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In Case of Emergency Take Selfie

This was how it started. First, she forgot to wash her hair. She reduced the ritual from once a week to once a month, then abandoned the task completely.

She piled her hair high on her head and focused her attention on knotting macramé. On Tuesdays she baked sourdough, using the scoring lame to slice artwork into the top of the dough so each loaf emerged from the oven looking like Jesus.

Next, she stopped shaving her legs. It started with the occasional missed inch of ankle, a long, hairy patch of the knee, the jiggly part beneath the thigh. Gradually this became large swaths of a calf, then the entire front and side of the leg before she abandoned the routine completely. The green, plastic razor rested in the shower, clinging to a lone sliver of cracked, white soap, where it remained left untouched since last July.

An exchange student from France once reminded us that American girls never scrub to get the dirt off. Instead we use poofs with artificially colored and scented body wash. Don't ask us how, but we knew that Julie's poof was purple and her Lush-brand soap smelled like cherries.

Did I mention that she stopped shaving her armpits? She let the hair grow long and curly. She found some blue Manic Panic on the internet and mixed it directly in her mother's porcelain sink, letting the dye splash onto the floor and permanently soak into the Italian marble molding. Then she used the turkey-basting brush to carefully paint the dye onto her armpit hair before

adding tiny flakes of glitter.

When we first saw this on social, we were impressed by her creativity. We were wowed by the tens of thousands of likes and comments she received. We were struck by the effortlessness of how doing something so basic—cooking instant noodles—translated into applause. Everything she posted boomeranged back in the form of adoration. And the quirkiest she was, the more that people seemed to love her.

We all predicted that Julie would become an influencer overnight. She'll soon be in the upper echelon, we had said, and we'll be able to say that we knew her back when. The thought of someone we knew gaining celebrity overnight wasn't new to us, but when it came to Julie specifically, it made our heads spin.

On the popular app that everybody vilified, your user name constantly changes to reflect how popular you are. You get points for any positive engagement you receive in the form of a comment, like, or share. Julie's name was Jules5M. The attitude I aimed to project was one of ambivalence—I kinda cared and kinda didn't. But of course we were all obsessed.

All you need are braids with little bows at the end, said Jon100.

This made me so happy, commented Eva10. Keep doing you!

I know where you live and it's time for a visit love. Anon02.

It was the last comment that made us shiver.

Julie was two grades above us and had it all figured out. She was the smartest girl at Chapman and lived in a loft on Broome Street with two moms, a screenwriter and fashion designer who were impeccable by default. She had no siblings but if she asked us to be hers, we'd jump at the chance.

Julie was mostly nice to us. Our relationship was transactional because what she wanted most was our loyalty. She never wanted to be seen mingling with us because we had nothing to offer. Although we never admitted this, we simply weren't anywhere near her standards for interesting-ness, despite how hard we tried.

The closest we came to being her friend was last Labor Day weekend. We invited her to a rave in Brooklyn, and she actually came and paid attention to us for a little while—heaven! This was until her besties arrived and pulled her back into her usual circle. From then on she kept treating us well—it's true—but Linnea, her best friend the dog food heiress, always found a way to intervene by charming her back with inner-circle dramas that we would die to be part of.

I've said it before, but Julie's most attractive feature was her quirkiest. We've been able to narrow in on this trait specifically only because we've spent hours dissecting it. She was unlike her glossy besties by duty, all blown-out hair and LV handbags, legacy Chanel plaids and shine. Julie was askew by a margin significant enough to make her unique, therefore individual and, to that extent, inimitable. She was mainstream but indie, a mix of uptown and downtown, the queen of the Upper and Lower East Side. Everything she did we did too, like the time she took a two-week pottery class, and we became semi-obsessed with all things glazed clay.

And she was the one who came up with the idea of posting the detailed trends of our

collective social decline in the first place. We all said it was a good idea and agreed to participate. Julie hated the other big social network, the one that our parents were on. She said the content wasn't fresh, they were overly moderated, and it always felt stagnant with the same people talking about the same old fake, irrelevant things.

Still, we were worried about the comment. We knew that stalkers could potentially be chic (in theory), but a potential murderer was crossing the line. This was in spite of our families' readiness for this sort of thing. Genevieve's dad was a bitcoin billionaire, which meant that someone could steal his entire fortune with a single fingerprint passcode. Her family had a full security team on payroll and had a car idling in the driveway 24/7 in case of an attempted kidnapping. Genevieve had a crush on one of the security guys until she learned—the hard way—that he had a major case of b.o.

We still thought it was a good idea to keep posting. What else were we supposed to do? We were in the middle of a worldwide pandemic and weren't supposed to leave the house. We had pretended to read *The New Yorker* cover-to-cover each week and had already caught up on all the important Criterion films. We shared an Apple News account and devoured all the fashion magazines seconds after they were published. Maybe if others saw what we were up to, despite that we had tubby legs and the occasional (okay, often) bloat, it would be okay.

We should be more indie, we said. We need to spend more time in the country with some chickens, a rooster, and some pigs. Pigs are intelligent; they have long eyelashes and complex personalities, Chloe said. We knew we weren't supposed to go outside, so the thought of a secluded countryside setting was magical-sounding. Boots and braids, we predicted, would be the next big thing. And Julie, who had taken to elastic-waist fashion pants from Amazon and worn athleisure, was cool, as usual, while the rest of us felt pathetic. Until we learned how to match high, scruffy ponytails and tall tube socks with housebound cashmere, we considered ourselves to be a total disaster.

But back to the stalker message, which Genevieve declared as sobering. We texted each other: What should we do? And how involved should we be, on a scale of zero interest to total intrigue? Our work had always been low-stakes, for example when we posted a personal ad for Scott Watermelon's father, or the time we made the pretzel girl cry.

We debated among ourselves—yes, we should help her—but who should be the one to do it?

Genevieve said she would but the last time Julie had taken days to respond, so she must not like her. Chloe was the most obsessed with Julie. She snarled from behind her thick web of quarantine hair (so chic) and said that since she was planning to cast a charm on Julie, she couldn't contact her, otherwise it would mess everything up. I shrugged and stayed silent, spooning myself more crème brûlée from Dean & DeLuca's directly from the jar. In the end, none of us texted.

And Julie surely thought about calling the police, but she did have a reputation for handling things herself. Once, Jim Masterson ate the antlers from a vintage reindeer Christmas ornament

dating back to the 1920s and blamed it on her. But no, she didn't retaliate. Instead she cruised up and down Fifth Avenue in her mother's red coupe, slowing to ask random women on the street for their best revenge advice. We still have those videos, which remain in the canon of all things Julie Brandhorne.

Our initial instinct about the threat was: Okay, maybe she's got this. But an hour later another comment was posted. We knew it was from the same person because of the username, Anon02, and this time he was stupid enough to leave a name. We imagined he was harmless, irrelevant. To consider him a threat somehow made us feel vulnerable, which we didn't like, like an adult's nagging reminder of consequence in which there is no distinction between the digital world and reality. It was just as likely he was from Chapman, a random hater, an exchange student, a guy on Prozac bored amongst a pile of books in the school library. Of course the Unabomber was a good student too. The only thing we knew was that he lived in Brooklyn because of his obsessive posting on L train delays and info about random screenings at Nighthawk.

That was Friday. And after a long Saturday afternoon with zero new posts coming from Julie's account, we began to get nervous. We hoped we might feel better after doing a virtual kickboxing session, but after ten minutes we got tired and had to stop. We called an emergency meeting for that night.

An onion moon hung low in the sky. The city, woven inside a knotty blanket of clouds, felt like an intimate mystery. We clustered on the street corner at Houston and Sixth in sweats and baseball caps. Chloe clutched an undercover cocktail in the form of a coffee mug proclaiming #Wiccish in a script made to look like handwriting. I shifted from one foot to the other, watching everyone else: a young couple walking an elderly golden retriever, a man pushing an ergonomic baby stroller, an NYU student jogging in oversized headphones. Genevieve was chattering about somebody she met on Crush, the latest dating app—she overshares when she's feeling confident.

All of us, the coveted N-1000 masks strapped to our faces. Because of the obstruction we donned long, feathery eyelashes and eyeshadow in deep hues of royal purple and emerald green, deep navy blues and silver. The worldwide emergency had matured us, aged us somehow. The sound of our laughter was muted, and even mundane conversation felt secretive. Adventures we used to find exciting had become foreboding and onerous.

And while Julie had been looking great despite letting things go by favoring a more (let's say) cottage core aesthetic, it was important to us to hang onto some of our city-girl rituals for as long as we could.

The white truck was a small, windowless box. When the rear doors popped open, amber light spilled onto the sidewalk, and our bodies became long shadows on the crumbly concrete. We glimpsed the inside walls of the truck, covered with a square-bottled and candy-coated version of the rainbow. We caught the familiar stench of rubbing alcohol, shellac, and woody sandpaper that, combined with the coffee, reminded us of Saturday morning with our mothers.

A man was playing the saxophone and we shuffled our feet. I hate waiting, Chloe said,

picking at a cuticle until her thumb started to bleed. She stuck it into her mouth, then removed it, examined it, then buried it in the sleeve lining of her mother's tweed coat. Genevieve examined her own nails. I'm going to do a reverse French manicure this time, she said, wiggling her fingertips. I hate this pandemic. We all nodded solemnly.

It was then that our phones beeped, and we simultaneously learned that Julie had been reported to the police as missing. We gasped. Was she kidnapped or did she leave on her volition? Linnea wouldn't write us back, so we decided to take the matter into our own hands.

Let's do this, whispered Chloe as we scrolled with lightning-fast thumbs all tap-tap, aqua-blue bubbles illuminating our serious faces. The stern looks of people controlling their technology, owners and operators, tending to our devices as an extension of ourselves, as my scientist father would say when he made an appearance at dinner while I pushed my food around, silently counting the calories, eager for the ordeal to be over so I could finally get back to my life already, geez. What he didn't know was how to claim attention. We all understood that attention was stronger than any algorithm.

The influencer JuneBug100M agreed to post almost immediately. We made a ten-second Duo video in response, big balloon carnations and all the collaged colors we could find—photos of Julie from Paris, the beach, prom—to drive awareness that our beloved classmate-slash-icon was gone.

It took another hour to get *#WheresJulie* trending on social media. We'll find our girl, the comments said as we rolled our collective thumbs across our screens. We reported Anon02 to the social network everyone vilified.

The next morning a crowd of people jammed the street in front of the building where she lived. Signs with phrases like *#FindJulie* and "We Are All Julie" were jammed into the air. There were blue wigs and silver platforms, glitter and tie-dye. Chloe wondered since when did Julie become a gay icon, to which Genevieve said duh.

As we were taking in the scene, we learned that Anon02's account had been deleted. So we took the train to Brooklyn and paid a visit to the 90th Precinct, where we told a weary police officer what happened. While we described the situation, she kept checking her watch. In a way, this annoyed us—then again, if the situation was catastrophic, we imagined, she would've acted immediately.

We were silent on the cab ride home. We watched the city whip by with a newfound curiosity. Big, blooming clouds, a crisp, sweeping breeze, and the city smells of sweet, sour, and acidic made the afternoon feel electric. Why hadn't we noticed this before?

That was the day we understood that our group dynamics would never be the same. Looking back, our friendships could have been bolstered by Julie's disappearance, reinforced by the shared event in the way we came together during the national disaster. By that point our relationships weren't strong enough to hold more—as a result, our group dissolved instead.

As school reopened we felt a sudden rush of boredom mixed with overwhelm. In a way, we felt exposed, as though the stalker could be among us: skulking through the hallways, watching

us in class or at lunch from across the atrium floor. After a month Genevieve decided to go live with her mother in Los Angeles, and Chloe deleted her social media accounts entirely.

I kept my social media accounts live and checked in from time to time. I threw myself into my schoolwork and reading mystery novels. Unsurprisingly, I liked the ones with missing persons cases and crazy stalkers the best: Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Gillian Flynn, A.J. Finn. I acutely felt the grind of the city around me, the grating sounds of constant construction, the squeal of brakes, and endless hot concrete. I thought about visiting Genevieve in Los Angeles and begged my parents for a transfer to Switzerland. I went on long walks through the park after school.

In the end, no one ever saw Julie again. Two months after her disappearance, I saw a post on the new reviled app, the one where your message disappears in six seconds. It was undoubtedly her. She was on a farm, showing us how she feeds her chickens. Although her serene-looking face was only in the frame for a second, I could tell by the bright, melodic tone of her voice that she was happy. I could hear chickens clucking, the maa of a goat, and even saw a sheep in the background. In classic Julie form, she had it figured out after all.

When I showed this to my mother, she wanted to know if Julie was high. Perhaps she had run away to join a cult, were her words. No way, I said. I think she's home.

Nicole Cifani Lehmann-Haupt has been published in *Active Muse Literary Journal* and received a Pushcart Prize nomination. She is also published in *Mulberry Literary*. She earned a bachelor's degree in information communication processes from The Ohio State University and a master's degree in visual and media arts from Emerson College. Nicole has attended the San Francisco Writers Conference and the Iceland Writers Retreat. She teaches creative writing at The Writers Studio founded by Pulitzer Prize winner Philip Schultz and is a growth marketer. Nicole grew up in Ohio, has lived in Boston, Los Angeles, New York City, Paris, and Tokyo, and now calls San Francisco home.

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