

THE MANY MEDIA HYPOTHESIS

How to look after yourself.

BY MARISSA LINGEN

“Are you coming to bed?” he calls.
 “In a minute,” you call back. “Someone on the Internet is wrong. And it’s probably me.”

You tell yourself, that is, you #20 — you have a little list by the computer, this is the you with a pit bull — that you really should take the dog in for a vet check with eyes looking like that. Reassured, you scroll down through the rest of the social-media page.

In another world, you had a grandfather who remarried. You’ve seen the pictures of your teenage self on Throwback Thursday, same terrible time growing out your bangs, carting a manic pigtailed toddler around on your hip. In that world you had cousins. Now you’re looking at your cousin’s wedding pictures. She is radiant. She wears flowers in her long blonde hair. You can see where you’re tagged, in the background raising a glass of wine to your other cousin, her brother.

You know that there is a world in which you would give these kids a kidney. In this world, they seem like nice people and you wish them all the best. The echo of that other feeling rings your heart like a goblet.

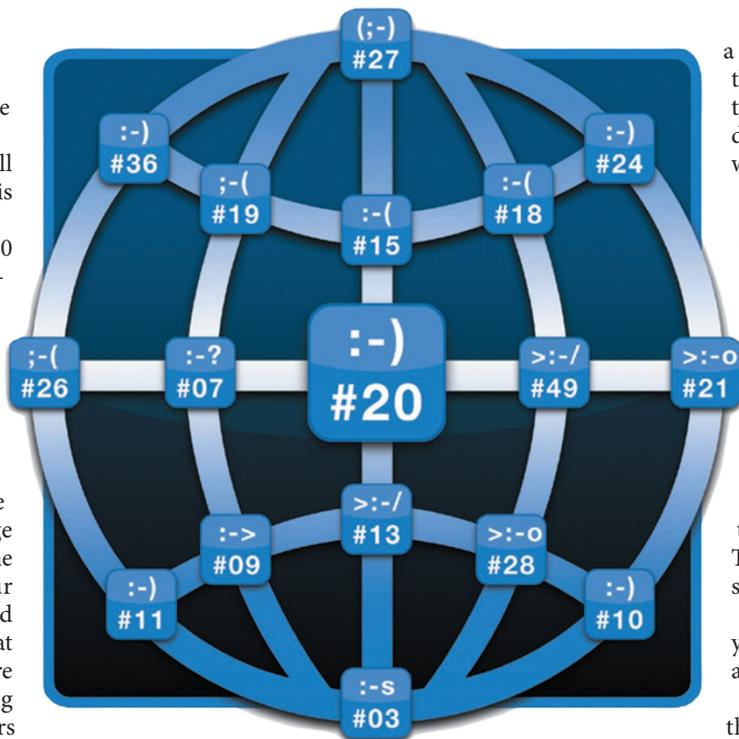
A handful of you stayed in physics. They are the ones you blame for this. None of your friends has found their social-media pages taken over by alternate timeline selves — although, to be fair, you’ve only trusted a few enough to ask. You still get the posts from your old roommate, your ninth-grade French teacher, all your many cousins in Sioux Falls. They’re just overwhelmed by the sheer number of posts from other worlds featuring, apparently, you.

There is a lot of you.

You have a lot in common.

For example, you never live south of the Iowa border for more than five years as an adult. You don’t all live in the United States or North America or Anglophone countries — but that forty-fourth parallel really seems to be important somehow. You never have more than three kids. You never, ever like coconut, not any of you, not ever.

On the other hand, some of you like pineapple. Some of you even can stand durian, although those are the weird ones and



nobody really understands them. You tend to form clumps. The durian eaters. Those who took to Agatha Christie novels. Those who got good at tennis. Those who let their ear piercings grow shut — that’s not important to the rest of you, but to the ones who did, it’s emblematic of something they can’t explain.

And of course, those who are friends with Stella and those who never met her. Those who lived in Oregon and those who only visited. Those whose hearts were broken when Mrs Bremmer died and those to whom she was just a name on their interdimensional postings.

Those who have developed the full-blown forms of each of three conditions you’re prone to, and those — the majority — who are perfectly healthy. Not you. Those others.

Before the social-media thing you were never very good at taking care of yourself, but you have got much, much better. The latest message you get would have made you weep and rage when all this started. Now you just press your lips together.

You remember breaking up with a guy in college when he passed from annoying to creepy, wondering why you didn’t do it when he got annoying. This other you, you #572, she didn’t even do that well. So she didn’t get the feeling of dodging

a bullet when he pushed her into the wall of the dorm and punched the wall next to her head. She didn’t think, so that’s what my life would have been.

Because that’s what her life is.

You think back to the point where you diverged, to who you know in common with you.

“Go to Heather and Dave,” you write. “They’ll help you get out. They’ve got a spare room, and if they don’t have enough space” — you briefly forget how many kids this you has, if you ever told you — “Heather’s folks are right down the road. They’re good people. They won’t want you to stay in this situation.”

“I haven’t seen them in years!” you write back almost immediately.

Neither have you, but you trust them all the same. Heather was always baffled by your brief relationship with this guy, relieved when it was over. You need a friend like that, and you know you have one — even this many years later.

“It won’t matter,” you write. “She’ll know this is important. Do it for the kids.” You consult your list quickly. Two of them. That’s two too many for this behaviour. “Promise me. Promise yourself.”

The pause is too long. Bad things have happened to you before, but never this. You wonder if you should message another you, but you can’t think which one.

“All right, I promise,” you finally write back. You breathe a sigh of relief. Something might have happened to Heather — it might not work — but you will come back and ask again if you need to. You know you that well.

You are so tired.

You flip back to the wedding pictures, scrolling through. One of your actual aunts is there, wearing a hideous flowered dress. In your own timeline she has developed taste. In the other, not so much. But she has a piece of cake with overblown foliage to match her dress; she has old family friends who in your universe are off doing something else. She looks happy.

That’s all you want for them. All of them. ■

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ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

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