

## **I.R.L.**

I wake up and check my computer to see if I have posted anything I am now embarrassed by so I can delete it.

I get distracted by other things. I press little blue Like buttons on the screen until I remember I am supposed to find out if I should be embarrassed. It turns out I shouldn't be embarrassed, or at least not that embarrassed, not relatively. Relative to what? Relative to another day when I had posted something I was more embarrassed of? Or relative to what I perceive as the embarrassing statements posted by other users, my online friends and so on? My brain feels soft. I eat cereal.

The sun comes through my window and makes the dust in my studio apartment look like glitter drifting down from the rafters. It is late in the morning now and I have watched a lot of YouTube videos, but I don't remember what most of them were about. I have pressed the Like buttons a lot more times. I have rubbed my eyes when the screen blinked at me. At one point, my great aunt posted, "Not feeling well today" and I pressed Like just to let her know I was aware she was feeling bad and that I had her in my thoughts. I did not actually like how she was feeling.

I watch some stuff about plastic floating in the Pacific Ocean and a mini-documentary about child soldiers on the other side of the planet. I watch two old friends that I have not seen in years as they misunderstand each other and get in a heated argument in the comments section of one of their statuses. I press Like on all of their comments to be safe.

Now I am watching more videos and thinking about Aunt Ade. My great aunt is a sweet woman who loves what is left of her family. She had no children and my father passed away two years ago, leaving basically just my sister and I as the people left in the world that care about her.

I guess my mother cares about her because she was my father's aunt, but on the other hand I don't know that they got along when he was alive. Not everyone gets along, even if they are both okay people. I remember my mother once calling my great aunt "a wormy old thing."

I wish I hadn't seen Aunt Ade's status. I look for something to take my mind off it. I think about what I would be doing if I was at work now, if I still had a job, and I realize it would probably be pretty much the same thing only I would be dressed in less comfortable clothes and attempting to look busy and being paid for it. I would have still seen her status update though.

I try to play a game but the farm I am building in the game bores me, I can't focus on it. I look up my ex-girlfriend and try not to click Like on all of her photos, even though I kind of hate them. I only click Like on a handful. Her relationship status has changed to It's Complicated. It is not me that it is complicated with and that bums me out a little on top of my great aunt not feeling well today and everything else about being alive. I don't even miss my ex, I just want proof that I am an okay person again - like a girlfriend would mean everything else was in working order. Something pops in my soft brain. I can feel a cool blue mist coming out of my ears and eyes. I am having an idea and it is refreshing. So refreshing I have to take a picture of myself with the computer and write a blog post about it.

This is what the blog post says:

*ran away somewhere. need a vacation. :(*

Beneath it is a picture of me frowning. I am making a frown-y face. I don't bother to use all caps. I think about using all caps, but decide not to.

I consider deleting the post as soon as I have published it. I hold off. I go to shut down my computer but I don't. If I shut off the computer, I will be alone. I am afraid to be alone in my apartment. I could go outside, I think. My phone rings. It is my mother. I do not answer it. She sends me a text message. It is hard to read because she is not good at text messaging. I think it is supposed to say something about "lucky turnips" or "luck turning up." I am not sure. Both seem like something she might say. For some reason, getting a text from my mother reminds me that I will not be able to pay my rent by the end of this month. I will have to ask my mother or younger sister for money and they will give it to me and my heart will crumple a little when they do.

I think about going outside and walking somewhere, but I don't get up yet. I just think about it. I will bring my phone, I decide, but I won't look at it. I think about getting a sandwich but I am not hungry. I think some more about purchasing it, taking a bite, then wrapping it back up in its foil and coming home to heat it up in an hour, maybe looking for something to watch that reminds me what it felt like to be a child.

I often get nostalgic and find myself watching puppets or cartoons from my childhood. Most times they don't hold my attention the way they used to. That depresses me. I imagine this time it will be the same. I start to watch a cartoon, then click away, already bored. I look at my fingernail, then back at the computer. I search several professional networking sites for job opportunities but I find nothing that I am qualified for or that I have not already applied to earlier in the week. I feel another little pop in my head. A deeper, bluer mist. I log off about ten different websites in quick succession. Sites I usually never log off on purpose.

When I try to log off Facebook, at first it won't let me. There is an error message. I have to type in a captcha code, which I keep fumbling with. I don't remember this happening before. On the other hand, I don't remember the last time I logged off. They probably changed

something. These sites are always changing, I think. My hands feel tingly. I am starting to panic. Finally, it works and I shut the computer fast like I am trying trap a bug inside. I pick it up and put it on a shelf tucked in a row of dusty books. I put a small porcelain giraffe in front of it, like a wall. The giraffe was a gift from Aunt Ade.

I feel good about putting my computer away. I almost take it down and open it back up, but I don't. Instead I take a shower. A thin layer of dry, dead skin covers my face and arms. I scrub them. I'm still ashy. I am still shy.

After the shower I do push ups. They are very hard and I feel stupid doing them. I am not sure what I am doing. I feel like I am getting ready for something. I do less than twenty before giving up. I maybe do less than ten.

I do all the stretches I remember from gym class. I usually forget to breathe while I am stretching and have to start over. I recall someone saying it is very important to breathe. It feels like it is taking a very long time, but the clock on my phone says it isn't. I think about going online to tell people I have been stretching, see what they're thoughts on stretching might be. Instead I just stretch harder. I am afraid I might pull something, but I like it. My legs are like saltwater taffy when I am finished. I'm loose. I put on my clothes and go outside. I want to walk around before that feeling leaves my muscles.

My first day offline is like wearing a disguise. I look for strangers to recognize me or poke me or tell me they like my tee-shirt or that my eyes look red, but no one says anything at all. Not a single comment. I picture yellow smiley faces bubbling out of people necks when they look at me. I watch a man on the corner, yelling about Christ, and I try to think of it as a status update,

which I know is silly. I think about anonymity, about how strangers on the street are just walking past with no profile or avatar. Their faces are unstable, a blur, just moving things. I wonder what is bigger: the world or the Internet?

I decide to take a little break from my own thoughts. This strategy has never worked before, but I try it anyway. I sit down near a fountain on the east side of Mount Vernon Place. I cross my legs Indian-style like I did when I was in school, then I close my eyes. I am meditating I think maybe. I feel stupid again. I want to open my eyes to see if anyone is looking at me but I tell myself to keep them shut. I squeeze my eyelids tighter. I see purple and orange blotches like cells. I remember someone telling me that you are supposed to repeat a word or phrase over and over while you meditate but I am too embarrassed to do that out loud, so I decide to just repeat a phrase in my head, but I can't think of anything to say. Maybe that means I am already meditating successfully?

Vacation, I finally think. Vay. Cay. Shun. I say it once through my breath just to see how it feels out loud. I keep breathing. It feels like the way my breath should sound all the time. I leave my phone in the grass when I am finished. On its back in the grass, it resembles a field mouse. I kick it slightly as I get up.

That night I spend a long time sitting in the quiet dark. I have not done that since I was a child and my parents put me to bed. Back then, monsters visited me. I remained perfectly still under my covers so they would leave me alone. I was a wooden boy for them.

The monsters never stopped visiting me. I just ignore them now. I set up a wall of distractions. I go to bed with the TV on, looking at the computer screen, listening to headphones padded with soft leather. I go to sleep holding my phone, pressing buttons.

Now I am on vacation from my distractions and I am afraid the monsters will come back. I imagine my great aunt in the corner. Bones are coming through her skin. They look sharp in the moonlight through the blinds. There are voices whispering outside the window. Laughter. Everyone in the world knows my thoughts and dislikes them. The carpet is made of tiny fingers. I am a man without a home and people are laughing at me.

I fall asleep sitting up in my chair. I do not get up and walk to the bed. If I don't move, the monsters will not notice me.

At night I dream I am an animal in a laboratory. I keep drinking sugar water. I drink it on tap out of a little bottle with a metal nozzle. I am in no danger of running out. Drinking the water becomes all that I do. I drink it because it gives me a little boost of comfort. Eventually I start to feel sick but I keep drinking anyway, even though the water stops tasting sweet like it used to. Pretty soon it tastes like nothing at all. Then it starts to taste bad, but I keep drinking.

When I was a kid, my parents bought my sister and I a goldfish. It died. So they bought us another one and that died too. My sister and I – mostly me – were starting to get pretty upset. We felt like it was our fault. Like we were killing the goldfishes. I had no idea how long they were supposed to live. I didn't really think about it. I guess I figured that if the goldfish was able to love you, if you were worthy of its love, then it would just live as long as you did. My parents bought us a third goldfish and that one died too.

But the fourth one lived forever. We called him Stan. Stan was an invisible fish that lived in a cup of water my father cleaned and refreshed once a week. We poured fish food inside each

night before we went to bed. I think my father scooped it out early each morning. Sometimes I would find tiny flakes stuck to the counter while I was heating up my Pop-Tarts.

In the morning I wake up and look for my computer in front of me but it is gone. Then I remember that I closed it and put it on the bookshelf behind the giraffe. That reminds me of my phone. I run out of my apartment barefoot and over four blocks to the park. I am frantic. My face is red and I am out of breath. My chest hurts because I smoke cigarettes and don't like to run.

When I get there, the phone is gone of course. I panic for a second and wonder if I was still logged into anything the person who found my phone can now hack into. I worry someone is out there pretending to be me, trying to ruin whatever reputation I still have. I barely see most people these days but I constantly worry what they think of me anyway. I tinker with my reputation online. Manage relationships. Express myself.

The more I think about it, the more I actually feel okay with someone else doing that stuff for me.

I look at the empty spot in the grass for a while. Dew has formed where my phone used to be. My feet feel light in the wet grass. It gets between my toes. I take my time on the walk back. I stick to the sunny side of the street, smoking. When I get home I move the porcelain giraffe to the side and wrap my computer in duct tape. It looks drab so I take an old red shoelace and tie it like a ribbon with a bow. I put the giraffe back in front, as a guardian.

Now I think of my computer as my "anxiety box."

I will not touch my anxiety book. I mean, box.

I know I am not the first person to take a vacation from the Internet. I know there are people who don't use it at all. It blows my mind but I know it. I wonder if what I am doing is

more like rehabilitation than vacation. My fingers twitch. My instinct is to Like something or to see if I have been notified of recent activity. I want to leave a comment somewhere. I want to be noticed. I want to remind people that I am alive. I pace a little and do more push-ups. I try to think about what I would do on a real vacation. I pretend like just yesterday I arrived at a resort, jet-lagged, and now I am waking up for the first time in a strange new place. I try to think like a visitor in my own city. I get down on myself for being bored.

I remember a time when being forced to watch a friend or family member's vacation slideshow was a television sitcom cliché representing the most boring activity of all time. Now I don't think twice about searching through all their filtered landscapes, selfies, and ill-lit food pics on my own. I will even probe deep into the photos or timeline of an acquaintance or complete stranger, not to mention check out who else has viewed them. I don't know how this happened to me. I don't know how I started to care about all these things. I don't know when I developed an obsession.

It is not like I was *always* on one of my social networks. I mean, I was *logged in* to all of them always and I carried my smartphone with me everywhere, but sometimes I looked at other things besides the screen. Trees, cars, the weather. The screen was always a place to come back to. It was comfortable there. Even if I worried what people thought about me online, at least I knew they thought about me enough to press a button.

What if I came back to the Internet and it had been abandoned? What if it was a ghost town, I think. Something inside me registers a feeling like longing for many dead souls. I imagine myself running naked through the virtual streets.



The Internet has caused me problems in the past. Most recently with my job and my girlfriend. My job was sort of going great, I think, or at least going. I worked for a non-profit that helped fund programs for the homeless as well as providing assistance with beautification projects and community gardens in vacant lots. Everything was fine until they began monitoring our web history. Somehow everyone else figured this out but me, I guess. My supervisor told me more than once that the computers were for work only, but I couldn't help myself. My job was largely administrative and I spent a lot of time each day just waiting for work to come over my desk. I didn't know what to do during that time. I stared at my screensaver, which was just a grey field. My own face reflected back at me in the dim mirror of the screen. It was so...final. *Empty*. I couldn't look at it. I had to check my profile. I had to say something to the world and see what they thought about it or I would just sit there judging myself and the judgment wouldn't be favorable.

After a lot more warnings they let me go in the kindest way they could. They said it was a budget issue and they were not going to be able to continue funding my position, but I checked the website a week later and I had been replaced with a young woman. I looked her up on Facebook. She didn't even have a profile. That was almost six months ago. I spent a lot of that time trying to build professional connections and applying for jobs online. My unemployment checks ran out a week ago.

Tish broke up with me three months ago. We had been planning to move me into the apartment she shares with her roommate and getting our own place when I found a new job, but those things never happened. She broke up with me in G-Chat. She said she had seen me online in a picture with Gillian, the girl I dated before her, which might have been true because we bumped into each other recently at a bar but nothing happened. I am surprised we managed to

even be next to each other long enough for the photograph, which I didn't remember posing for. Tish asked me if I was still in contact with her and I told her that we chatted now and then on Facebook, but that we had barely talked the night the picture was taken. That was true. It had been too awkward between us in person. Tish told me we probably would have broken up soon anyway. We were "headed in different directions" she told me (even though I wasn't headed anywhere at all) and it would be easier to do if we hadn't moved in together yet. She promised she wouldn't block me from her profile, but she changed our relationship status that night. I just sent her a sad-faced emoticon in response. It expressed how I was feeling better than I could put into words, which were a little painful to type anyway.

We have not seen each other in person since that night. When I think about it now, it was the easiest break-up, from a standpoint of efficiency at least, that I have ever been through.

I go back out for breakfast. When I get home, I don't go upstairs right away. Instead I sit down on the stoop. I lean back and put my elbows on the steps behind me. The sun is like a warm hand petting me on the head. I should try to feel like a dog, I think, move around the world like a dog. A man walks by with a cocker spaniel as I am thinking this. I envy the dog's curiosity. He is excited to see me and gives me a sniff. I smile at the man and touch the dog's floppy ear. The dog sees a spot of bird shit on the sidewalk and his snout beams with excitement. He is distracted from me altogether. He hops toward the turd gleefully. His ears bounce in the air. I turn my face toward the sun. I tell myself I am getting my vitamin D. The sun feels nice.

I try to enjoy my warm stoop with patience but it isn't too long before I get bored and then I start to think about myself again, loser, how I am letting life creep by, how I am not even sure what life is supposed to be about anymore. When I was a child, it seemed so obvious. It makes me nervous to think about these things now.

I need to get online to find a job, I think. And I should probably just check in and see what a few people are up to. Maybe let everyone know that I lost my phone so they don't worry when they can't get ahold of me, as if for some reason they needed to get ahold of me. I wonder if I can still get wifi service out here on the stoop. I try not to move but I find myself getting up and walking inside to get my computer.

I walk over near the shelf. I look at the red ribbon and duct tape wrapped around my computer. The tail of the ribbon hangs down the porcelain giraffe's neck. It looks like the giraffe is bleeding. I turn away from the computer and decide to jump in the shower instead. Afterward I find myself staring at the floor just inches in front of me. I am doing push-ups again. I have got to get a more interesting hobby than this, I think.

I will just take one month off, I tell myself. *At least* one month. See if I can do it. It is not like I can afford to buy a new phone anyway. I don't even have quite enough money to pay one month's rent. At the end of the month I will either be borrowing money to pay my next month's rent and eat food or I will be moving back in with my mom and her boyfriend or maybe crashing with my little sister. My mom's boyfriend is an asshole. You could have guessed that though. All Moms' Boyfriends are a little bit assholes, I think. It can't be helped. It is inherent in the job title.

What is the worst thing that can happen? I wonder. Another false start at adulthood. Another smack to my pride. I am over thirty now and used to false starts.

Things get more interesting a second later when I ask myself: What's the best thing that can happen?

I can't even begin to think of an answer, which makes life feel enormous and wonderful. I just imagine the Earth hovering inside my eyelids like it belongs to me.

That afternoon I find a smooth grey rock in a tree-well on Calvert Street as I walk to the liquor store. It is about the size of my cell phone but a little heavier. I pick it up and wipe it on my shirt. I put the rock in my pocket. I reach in and touch it a lot as I walk. Sometimes I take it out and look at it. Every now and then, I hold it to my face.

One of the dollar bills I get back as change from the liquor store has a note written in the margins. The note is in glittery purple ink and says: *I want to run naked through the streets with you.* There is also an address. The address is not far away I don't think, just a couple neighborhoods over, walking distance but in an area (Oliver? Middle East?) full of vacant houses that sit between the prison and Greenmount Cemetery, where John Wilkes Booth is buried along with a bunch of other long dead rich people. I fold up the bill and put it in a special pocket in my wallet.

There are a lot of rats in the city. Big ones. I hear them outside my first floor studio, in the alley where we leave the trashcans.

I sometimes feel like I am secretly a rat. Like a rat that woke up one day turned into a child and just kept growing that way and nobody said anything. I heard about a story where a guy turns into a bug and just has to keep trying to live his life that way until he dies. I think it was *The Fly*. Or maybe something else. I don't know anything. But sometimes I think I may have been born a rat and am still a rat inside.

I have a pint of whiskey in my pocket and I am walking past a block of boarded up rowhomes that have signs posted on their front doors. The signs say: "If Animal Trapped, Call" and then they give an emergency telephone number. I want to write the number down for some reason, but I don't have a pen. I don't need to write it down because these signs are everywhere for me to look at, but I want to write it down anyway. Instead I just stand outside one of the houses for a minute, listening for animals inside.

"Zoinks," someone says behind me, like Shaggy from Scooby-Do. I feel a hand on my shoulder but don't even turn to look. I just keep staring at the empty house. I think it might be a mugger but I don't really care if I am mugged, which feels weird. Besides, what kind of mugger says "Zoinks"?

It turns out it is this guy Sam, who lives in the same warehouse building as my sister. He is some kind of artist, I think. Everyone in the building is some kind of artist. I only know him because he sometimes walks in her door while I am there and starts talking about drugs. A couple times I have followed him to his apartment and bought drugs from him.

He has a little dog with him. The dog pounces at my shoe like he's caught something. "Where've you been hiding?" he says.

I don't know how to answer him. He isn't someone I expect to run into and I haven't been hiding anywhere. "Just Baltimore, I guess," I say. I wonder if we are friends on Facebook, if my posts appear on his wall. "I'm on vacation."

I expect him to give me a strange look when I say "vacation," but he doesn't even notice.

"Did I tell you about the man who looked like a tree?" he says and begins to launch into this story about walking his dog and some guy he saw, dressed in all brown, who emerged from a patch of trees in the park. Sam thought he was going to get robbed or something sexual was

going on but the man just smiled at him and walked away. It takes him like ten minutes to tell the story. It hurts my head to hear him speak. I am still trying to hear animals in the empty houses, listening for their scratching just past the sound of his voice.

“Do you have any drugs I could do?” I ask when he stops for a breath. I don’t really party anymore because I am usually at home by myself, but right now it feels like the thing to do.

Hell, I’m on vacation, I think.