



Igor

Or, My Internet Boyfriend Died and So Can Yours

THE COMPUTERS just show up one day. We come in from recess, and there they are, seven gray boxes on a long table in the fifth-floor hallway.

5 "We got computers!" our teacher announces. "And they are going to help us learn!"

Everyone is buzzing, but I am immediately suspicious. What is so great about our hall being full of ugly squat robots? Why is everyone cheering like idiots? What can we learn from these machines that we can't from our teachers?

10 The boys especially are transfixed, spending every free moment tap-tap-tapping on the keyboards, playing a simplistic game that involves stacking blocks in an effort to make them explode. I stay away. I have only touched one other computer, at my friend Marissa's house, and found the experience disconcerting. There was something sinister about

the green letters and numbers that flashed on the screen as the computer booted up, and I hated the way Marissa stopped answering questions or noticing me the second it was turned on.

My distaste for computers has an almost-political fervor: 5 they're changing our society, I say, and for the worse. Let's act human. Converse. Use our handwriting. I ask to be excused from typing class, where we use a program called Mavis Beacon Teaches Typing to learn which finger should touch which letter. (Pinkie on P, she says. Pinkie on P.) While the 10 others try to please Mavis, I write in my notebook.

At parent-teacher conferences my teacher tells my mother and father that I show "a real hostility toward technology." She wishes I was willing to "embrace new developments in the classroom." When my mother announces we will be get- 15 ting one of our own at home, I go to my room and turn on the tiny black-and-white TV I bought at a yard sale, refusing to come out for over an hour.

It arrives one evening after school, an Apple with a monitor the size of a moving box. A guy with a ponytail installs it, 20 shows my mother how to use the CD-ROM drive, and asks if I want to see the "preinstalled" games. I shake my head: *No. No, I don't.*

But the computer exerts a magnetic pull, sitting there in the middle of our living room, humming ever so slightly. I 25 watch as my babysitter walks my sister through a game of Oregon Trail, only to have her entire digital family die of dysentery before they can ford the river. My mother types a Word document with her two pointer fingers. "Don't you want to try it?" she asks. 30

Finally, the temptation is too great. I want to try, to see what all the fuss is about, but I don't want to be a hypocrite. I already went back on being a vegetarian and was so ashamed

I told the girls at lunch that my sandwich was tofu prosciutto. I have to be true to myself. I can't keep rejiggering my identity, and hating computers is a part of my identity. One day my mother is in her bedroom organizing her shoes, and the
 5 coast is clear. I walk into the living room, sit down in the cold metal office chair, and slowly extend my finger toward the power button. Listen to it boot up, ping, and purr. I feel an exhilarating sense of trespass.



In fifth grade we all get screen names. We message with one
 10 another, but we also go to chat rooms, digital hangouts with names like Teen Hang and A Place for Friends. It takes me a little while to wrap my head around the idea of anonymity. Of people I can't see who can't see me. Of being seen without being seen at all. Katie Pomerantz and I jointly take on the
 15 persona of a fourteen-year-old model named Mariah, who has flowing black hair, B-cup breasts, and an endless supply of smiley faces. Aware of Mariah's incredible power, we ensnare boys, promising them we are beautiful, popular, and looking for love, as well as rich off of our teen-model earnings. We giggle as we take turns typing, reveling in our power.
 20 At one point, we ask a boy in Delaware to check the tag of his jeans and tell us the brand.

"They're Wrangler," he writes back. "My mom got them at Walmart."

25 Feverish with triumph, we log out.



Juliana is new to ninth grade. She doesn't know anyone, but she has the confidence of someone who has been popular

since kindergarten. She's a punk: her nose is pierced, and her hair is spiked. She wears a homemade T-shirt that reads LEFTOVER CRACK, and her face is so beautiful that sometimes I can't help but imagine it superimposed over my own. Juliana is a vegan for political reasons and seems to genuinely
 5 enjoy music without a melody. When she tells me that she's had sex—in an alleyway, no less, with a twenty-year-old guy—it takes me a week to recover.

"I was wearing a skirt, so he just pulled my underwear to the side," she says, as casually as if she were telling me what
 10 her mom made for dinner.

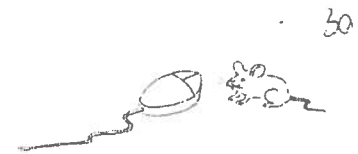
Two months into school she uses her fake ID to get a tattoo, a nautical star on the back of her neck, the lines thick and inelegant.

I ask to run my fingers over the scab, unable to believe this
 15 will exist *forever*.

A lot of Juliana's punk friends live in New Jersey, where she often goes on the weekends for "shows." At lunch, we look at their homemade Angelfire.com websites, one of which has an image of a decomposing baby carcass on the home page. But
 20 mostly they post pictures of themselves sweaty and piled high in front of makeshift stages. It's hard to tell who's in the band and who is just hanging out. She points out Shane, a pretty blond she has a crush on. His website is called Str8Outta-Compton, a reference I won't get for another ten years. In
 25 one of Shane's photos, a picture of a concert in a cramped basement, I notice a boy, tan with chubby cheeks and vacant blue eyes, moshing off to the side, a bandanna tied around his head. "Who's that?" I ask.

"His name is Igor," Juliana tells me. "He's Russian. Vegan, too. He's really nice."

"He's cute," I say.



That night, an instant-message bubble pops up from Pyro0001. I accept.

Pyro0001: Hey, it's Igor.



For the next three months, Igor and I instant message for 5 hours every night. I get home around three thirty, and he comes home at four, so I make myself a snack and wait for his name to appear. I want to let him say "hey" first, but usually I can't wait that long. We talk about animals. About school. About the injustices of the world, most of them directed at 10 innocent animals who can't defend themselves against the evils of humanity. He's a man of few words, but the words he uses are perfect to me.

I am no longer opposed to the computer. I am in love with it.

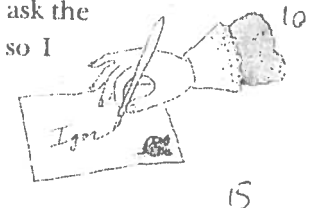
15 No guys like me at school. Some ignore me while others are outright cruel, but none want to kiss me. I'm still distraught over a seventh-grade breakup and refuse to attend parties I know my ex will be at. At this point, my heartbreak has lasted twenty-four times as long as our relationship.

20 Igor wants to see a photo of me, so I send him one of me against my bedroom wall, on which I have drawn trees and nudes with a Sharpie. My hair hangs in a yellow, flat-ironed curtain, and I am cracking a glossy half smile. Igor says I look like Christina Aguilera. He's a punk, so it seems more like a 25 factual assessment than a compliment, but I am thrilled.

We message through dinner, through fights with our parents. He describes how quiet it is when he gets home, how his parents aren't back until eight. He says "brb" when he goes to the door to get his delivery dinner, which is usually

eggplant parm minus the parm. He tells me that he goes to the kind of school that has popular kids and losers, jocks, and freaks. A big public school with a class full of strangers. My school is supposed to be different, small and creative and inclusive, but sometimes I feel just as isolated as he does. 5 I start describing kids at school as "bimbos" and "fakes," words I never would have thought to use before he introduced them. Words he'll understand and that will draw him to me.

When I go on vacation with my family, I ask the hotel office to let me use the computer so I can send Igor an email on Valentine's Day. He tells me he doesn't want to send me a new picture of himself because he's had "some pimples" lately. My father is irritated that I take the time away from the beach to sit in a windowless office with a woman smoking Newports and send love notes to someone I've never met. He doesn't get it. He 10 doesn't even have email.



Juliana says that Igor's friend Shane says that Igor says he 15 really likes me. This emboldens me to ask him to talk on the phone. He seems eager and takes my number but never calls. Juliana says she thinks he may be self-conscious about his accent.

Trixiebelles86: If u don't like the fone may-b we cud meet in person? 25

He agrees to meet me the following Saturday on Saint Mark's Place. He'll take the train in, and we'll find each other on the corner. I go, in a tank top, cargo pants, and a shrunken denim jacket, even though it's freezing. I'm so nervous, I arrive twenty minutes early. He isn't there yet. I wait another 30

half hour, but he never comes. I try and look relaxed as pierced NYU kids and pink-haired Asian girls stream past me. I go home and log on, but he isn't there either.

The next day, he messages me:

5

Pyro0001: Sorry. Grounded. May-B sum other time.



10

Gradually, Igor stops messaging me. When he does make contact, it's only to respond. He never initiates. Every time that ping sounds, signaling a message, I run to the computer, hoping it's him. But it's only John, a kid from a nearby school who excels at break dancing, or my friend Stephanie, complaining about her Peruvian father's strict rules about skirt length. Igor doesn't ask me any questions anymore. Our relationship had hummed with possibility: the possibility of meeting, of liking each other even more in person than we did online, of falling in love with each other's eyes and smell and sneakers. Now it's over before it began. I wonder whether I can consider him an ex.

15

One day, in late summer, Juliana IMs me.

20

Northernstar2001: Lena Igor is dead.

Trixiabelle86: What???

Northernstar2001: Shane IMd me. He had a methadone overdose, choked on his own tongue in his basement. Its fukked. He's an only child and his parents don't like speak English.

25

Trixiabelle86: Did Shane say if Igor stopped liking me?



I'm not sure who to tell because I'm not sure who will care, and I don't want to explain the whole thing to anyone. It was impossible for my parents to understand the reality of Igor when he was alive, so why would they get it when he was dead?

5

A year later I have to change my screen name because a boy at school, a massive hairy boy with a face like a Picasso painting, sends me an email saying he's going to rape me and cover me in barbecue sauce. He's the only guy who likes me in that way, but I wish he wouldn't. He mentions having a machete and attaches a photograph of a kitten that has been stuffed inside a bottle and left to die. My father is justifiably angry and calls my uncle, who is a lawyer and says the police need to be involved. For the first and last time, I am escorted home from school by the cops. When they go to his house, they find he has printed and saved all of our instant messages, pages and pages of them. One of the officers implies I shouldn't have been so nice to him if I didn't like him "that way." I tell them I just felt sorry for him. They say I should be more careful in the future. I am ashamed.

20

My new screen name includes my real name and is only shared with select friends and family, but I transfer all my contacts, so I can always see who is logged on when. One day, in my HERE TO CHAT bar, I see him: Pyro0001. The world goes fast, then slow again, the way it does sometimes when I get up to pee in the night and the whole house sounds like it's saying *Lena, Lena, Lena*.

25

"Hey," I type.

The name disappears.

I walk around for the rest of that day like I've seen a ghost. I type his full name into multiple search engines, looking for an obituary or some evidence that he existed. I mean, Juliana knew him. She met him. She heard his accent. He was real.

30

He is dead. Fake people don't die. Fake people don't even exist.

5 Years later, I will give his last name to a character on my television show. A smoke signal, so that whoever wants to know can know: he was kind to me. He had things to say. There was a way in which I loved him. I did, I did, I did.