. It may keep us from taking

positive action because we already feel we've done "something." I know these things to be true. But people who confess online also tell me that they feel relieved and less alone. This is also true. So, if sites are symptoms, and we need our symptoms, what else do we need? We need trust between congregants and clergy. We need parents who are able to talk with their children. We need children who are given time and protection to experience childhood. We need communities.

Molly, fifty-eight, a retired librarian who lives alone, does not feel part of any community. She doesn't have children; her urban neighborhood, she says, is "not the kind of place people know each other. . . . I don't even recognize the people in the Shaw's [a local supermarket chain]." She says that she has memories of grocery shopping with her father as a girl. Then, she had felt part of a family, a family in a neighborhood. Every visit to Shaw's reminds her of what she doesn't have. She imagines her favorite confessional sites as communities and says that this has been helpful to her, at least to a point. Molly has posted stories of her mother's struggle with alcoholism. She is Catholic, but as both child and adult, she never felt comfortable talking to a priest about her history. "It wasn't something to confess. It just seemed like complaining." Speaking of her "real life," she says, "I don't see the goodness around me. Online I have found some good people." She uses the word "community."

One can only be glad that Molly has found sustenance. But her view of "community" is skewed by what technology affords. Although she claims that on confessional sites she has met "good people," when she gets feedback she doesn't like, Molly leaves the site so that she does not have to look at the criticism again. Communities are places where one feels safe enough to take the good and the bad. In communities, others come through for us in hard times, so we are willing to hear what they have to say, even if we don't like it. What Molly experiences is not community.

Those who run online confessional sites suggest that it is time to "broaden our definition of community" to include these virtual places.⁷ But this strips language of its meaning. If we start to call online spaces where we are with other people "communities," it is easy to forget what that word used to mean. From its derivation, it literally means "to give among each other." It is good to have this in mind as a standard for online places. I think it would be fair to say that online confessional sites usually fall below this mark.

Perhaps community should have not a broader but a narrower definition. We used to have a name for a group that got together because its members shared common interests: we called it a club. But in the main, we would not think of

confessing our secrets to the members of our clubs. But we have come to a point at which it is near heresy to suggest that MySpace or Facebook or Second Life is not a community. I have used the word myself and argued that these environments correspond to what sociologist Ray Oldenberg called "the great good place."⁸ These were the coffee shops, the parks, and the barbershops that used to be points of assembly for acquaintances and neighbors, the people who made up the landscape of life. I think I spoke too quickly. I used the word "community" for worlds of weak ties.⁹

Communities are constituted by physical proximity, shared concerns, real consequences, and common responsibilities. Its members help each other in the most practical ways. On the lower east side of Manhattan, my great grandparents belonged to a block association rife with deep antagonisms. I grew up hearing stories about those times. There was envy, concern that one family was doing better than another; there was suspicion, fear that one family was stealing from another. And yet these families took care of each other, helping each other when money was tight, when there was illness, when someone died. If one family was evicted, it boarded with a neighboring one. They buried each other. What do we owe to each other in simulation? This was Joel's problem as he counseled Noelle in Second Life. What real-life responsibilities do we have for those we meet in games? Am I my avatar's keeper?

AFTER CONFESSION, WHAT?

After a morning immersed in reading online confessions, I suddenly become anxious about my own responsibilities. The sites make it clear that they do not collect IP addresses from those who write in. If they did, they would be responsible for reporting people who confessed to illegal actions. (When people confess to killing someone, the caretakers of these sites do not pursue the question, choosing to interpret these posts as coming from members of the military.) But what of my sense of responsibility? If this is not a game, how do you not get anxious when a woman talks about letting her lover suffocate her until she fears for her life? If this is not a game, how do you not get anxious when a mother talks about nearly uncontrollable desires to shake her baby? My time on confessional sites leaves me jumpy, unable to concentrate. People are in dire straits. And I am there bearing witness.

Yet, my anxiety may be ill placed. Some people tell me that what they post on the Internet bears only a glancing relationship to reality. One young man in

his twenties says that the Internet is our new literature. It is an account of our times, not necessarily calling for each individual's truth to be told. A twenty-four-year-old graduate student tells me she goes to confessional sites to say "whatever comes into my mind" in order to get attention. A forty-year-old college professor explains that when he does anything online in an anonymous forum, he takes on the persona of "everyman." For him, anonymity means universality. What he says on the Web does not necessarily follow from his actual experience: if the world is violent, he feels free to write of violence in his own voice. So, when I read online confessions and go cold, am I tuning out the voice of a woman who was raped at nine, or have I ceased to believe that the confessional Internet can connect me to real people and their true stories?

Trained psychoanalytically, I am primed not to ask what is true but what things mean. That doesn't suggest that truth is unimportant, but it does say that fantasies and wishes carry their own significant messages. But this perspective depends on listening to a person, in person. It depends on getting to know that person's life history, his or her struggles with family, friendship, sexuality, and loss. On the Internet, I feel an unaccustomed desire to know if someone is telling "the truth."

A good therapy helps you develop a sense of irony about your life so that when you start to repeat old and unhelpful patterns, something within you says, "There you go again; let's call this to a halt. You can do something different." Often the first step toward doing something different is developing the capacity to not act, to stay still and reflect. Online confession keeps you moving. You've done your job. You've gotten your story out. You're ready for your responses. We did not need the invention of online confessional sites to keep us busy with ways to externalize our problems instead of looking at them. But among all of its bounties, here the Internet has given us a new way not to think.

I grant that confessional sites leave some people feeling better for "venting" and knowing that, in their misery, they are not alone. But here is how they leave me: I am anxious about my inability to help. I feel connected to these people and their stories, but I realize that to keep reading, I must inure myself to what is before my eyes. Certain kinds of confessions (and, unfortunately, some of the most brutal ones) start to read like formulaic writing in well-known genres. When this happens, I start to tune out and then feel terribly upset. I think of Joel on Second Life and his doubts about Noelle's really being suicidal. Am I watching a performance? Or, more probably, how much performance am I watching? Am I becoming coarsened, or am I being realistic?

CHAPTER 13

anxiety

Marcia, sixteen, a sophomore at Silver Academy, has her own problems. "Right now," she says, on-screen life "is too much to bear." She doesn't like what the Internet brings out in her—certainly not her better angels. Online, she gives herself "permission to say mean things." She says, "You don't have to say it to a person. You don't see their reaction or anything, and it's like you're talking to a computer screen so you don't see how you're hurting them. You can say whatever you want, because you're home and they can't do anything." Drea, a classmate sitting next to her, quips, "Not if they know where you live," but Marcia doesn't want to be taken lightly. She has found herself being cruel, many times. She ends the conversation abruptly: "You don't see the impact that what you say has on anyone else."

Marcia and Drea are part of a group of Silver Academy sophomores with whom I am talking about the etiquette of online life. Zeke says that he had created "fake" identities on MySpace. He scanned in pictures from magazines and wrote profiles for imaginary people. Then, he used their identities to begin conversations about himself, very critical conversations, and he could see who joined in. This is a way, he says, "to find out if people hate you." This practice, not unusual at Silver, creates high anxiety. Zeke's story reminds me of John, also at Silver and also sixteen, who delegated his texting to digitally fluent Cyranos. When John told his story to his classmates, it sparked a fretful conversation