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Protozoa

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On a Thursday in May, Noa ditched her friends after school and jumped in a Lyft with Paddy. She wanted to pet his baby moustache in the back seat of the Kia. Instead she floated her arm out the window and bounced it to the hip-hop leaking from his earbuds. The air was warm and dense and sweat curled in the backs of her knees.

They rode along Venice Boulevard past shaggy stumps of sawed-off palm trees and sunfaded billboards hemmed in graffiti. Noa's friends Wren and Annaliese messaged her from the carpool lineup: *Why the little toad? He'll use you. Roast you.* They sent flame emojis.

Noa turned away from Paddy, just slightly, so he wouldn't see the messages. *Homework at my house,* she replied.

Wren and Annaliese were still preoccupied with complex cake recipes. They fastened back their sleek hair with headbands tricked out in enormous, furred pompoms. To Noa they seemed all parts light, which was good if you could meet them there, in the light, with the horses. Noa had come to feel like another species around them, a graceless mouth-breather. Their distaste for Paddy held no sway with her.

Someday they might understand how it was necessary to take a risk for a boy. Yes, she was afraid. That was the point.



Paddy bowled his backpack down the hall and freefell onto the couch in Noa's living room. They played and replayed his latest post, a video poking fun at Callan from school. Paddy roasted people online under the name PaDWack. He had built a fan base after winning the school's slam poetry competition. As his rhymes got meaner his followers adored him more intensely.

"This is legit brilliant," Paddy said as he watched himself rap in the school bathroom with his pork pie hat pulled over his eyes:

Maestro Callan with his hobo pants.

Taking a bath in the school trash cans.

Today in the lab he gets a nosebleed.

Keep off my keys, and stop picking at these [pointing to his nose].

Callan was an easy target, a loner who used to slide out of his chair and finger his nostrils constantly when they were younger.

"Hobo pants, so true," Paddy said.

"Told you," Noa said. She'd fed him that line about Callan's jeans, which were tattered and torn off at the knee.

"You're wicked, Protozoa."

"Protozoa." She savored the word as she spoke.

"The cells?" Paddy said.

"I know what they are."

In a few weeks they would graduate from the eighth grade at Windsong, where they'd been together since kindergarten. Paddy was set to attend a magnet high school for the highly gifted and sometimes forgot he wasn't smarter than everyone else. Noa was going to the local public school in Venice where her mother said she would develop certain life skills.

Paddy rhymed some more: Noa Noa Protozoa, swervy like a boa. They drifted to her room. A faraway lawn mower churred and sun soaked the window above her bed. That morning she had hidden in the closet a model of Hogwarts castle, forty-six posters of boy bands, a bracelet loom. She had placed on the desk a freakish pencil drawing of her father with distorted features, her best one. Paddy, immersed in his phone, paid no attention to any of it.

Noa grabbed her giant plush crab and nailed him with it.

“Hey!” His hat fell to the floor and he quickly stuffed it back on his head. “You have to respect the lid.” Cowlicks made his hair stand in odd clumps. He’d worn a hat to cover it for years, a knit beanie or a bucket hat or his most recent pork pie. At some point he’d become known as Paddington instead of Trevor, his real name.

As he pushed her onto the bed a laugh caught in her throat, her heart beating savagely. He dove next to her and cupped his lips over hers, teeth knocking on teeth. His had white plastic buttons of invisible braces on them. She thought of licking candy dots off long sheets of paper as she’d done on the Santa Monica Pier.

Later she would share details with her new closest friend, Aurora Waters, who had been places with boys already. *It’s happening, Aurora*, she nearly blurted out.

Paddy hitched up her tank top, exposing her belly.

“Wait.” She drew back.

“I mean. You invited me, Protozoa,” he said.

“Fine.” She tried to soften her body. His fingers trotted around the hem of her skirt and rolled her blue fishnet tights all the way to her toes. Then her breath was taken, as if she’d slipped into water too deep and dark to touch bottom. She pressed her nose against lip hair and groped the twiney muscles of his arms. His tongue slid along her face to her ear.

“Don’t,” she said when he rooted a thumb under her panties. It was like being jarred from a dream. Her bralette had been pushed up so she covered herself with the plush crab.

“That’s booeey,” he complained and then collapsed face-down on the covers. Without a shirt he appeared much smaller. He had the fragile shoulders of a child.

“Stop looking at me,” he said.

“I wasn’t.”

His stomach rumbled. “You have any of that truffle-up-agus your mama makes?” Without waiting for an answer he skidded down the hall to the kitchen.



A moment later Noa’s arms and legs still hummed, as if her own daring produced an electrical charge. Things had gone almost exactly as she’d hoped or probably better. She took a blast of selfies to document: pouting, mouth slack, wide-eyed.

I did it, she messaged Aurora Waters. Fat tongue emoji.

As Paddy rattled kitchen drawers down the hall, Noa thumbed through her phone. Her mother had just posted a photo of rabbit roulade plated with smashed root vegetables. The photo was poorly cropped, with her mother’s freckled arm in the background. Noa commented under the photo #MR, short for Mother Rabbit. Her mother would reply much later with a winking emoji.

Noa’s parents opened the restaurant Jenney together a few months before, but her mother was the force behind it. She’d had the investors for dinner, charmed them with her food. Noa’s father never would have gone to the effort, he said. Before they had the space, they’d catered office lunches out of a truck and her father seemed satisfied with that.

The restaurant was a dozen blocks from their house in Mar Vista. In the late afternoons Noa’s father rode his bicycle home to check on her. Most often he stole some time to sun his broad back on the patio. He would pore over books with pages thin as tissue paper; he called them a “compendium of philosophies.” Or, he would strike up a conversation with

the neighbor Sharn over a fence that pitched heavily towards her yard. They would chat about her tomato plants and David Hockney and the eyesore McMansion going up across the street. Sharn was retired, a widow, and always seemed to have an ear for Noa's father.

"Shouldn't you be getting back?" Noa said once as the sun edged behind Sharn's roofline.

"Soonish," her father said as he clapped at a bug tickling his neck.



"You should go now," Noa sang as she walked down the hall. Takeout boxes littered the kitchen counter, emptied of rabbit sausage and fritters with chunks of pear. Paddy had flung open the French doors to the yard and wandered with a box in hand.

"This is bomb," he said, sucking dramatically on a fork dipped in yellow custard.

"Spoonbread," she said. People called it a drug. She slipped into her mother's clogs and joined him outside. The brick patio was edged in nasturtium with flat round leaves like lily pads. Her father's surfboards leaned against the tilting fence.

Paddy offered a nibble but Noa pushed it away.

"Should we take a picture together?" she said.

He shook his head and handed her the fork and box. Then he pulled out his phone and scrolled down a feed of photos. "Your mama's getting mad famous. You call her MR?"

Noa's face went hot. He had found her mother's post. "Mother Rabbit. Boring. Don't follow her or anything."

"But that's catchy."

Paddy's mother walked with a limp, thick ankles ending in spreading flat shoes. She was no one interesting. Paddy liked to say that he was adopted, that his real parents were famous actors in other parts of the world. He looked enough like his mother that he couldn't be believed. For a while his lies caught up with him at school, but he saved himself with his PaDWack roasts.

"Rabbit," Paddy said as they walked inside. "Bunny. Huh."

"It's popular in Europe and the South." Noa tossed the empty box in the sink. She didn't mention that he'd eaten some.

They moved to the front door, noses in phones. He typed something and Noa's phone buzzed. He had messaged her: *300 likes for nosebleed von hobo pants.*

If you roast me, better make me look good, she replied. She remembered that he'd made up a rhyme for their music teacher Inez, a "siren with all guns firin'." After he posted it all the boys began to fawn over her. *Like Inez,* she added.

No promises, Paddy replied. *Whims.* He leaned into her as if he would kiss her goodbye but instead he flicked her breast.

What the fuck, Paddington! He disappeared into another car, leaving her staring after him until she saw spots.



When he was gone Noa burrowed into the jumble of relics on her closet floor. She balanced her laptop on flattened posters and the backs of doll bodies and sought out Aurora Waters. *Can you chat?*

Aurora was older, in high school on the other side of the city in Hollywood. She had boasted of her own encounters with boys, insisted that she'd felt a "magic ripple." They had met online after Noa set up a new account. She projected a mood using carefully selected images: a series of a healing bruise, a collapsed building in the aftermath of an earthquake, the peculiar drawing of her father.

Dark heart? Aurora had written her, introducing herself. Noa did feel at times exactly as Aurora said. Images that used to make her happy now made her wince: shaved ice doused

in rainbow syrup and a hedgehog so small it slept in a teacup. She didn't want to adore those things again, but nothing yet had taken their place.

Aurora popped up on Noa's screen in the middle of a yawn. Her hair, which was dyed blue, was pinched into a nest on her head.

"I hooked up with Paddy," Noa said. "The one with the hat?"

"Yeah, I saw the message. The rhymer," Aurora said.

"It's fun but kind of like drowning."

"Did he shove his tongue in your mouth?"

Noa nodded. "I see why you call it magic."

"So you liked it." Aurora peered into the camera as if it would help her suss out the truth. Her skin was pale and even, heavily powdered.

"He took my tights off," Noa said.

"You didn't let him bone, though."

"No, no, no."

"Good, because then you give up any power you have. At all."

"Have you tasted plastic braces?"

"I didn't think you would do it," Aurora said.

A hoarse woman's voice hollered on Aurora's end, bags and keys settling on the counter. Aurora walked to her bedroom door, put her ear against it and slid the chain lock. In slim black overalls she could have been six feet tall. She'd written on the pockmarked walls, in Sharpie, words from one of her favorite trip-hop songs: *Ride the Night. Liberate your heart.*

The most exotic thing was that Aurora went out as she pleased any night of the week, hopped into a hired car and roamed the hills above the Sunset Strip and the bluffs in Pacific Palisades. Noa's favorite picture of Aurora was taken on those bluffs. With crazy eyes she pretended she was about to jump off the edge of an overlook, like the ocean was a trampoline she could bounce on.

Aurora sat in front of the camera again. "You don't seem sad today," she said, pulling a thumbtack out of a plastic breath-mints case. Her cuticles had been eaten away. "I have to hurry."

It was their secret ritual to watch each other cry. Aurora said that sharing tears was a high and a release. In Japan, she said, entire rooms full of grown men bawled together.

"Well, Paddy was in my bedroom just now," Noa said. "It's playing in my head like a movie."

"Yesterday you even said how fucked up the world is. Remember the starving dogs that no one loves?"

Noa nodded and sniffed her old dolls, molded plastic faces and synthetic hair.

"Or think about this," Aurora said. "What if it never rains again? It won't, I bet."

Aurora scratched at the inside of her arm with the thumbtack. She whimpered and her mouth twitched. The tics of emotion were familiar to Noa though they'd only known each other for two weeks.

Aurora stopped herself and cleared her throat. "If you can't be deep, it's not helpful," she said. "There's nothing I get from it."

Noa crumpled her face as if she could trick herself, but failed. Aurora cried steadily for three minutes and then snapped from it like a switch had been hit.



Late afternoon fog nuzzled the house, casting Noa's room in darkness. From inside the closet, she heard the clicks of her father's bicycle spokes and the creak of the gate.

His flip-flops slapped against the kitchen floor. "Noa!"

She scurried down the hall.

“What’s this mess?” He swatted a takeout box into the sink. A sweat stain bloomed over his heart on a threadbare T-shirt. The chef’s jacket her mother had ordered for him was probably rumpled and stuffed into his backpack.

“Well, I ate already,” Noa said. “So I’m not hungry.”

“You ate everything? Not buying it.”

“I had a homework group after school.” She nudged a crumb along the floor. “They love the food.”

He raked his whiskers. “Didn’t we say no friends when you’re alone?”

“I won’t do it again. I’ll FaceTime with you at the restaurant, I swear,” Noa said.

“Nobody wants Roberta back,” her father said. Roberta, the old babysitter, had taught him how to track Noa on his phone even though he claimed he wouldn’t do it. Noa had persuaded her parents to let go of Roberta when they opened a restaurant so close to home.

“No one in eighth grade has a babysitter,” Noa said. “Aren’t *you* my supervisor now?”

“Aye. But this is a trial run.” He narrowed his eyes at her then walked over to the French doors and rested his forehead against the glass. “Let’s go surfing,” he said. “Tomorrow, before school.”

“I got pounded last time. And there’s so much trash.”

He looked at her. “If we see animals, that’ll be worth it. Dolphins? Maybe a ray?” He tapped on the window.

Noa’s father tried to coax her outside once in a while. On a recent afternoon he’d begged her to draw a portrait of him while sitting on towels in the yard. It was awkward to stare at her father, so she didn’t try to get a realistic drawing. Instead she gave him broken and misshapen teeth and made his whiskers a long, braided beard.

“I like this,” he’d said, leaning back on his hands. “You’re off the phone, doing something in the actual world.”

“The actual world?” she’d said as she exaggerated the hollows under his eyes. On paper he was a hillbilly tweaker.

“Yeah. You know.” He leaned over and tore a leaf off the nasturtium and waved it in her face. Then he ate it. He might have understood that her world was entirely different, but he was romantic about what could be touched and tasted.



Paddy posted a new roast that evening during peak hours. In the video he chanted:

Noa Noa Protozoa.

Bish hungry so get out your boa [grabbing his crotch].

Form a line at the doa.

But Harry Poe-tare not welcome anymoa.

After his rap, he flashed his nipples. He’d taped over them two photos of protozoa, glassy and oval as seen through a microscope.

Delete!!! She messaged him. *I’m a hungry bish? You’re the most hungry.*

But it’s about you. My muse, he replied. Four emoji faces laughing so hard they were crying. *You asked for it, Proto.*

A ball of sickness formed, swelled against her ribs. She messaged Aurora: *P did it. Roasted me. So bad, right?*

Her phone pulsed with new people wanting to follow her. They’d jumped from Paddy’s video to her accounts. Not strangers, really, because she had heard of them loosely. They were curious, of course. She added them all as followers.



Want someone to call me hungry, Aurora messaged an hour later. *You get all the attention.*

Makes me look desperate, Noa replied. Cracked heart emoji.

He likes you.

Okay.

The titties though. So juvenile.

By eleven the rhyme had more than four hundred views and Noa was being called *dirty ho*, being sent pictures of body parts that looked like cutaways from porn. Dick pics were normal but she'd never been flooded with so many. She was sure the people calling her names were jealous. Words were always thrown at girls looking to be wild. The smartest girls, the girls Noa admired most online, just ignored them as if they didn't matter.



Protozoa. Aurora messaged. *What do you think he'd call me?*

A-snore-a. No. A-whore-a.

Ha. Cruel.

"Noa," her mother called gently, poking her head into the room. Noa shoved her phone under the mattress. Her mother crept in and lowered herself onto the bed, swung a bare, dimpled leg over Noa's body.

Noa groaned. "I don't want to talk about food," she said.

Her mother sighed like she'd been wounded, but she didn't go away. Noa took her mother's hand and guided it to her own back. Her mother began to scratch.

"Tell me again," Noa said. "The first boy you liked. Wasn't he new wave or mod?"

"He rode a Vespa," her mother said. "Gunter. He had those thin suspenders."

Noa looked up at the ceiling. She tried to imagine her mother on the back of a scooter, bare skinned knees darting through cars.

Her mother gathered Noa's hair and fanned it across her back. "Daddy's panicking. He wants you to stop wearing those stockings."

"The fishnets? What else did he say?"

"Well, they're provocative. It makes him uncomfortable, and he can't say that to you."

"Stop!"

"Listen," her mother said. "I told him that's not how you raise an empowered woman. I'm not having any part of it."

Noa pulled her mother's arm tight around her. "He's so lost."

"He doesn't know what a girl's like." Her mother pressed her cheek against Noa's back.

Noa sensed there was more to her father than that, acting like he had nothing to do in the afternoons. Tanning, chatting up Sharn. She stayed silent. It seemed dangerous to mention those things, as if that would turn them into real problems.



The next morning Noa walked through the elementary playground in long strides, the low angle of morning sun at her back. Finger paintings dried on clotheslines. She bobbed under them, passed the soft rubber slopes and the climbing structure with a sail hoisted high like a ship. Either Windsong had shrunk overnight or she had grown into a giantess.

In the middle school building Paddy waited for her at her locker surrounded by his baller friends. Everyone could see that he liked her, the way he stood there waiting. She threw her shoulders back.

"Protozoa," he said, making his friends snicker. His fists were thrust deep in his pockets and he waggled them. "Under the bleachers at lunch?"

"If I have time," she said to be aloof.

All morning her insides lifted and turned as though she'd swallowed hundreds of moths. *Hooking up at school*, she messaged Aurora from the bathroom under the stairwell. It was the only bathroom on campus with total privacy, a locking door.

Aurora FaceTimed her right away. “Why?” She was hiding in a stall at her own school, whispering. “Don’t be so public with it.”

“I thought you said this was good.”

“You’re getting played.” Aurora gnawed on her fingers.

There was a knock at the door and Noa hung up. She was done listening anyway.

In the hallway between classes, people walking behind Noa broke into a murmur of “Pro-to-zo-a.” Boys snapped the waistbands on their Dri-FIT shorts. The attention made her flush but she didn’t mind it. No other couple had started with any kind of sensation.



At lunch Paddy was not in the gym as planned. Noa roamed the school, checking the computer lab and the music studio. She saw Wren and Annaliese in the room where a nursery had been set up for teachers’ babies. They each held an infant on one hip. When they caught Noa looking in at them the pity that came across their faces made her seethe. She’d deleted their messages that morning: *Toad called you a slut. Told you.* What if Paddy roasted them next, she thought. They could be joined twins, sharing one brain.

On the yard the *Rent*-heads had taken over the climbing structure. They swayed and sang “Aquarius,” warming up for that night’s performance of the musical *Hair* in the school theater.

Noa covered her ears and circled back to the gym, where Paddy’s friends Asher and Finn sat on the floor. They maneuvered basketballs under bent knees and tipped potato chip dust into their mouths.

“He got called to the office,” Finn said. “Had to go on leave. For a week.”

“He left with his mommy,” Asher said, and belched.

The thought made her shiver. “He was sent home for a nosebleed rhyme?” Noa said. “People are too sensitive.”

The boys looked at each other.

“You snitched,” Finn said. “It was the Protozoa.”

Noa’s mouth dropped open. “I would never. I told him to do it.”

“Snitch.” Finn lobbed his basketball at her. She dodged it and ran across the campus to the school theater.



The dressing room was dark and swampy with costumes. Noa dropped into a heap of tie-dyed shirts. *I said nothing!* She messaged Paddy. *Want spoonbread? I’ll send some. Postmates.*

Fatal, black hole of no reply.

She saw that the PaDWack account and all of his rhymes had been erased.

He’s gone, she messaged Aurora. *Fuck my life.* Smoking gun emoji. She folded her knees to her chest. *Can you?* Crying face emoji, blue face emoji. She took a raggedy breath.

“Are you going to cry?” a voice said. She shrieked. It was Callan, nestled in a corner.

“Don’t sneak up on me like that,” she said.

“This is my perch,” he said, bugging his eyes.

“His phone was taken,” she said. “Paddy’s. I feel bad now.”

“Poor baby,” Callan whined, batting a ballet shoe across the room. “When he’s back I’m going to tackle him and blow snot all over his hat.”

Noa cringed. “You saw the roast.”

“I tried not to,” he said. “Cause I think the Internet’s garbage. But my sister follows him.”

His sister, who was Aurora’s age, had sent Noa a follow request in the night.

“Then he burned you too, calling you amoeba or some crud,” Callan said.

“I know, but. It’s a little different when he teases me.”

Callan laughed so hard he held his stomach.

Just deal, Aurora messaged.

“Maybe your sister knows my friend. She lives near you.” Noa showed him a photo of Aurora: halter top, pale hollowed waist, and pants that pooled at her feet. “Works at Vintage Cache on Melrose?”

“That goon?” He grabbed her phone away. “She’s around. If you want to see her, the actual person, I know the spot.” He said Friday nights an army of kids invaded a construction site off Sunset. He would take Noa if she could get across town.

You going out to the spot? She messaged Aurora. *You have to!! We can chill.*



All of the online girls Noa admired most said that strong eyebrows were critical to the face. In the vanity mirror on top of her desk she brushed and gelled her brows. Soon she would meet Aurora Waters at a secret spot. She was closer than ever to the future she wanted to have.

She had FaceTimed her father, so he could see that she was alone at home. She’d convinced him not to bother with her, said she’d be attending the school’s production of *Hair* that evening with Wren and Annaliese. He said that she was making a good choice and he was glad for it. His words felt right, even though she’d misled him. She *was* making a good choice. She borrowed from her parents’ closet a vintage Dodgers jersey, Valenzuela, and wore it as a dress with the fishnets and gold ankle socks and her creepers with platform soles.

In her frenzy to put herself together, Noa stopped thinking so much about Paddy. She was surprised when, on her way out the door, she received a message from him.

Look what I found, he wrote. He attached a video of her mother, an instructional on how to butcher a rabbit. The video was one in a series produced by a farm collective her parents belonged to. Noa had completely forgotten about it.

In the video her mother cuddled a spotted rabbit to her chest, then held it out and stretched its legs. Next her mother stood over a slaughtered animal, guiding the viewer through the separating of its parts. Wide smile, arms glistening. She was completely absorbed.

Bunny killa, Paddy wrote.

Just like pigs and cows and . . ., Noa started to type. She deleted it. Too much effort was required to explain her mother’s thoughts about rabbit: the versatile flavor, the small impact on the earth.

In fact her mother looked demented in that video. It was shot during her mohawk phase. She’d since grown her hair in on the sides.

She’s a chef. What does your mom do?

She would let him hang there. His mother couldn’t compare with hers.



Callan waited for her on the corner of Sunset and Doheny in front of a liquor store. “The spot!” He pointed uphill and they began to climb. It was dusk and billboard lights began to flip on, washing color out of the sky.

A canteen swung from Callan’s shoulder. “My grandpa’s, from Nam,” he said. When they were far enough above Sunset he offered her a chug. “Jack and coke.”

She coughed and her eyes watered but she drank again.

He gave her a military salute.

“Don’t be hyper,” she said.

“I haven’t been in three years.”

They meandered past steep driveways that led to homes built into the craggy hillside, homes on stilts.

“Freedom!” Callan yelled, spinning with his arms skyward.

Noa copied him but got dizzy.

They came to a chainlink fence that had been pushed down between drooping eucalyptus. Callan boosted her over and upslope they clambered, through spindly trees that had dropped a carpet of needles. A girl’s laughter carried down the hill. Come on, the laughter said. Hurry.

A, are you at the spot?

Noa’s insides were churning when they arrived at a place where the hillside had been flattened and cleared. In the near-dark she made out kids pushing each other in shopping carts across the dusty lot. Others had climbed on the Porta Potties and hung upside down from them taking selfies.

“When security comes you have to just—” Callan said, thrusting a fist toward the trees. He led her to the opposite end of the lot, where kids lolled on a tarp fastened over a mountain of gravel. Smoke ribboned upward from them.

“Bruddah!” a girl called out in a taunting voice. Callan’s sister, who called herself EmZee online. He scaled the tarp and sat next to her.

“Where’s Aurora?” Noa said. She pulled herself up next to Callan.

He took a black pen from EmZee and sucked, then expelled vapor with a practiced flourish. “Juul,” he said. “You want?”

Noa shook her head but took a hefty swallow from his canteen. She shuddered. A swarm of city lights below seemed to move, like they’d let go of whatever held them to earth.

“She’s the one in that rhyme,” Callan said to EmZee, hanging a thumb at Noa. “I told you.”

“Hey, I follow you now,” EmZee said.

Noa nodded.

“Follow back.”

“Yeah, okay.” Noa found the girl on her phone and sent a follow request.

Callan pulled his T-shirt over his knees, over the torn-apart jeans, and rested his head on them. His cheekbone was sprayed with acne, his Converse gaped at the toes as if his feet were growing right in front of her.

“Come on, I want a ride in a shopping cart,” Noa said.

“PaDWack?” EmZee said. “He slays me every day.” She leafed through her phone. “Look, he posted again.”

“Can’t be,” Noa said. “I’ve been checking.”

“There’s a new account,” EmZee said. “Padman.”

Noa leaned in to watch Paddy, who jeered at the camera:

You know Protozoa.

She’s hungry as fark.

She eats bunny rabbit.

She’s just like a shark.

She eats hobo meat straight up in the dark.

“Turn it off!” Noa said. She closed her eyes and pressed on the lids. “Trash talker.”

EmZee latched on to Noa’s hand to console her, but then she laughed. “Who eats bunnies? He’s so full of shit.”

Noa couldn’t say anything, couldn’t move. The drink in her belly riled, torching her throat and her nose. She was punched right through the middle, drained.

“You’re the hobo, you know,” EmZee said to Callan.

“Who cares,” Callan said. “Horse’s muff.”

“None of that’s true,” Noa said.

She wondered how Paddy knew they were together, there at the spot. Someone had taken their picture or tagged her. She looked around. Nobody seemed to be watching her.

Why do you hate me? She messaged Paddy.

No hate. So easy to mess with Proto.

You'll be kicked out.

I got free speech rights. My mama will sue.

She messaged Aurora: *Where are you? P roasted me again.* Red face emoji. Tornado emoji.

Rays of orange light rotated across the lot. "Shit. Rent-a-cops," Callan said. Noa skittered behind him to the trees where they'd come in. He took off ahead of her, nimble in the brush. She half-crawled downhill all the way to Sunset.



From the Lyft home, Noa tried to FaceTime Aurora Waters.

Not picking up, Aurora messaged.

Okay, love you, Noa replied.

She waited a minute.

Why not? Noa messaged.

Too much babyness.

No! I was at the spot. I got drunk as fuck, A.

I don't even go there.

Noa checked all of Aurora's accounts. In the last few hours Aurora had found online a new favorite person, Rileyyy424, who was shown in a scruffy animal costume with matted fur and ears. Looked like she'd slept outside in it. Aurora had liked and commented on all of Rileyyy424's posts. There was nothing special about that girl.



The next minutes blurred together. Noa got to her bedroom without speaking to her father, who was laughing in the yard with Sharn. She hid away in the closet with her laptop and trained its camera on herself. She was already swallowing hard over the lump but quickly drew cat eyes with a soft and runny liner. Then she hit record.

She didn't need to wind doll hair around her finger to get started. Her eyes became wet easily. Tears traced the contours of her cheeks, dragging black makeup. She watched herself in the monitor, sobbing freely in her own company. She went on until she was completely emptied.

Then Noa played back the entire video. The first flash of pain in her face was the most impossible not to watch. She cut the video to a continuous three-second loop: tears forming, crawling, repeat. The video made the hair on her arms stand up.

She posted the loop on all her online accounts. *A, made a crying GIF. Check it out.*

She waited for something to happen.

Her father rapped at her bedroom door.

"Hold on!" she said. She would have to face him. She thought he was desperate, to seek the friendship of an old woman. Her Mother Rabbit had become too much for him, with ambitions too massive.

Seconds later one of the girls who followed Noa, one of her new friends, posted a video of herself crying with a bloated nose and a chin dripping with tears. Another crying video popped up, and another. A face with makeup-dotted zits, a tongue coated in white scum, lips stretching to bare teeth with metal braces, a set of knuckles with H-A-R-M drawn on them.

Her father rapped again. She must come out now, he said. She was in all kinds of trouble.

"Privacy! Please!"

Ten crying girls. Twenty. It was as though they'd all been waiting for Noa, full of feelings that no one else wanted to deal with. They were right behind her. So many that the echo of sobs was almost unbearable. Gathering momentum, they pushed outward like a tide.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/21/movies/kelly-marie-tran.html>

Kelly Marie Tran: I Won't Be Marginalized by Online Harassment

By Kelly Marie Tran

Aug. 21, 2018

Editors' note: The actress deleted her Instagram posts this summer in response to online harassment. Here she speaks out for the first time.

It wasn't their words, it's that I started to believe them.

Their words seemed to confirm what growing up as a woman and a person of color already taught me: that I belonged in margins and spaces, valid only as a minor character in their lives and stories.

And those words awakened something deep inside me — a feeling I thought I had grown out of. The same feeling I had when at 9, I stopped speaking Vietnamese altogether because I was tired of hearing other kids mock me. Or at 17, when at dinner with my white boyfriend and his family, I ordered a meal in perfect English, to the surprise of the waitress, who exclaimed, “Wow, it's so cute that you have an exchange student!”

Their words reinforced a narrative I had heard my whole life: that I was “other,” that I didn't belong, that I wasn't good enough, simply because I wasn't like them. And that feeling, I realize now, was, and is, shame, a shame for the things that made me different, a shame for the culture from which I came from. And to me, the most disappointing thing was that I felt it at all.

Because the same society that taught some people they were heroes, saviors, inheritors of the Manifest Destiny ideal, taught me I existed only in the background of their stories, doing their nails, diagnosing their illnesses, supporting their love interests — and perhaps the most damaging — waiting for them to rescue me.

And for a long time, I believed them.

I believed those words, those stories, carefully crafted by a society that was built to uphold the power of one type of person — one sex, one skin tone, one existence.

It reinforced within me rules that were written before I was born, rules that made my parents deem it necessary to abandon their real names and adopt American ones — Tony and Kay — so it was easier for others to pronounce, a literal erasure of culture that still has me aching to the core.

And as much as I hate to admit it, I started blaming myself. I thought, “Oh, maybe if I was thinner” or “Maybe if I grow out my hair” and, worst of all, “Maybe if I wasn't Asian.” For months, I went down a spiral of self-hate, into the darkest recesses of my mind, places where I tore myself apart, where I put their words above my own self-worth.

And it was then that I realized I had been lied to.

I had been brainwashed into believing that my existence was limited to the boundaries of another person's approval. I had been tricked into thinking that my body was not my own, that I was beautiful only if someone else believed it, regardless of my own opinion. I had been told and retold this by everyone: by the media, by Hollywood, by companies that profited from my insecurities, manipulating me so that I would buy their clothes, their makeup, their shoes, in order to fill a void that was perpetuated by them in the first place.

Yes, I have been lied to. We all have.

And it was in this realization that I felt a different shame — not a shame for who I was, but a shame for the world I grew up in. And a shame for how that world treats anyone who is different.

I am not the first person to have grown up this way. This is what it is to grow up as a person of color in a white-dominated world. This is what it is to be a woman in a society that has taught its daughters that we are worthy of love only if we are deemed attractive by its sons. This is the world I grew up in, but not the world I want to leave behind.

I want to live in a world where children of color don't spend their entire adolescence wishing to be white. I want to live in a world where women are not subjected to scrutiny for their appearance, or their actions, or their general existence. I want to live in a world where people of all races, religions, socioeconomic classes, sexual orientations, gender identities and abilities are seen as what they have always been: human beings.

This is the world I want to live in. And this is the world that I will continue to work toward.

These are the thoughts that run through my head every time I pick up a script or a screenplay or a book. I know the opportunity given to me is rare. I know that I now belong to a small group of privileged people who get to tell stories for a living, stories that are heard and seen and digested by a world that for so long has tasted only one thing. I know how important that is. And I am not giving up.

You might know me as Kelly.

I am the first woman of color to have a leading role in a "Star Wars" movie.

I am the first Asian woman to appear on the cover of Vanity Fair.

My real name is Loan. And I am just getting started.

<https://graziadaily.co.uk/life/in-the-news/sadfishing/>

I Invented the Term 'Sadfishing' So Let's Talk About What It Actually Means

Sadfishers maximise the drama of their situation to create engagement on social media in the emotional equivalent of clickbait, says Rebecca Reid.

BY REBECCA REID | POSTED ON 02 10 2019

It's hard to say that you made a word up without sounding like a complete egotist. We all went to school with someone who claimed they'd invented the McDonalds slogan, or had the idea for the digital photo frame first. But in the case of sadfishing, I really did make it up.

I made it up last year, after Kendall Jenner ran a teaser campaign ahead of her collaboration with Proactiv. She sat in a white T-shirt, face to camera, saying that she was finally ready to share her secret. The internet went bonkers. Was she coming out? Was she going to add her voice to the #MeToo movement? Nope. She eventually told us that she used to have spots.

Having bad skin can be traumatic, I get that. But Kendall didn't share an unfiltered picture of her acne to her Instagram to normalise having skin problems. She shared a beautifully shot teaser video where her skin glowed with perfection. That's sadfishing.

Sadfishing also happens in everyday life, with non-celebs. You've almost certainly got a friend who posts things like 'I don't know how to cope with this' on Instagram, or 'I guess you know who your real friends are' on Facebook. They check in at the hospital and allow people to assume they're in A&E when really they're having a mole looked at.

Trying to get people to worry about you in order to get attention if you're a normie, or money and fame if you're a celeb, is sadfishing. Earlier this week the expression hit the headlines following a study that found young people were 'sadfishing' online, and that it was making them even unhappier.

Digital Awareness UK, a digital wellness agency aimed at improving digital awareness and the impact of the internet on young people, interviewed 50,000 children aged 11-16 about their use of technology, and found that when they went online to talk about their problems in genuine need of support they were likely to end up either disappointed at not getting the response they wanted.

Of course that's the case. They don't have millions of fans clamoring for their love, unlike the celebrities who they are emulating. Instead of fans, most teens have peers, and teenagers enjoy gossip and have a cruel streak.

How celebrities use their social media informs how young people use theirs. When someone with 1.7 million followers says they're feeling sad, the outcry from their devoted fans will be resounding. When you're a 14-year-old with 75 followers, it's not going to be the same. And even if it was, there is something extremely hollow about social-media support.

Sadfishers maximise the drama of their situation to create engagement on social media. It's the emotional equivalent of clickbait. And unfortunately, that has a knock-on effect.

Sadfishing is not a judgemental term for people who are open about their mental health struggles online. It is patently a good thing if people, high-profile or otherwise, are open about their mental health in public forums. It reduces the stigma attached to seeking help, and it strips away a culture of silence around unhappiness.

Mental health issues are not cured, or even alleviated, by someone who follows you sending you a shower of kissy face emojis. Social-media support is a band-aid for a bullet hole, and while it might feel nice in the moment, it doesn't change any of the root causes.

There is also an aspect of vulnerability created by sadfishing. When young people post extensively online about their worries and fears, they are more likely to be targeted by predators who will exploit their unhappiness for their own gain. The researchers found that children who 'sadfishing' online are more likely to be groomed.

There is nothing wrong with sharing your feelings online, if that's what you need to do. But young people – and, in fact, all people – who are suffering from mental-health issues should not use Instagram or any other form of social media as their sole form of emotional support. If you're struggling you should be meeting with your GP, referred for therapy and, if needed, offered antidepressants.

Where it is at all possible, a support network should comprise real people, not screens.