



Deep Web

WRITTEN BY

Sennah Yee

ILLUSTRATION

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Editor's Note

“We have to have our dark corners and the unexplained. We will become uninhabitable in a way an apartment will become uninhabitable if you illuminate every single dark corner and under the table and wherever — you cannot live in a house like this anymore.”

—**Werner Herzog**, *GQ Magazine*

“How embarrassing, I thought, to openly crave attention. Why couldn't she figure out that you were supposed to pretend you didn't care?” —**Jia Tolentino**, *Trick Mirror*

Like most millennials living in North America, I grew up as the internet came of age. It was introduced to me through my dad's bulky Windows computer, where I would spend suburban school nights printing out pictures of cartoons and chatting on ICQ with my grade five classmates. Eventually, I learned how to make websites on Angelfire about boy bands I wasn't sure I wanted to admit I liked in person.

By the time eighth grade hit, an inner turmoil was growing as I surrounded myself with only a small handful of friends who were becoming weirdos like me, wearing oversized raver pants, jelly bracelets, and black band t-shirts. When my friends weren't around, the internet was my solace — it was the place I went to fit in and be myself. I began to make new friends online from the States and other parts of Canada (some of whom later turned on me as the years went on, bullying me through anonymous accounts for reasons I still don't understand). In high school, I started writing in a Livejournal, a routine that lasted up until late university, just as mobile phones were becoming ubiquitous.

The internet was different back in the '90s and early aughts. It was a place you'd go to check your email. Now, much to our detriment, the internet follows us everywhere. Reading Sennah Yee's piece this month in *The Vault*, I couldn't help but sense an ennui about this behind her biting pieces of flash fiction. Her stories all seem too familiar; from intimately following a crush online, to reading your tweets as though they weren't your own, Sennah explores something bleak in today's social online context, and it feels awfully lonely.

There is something brilliantly mundane in Sennah's work, as it so clearly pinpoints the era we're living in now. She innately picks up on the ways we multitask online — detached, and yet deeply longing for something difficult to find. There is an unmet desire floating throughout her characters' experiences, a lurking for something real and relatable. In the end, it's not up to us what we see. The pre-determined algorithms lead the way; ads follow us on our browsers and Instagram accounts, trying to get us to buy, to feel part of something. Collective and communal experiences are mostly devoid, as life is documented behind a screen, capturing sunsets and selfies as forms of individual pleasure and performance. The more content we like, the more it becomes prioritized.

If I had the patience, I could write a book about this. Thankfully, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* by Shoshana Zuboff already exists. But I keep circling back to this idea of surveillance, which is amplified under late capitalism, a theme present in Sennah's collection. We are now willing to be watched, as long as we get to watch others. We can feel safe, only if we can go back to our Sent inbox and read the email we just sent through the eyes of the person

reading it. We have access to glimpses of other worlds and cultures, but that also means peering into the lives of our favourite celebrities, frenemies, and forgotten high school pals. And for what, exactly?

In so many ways, the internet gave me freedom in high school, introduced me to new worlds (see: Napster), and helped me to see possibilities, but it had its many dark corners. As a teenager navigating this landscape, the internet highlighted the importance of being validated behind a screen. Looking back, it was terribly self-important, self-indulgent, and bordering on a form of narcissism.

But let's not forget that the internet is still young. As journalist Jia Tolentino writes in her book *Trick Mirror*: “We remember that at one point this all felt like butterflies and puddles and blossoms, and we sit patiently in our festering inferno, waiting for the internet to turn around and surprise us and get good again. But it won't.”

She continues: “The internet is governed by incentives that make it impossible to be a full person while interacting with it. In the future, we will inevitably be cheapened. Less and less of us will be left, not just as individuals but also as community members, as a collective of people facing various catastrophes.”

For me, it's easy to feel nostalgic about the early days of the internet. While the majority of us could probably never imitate life back then in today's modern context, we must be critical now of how it's impacting our relationships, not only with others but also with ourselves. Sennah's collection is a reminder to prioritize our own communities, embracing

people IRL even when we don't necessarily want to. Because we are not alone, no matter how much we think we are.

Erin Pehlivan
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