

Text: Excerpt from the novel The Circle

By Dave Eggers

Note: *Mae Holland works for the CIRCLE, the world's most powerful internet company. Its slogan is ALL THAT HAPPENS MUST BE KNOWN. In this excerpt, she is talking to her ex-boyfriend Mercer*

[...] "All right. Mae, we have to change how we interact. Every time I see or hear from you, it's through this filter. You send me links, you quote someone talking about me, you say you saw a picture of me on someone's wall. . . . It's always this third-party assault. Even when I'm talking to you face-to-face you're telling me what some stranger thinks of me. It becomes like we're never alone. Every time I see you, there's a hundred other people in the room. You're always looking at me through a hundred other people's eyes."

"Don't get dramatic about it."

"I just want to talk with you directly. Without you bringing in every other stranger in the world who might have an opinion about me."

"I don't do that."

"You do, Mae. A few months ago, you read something about me, and remember this? When I saw you, you were so standoffish."

"That's because they said you were using endangered species for your work!"

"But I've never done that."

"Well, how am I supposed to know that?"

"You can ask me! Actually ask me. You know how weird that is, that you, my friend and ex-girlfriend, gets her information about me from some random person who's never met me? And then I have to sit across from you and it's like we're looking at each other through this strange fog."

"Fine. Sorry."

"Will you promise me to stop doing this?"

"Stop reading online?"

"I don't care what you read. But when you and I communicate, I want to do it directly. You write to me, I write to you. You ask me questions, and I answer them. You stop getting news about me from third parties. [...] I mean, all this stuff you're involved in, it's all gossip. It's people talking about each other behind their backs. That's the vast majority of this social media, all these reviews, all these comments. Your tools have elevated gossip, hearsay and conjecture to the level of valid, mainstream communication. And besides that, it's fucking dorky."

Mae exhaled through her nostrils.

"I love it when you do that," he said. "Does that mean you have no answer?"

Listen, twenty years ago, it wasn't so cool to have a calculator watch, right? And spending all day inside playing with your calculator watch sent a clear message that you weren't doing so well socially. And judgments like 'like' and 'dislike' and 'smiles' and 'frowns' were limited to junior high. Someone would write a note and it would say, 'Do you like unicorns and stickers?' and you'd say, 'Yeah, I like unicorns and stickers! Smile!' That kind of thing. But now it's not just junior high kids who do it, it's everyone, and it seems to me sometimes I've entered some inverted zone, some mirror world where the dorkiest shit in the world is completely dominant. The world has dorkified itself."

40 "Mercer, is it important to you to be cool?"

"Do I look like it is?" He passed a hand over his expanding stomach, his torn fatigues. "Clearly, I'm no master of cool. But I remember when you'd see John Wayne or Steve McQueen and you'd say, Wow, those guys are badass. They ride horses and motorcycles and wander the earth righting wrongs."

45 Mae couldn't help but laugh. [...]

Mercer plowed on. "Now the movie stars beg people to follow their Zing feeds. They send pleading messages asking everyone to smile at them. And holy fuck, the mailing lists. Everyone's a junk mailer. You know how I spend an hour every day? Thinking of ways to unsubscribe to mailing lists without hurting anyone's feelings. There's this new neediness—it pervades everything." He sighed as if he'd made some very important points. "It's just a very different planet."

"It's different in a good way," Mae said. "There are a thousand ways it's better, and I can list them. But I can't help it if you're not social. I mean, your social needs are so minimal—"

55 "It's not that I'm not social. I'm social enough. But the tools you guys create actually manufacture unnaturally extreme social needs. No one needs the level of contact you're purveying. It improves nothing. It's not nourishing. It's like snack food. You know how they engineer this food? They scientifically determine precisely how much salt and fat they need to include to keep you eating. You're not hungry, you don't need the food, it does nothing for you, but you keep eating these empty calories. This is what you're pushing. Same thing. Endless empty calories, but the digital-social equivalent. And you calibrate it so it's equally addictive."

"Oh Jesus."

65 "You know how you finish a bag of chips and you hate yourself? You know you've done nothing good for yourself. That's the same feeling, and you know it is, after some digital binge. You feel wasted and hollow and diminished."

"I never feel diminished." Mae thought of the petition she'd signed that day, to demand more job opportunities for immigrants living in the suburbs of Paris. It was energizing and would have impact. But Mercer didn't know about this, or anything Mae did, anything the Circle did, and she was too sick of him to explain it all.

75 “And it’s eliminated my ability to just talk to you.” He was still talking. “I mean, I can’t send you emails, because you immediately forward them to someone else. I can’t send you a photo, because you post it on your own profile. And meanwhile, your company is scanning all of our messages for information they can monetize. Don’t you think this is 75 insane?” [...]

(940 words)

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Annotations

Lines

³ wall here: the part of your website profile where others can post messages

³ assault here: verbal attack, overwhelming someone in conversation

¹² standoffish cold, unfriendly

²⁸ conjecture opinion or idea not based on proof or evidence

²⁹ dorky slang: dumb or stupid in an embarrassing way

³⁹ to dorkify slang: to turn dorky, to turn something/someone into something/someone stupid

⁴² fatigues loose, brown-green pants worn by young men, based on soldier uniforms

^{42/43} John Wayne classical Hollywood stars who embody macho masculinity in their films Steve McQueen

⁴³ badass slang: tough, cool, awesome

⁴⁶ Zing feeds social network like Twitter, Eggers’ own invention for his novel; a zing is a short, quick post or response to a post; a feed collects and publishes posts

⁴⁸ junk mailer someone who sends unwanted emails, mostly advertising

⁵⁷ to purvey to make something available, to supply

⁶² to calibrate to measure in an exact way

⁶⁶ binge doing too much of something over a short period of time, like eating; here: overconsuming data or social media

⁷⁴ to monetize to convert something into money; here: to make money off data and personal information